The New Criterion Vol. 29, No. 8

The New Criterion

April 2011

A monthly review

edited by Hilton Kramer & Roger Kimball

Volume 29, Number 8, $7.75 / £7.50

The New Criterion *April 2011*

Contributors to this issue

Michael Anderson is writing a biography of the playwright Lorraine Hansberry.
James Bowman is the author of *Honor: A History* (Encounter).
Paul Dean is the Head of English at Summer Fields School, Oxford.
Denis Donoghue's latest book is *On Eloquence* (Yale).
Franklin Einspruch is an artist and writer in Boston.
Jeffrey Hart's most recent book is *The Making of the American Conservative Mind* (ISI).
Paul Hollander's most recent book is *Extravagant Expectations: New Ways to Find Romantic Love in America* (Ivan Dee).
Laura Jacobs's most recent book is *The Birdcatcher* (St. Martin's Press).
Adam Kirsch is a senior editor at *The New Republic* and a contributing editor to *Tablet*.
William Logan will have a volume of early selected poems in the spring.
Daniel J. Mahoney's most recent book is *The Conservative Foundations of the Liberal Order* (ISI).
Andrew C. McCarthy is a senior fellow at the National Review Institute.
Jay Nordlinger is a Senior Editor at *National Review*.
David Pryce-Jones is a Senior Editor at *National Review*.
Roger Sandall is an Australian writer and author of *The Culture Cult* (Westview).
Karen Wilkin is on the faculty of the New York Studio School.
Kevin D. Williamson's *The Politically Incorrect Guide to Socialism* was published in January.
Christian Wiman's latest book is *Every Riven Thing* (FSG).

The New Criterion. ISSN 0734-0222. April 2011, Volume 29, Number 8. Published monthly except July and August by The Foundation for Cultural Review, Inc., 900 Broadway, New York, NY 10003, a nonprofit public foundation as described in Section 501 (c) (3) of the Internal Revenue code, which solicits and accepts contributions from a wide range of sources, including public and private foundations, corporations, and the general public. Subscriptions: $48 for one year, $88 for two. For Canada, add $14 per year. For all other foreign subscriptions, add $22 per year. Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY, and at additional mailing offces. Postmaster and subscribers: send change of address, all remittances, and subscription inquiries to The New Criterion, P.O. Box 3000, Denville, NJ 07834. Notice of nonreceipt must be sent to this address within three months of the issue date. All other correspondence should be addressed to The New Criterion, 900 Broadway, Suite 602, New York, NY 10003. (212) 247-6980.

Newsstand distribution by CMG, 155 Village Blvd., Princeton, NJ 08540. Available in microfilm from University Microfilms, 300 N. Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106.
Internet: www.newcriterion.com Email: letters@newcriterion.com

Advertising: Telephone: (212) 247-6980 Email: advertising@newcriterion.com.
Subscriptions: To subscribe, renew, or report a problem please call (800) 783-4903.

Notes & Comments: April 2011

Groves of depravity

Longtime readers of these Notes will recall our fondness for Daniel Patrick Moynihan's essay "Defining Deviancy Down," which appeared in *The American Scholar* back in 1993, before that magazine descended to its current state of politically correct irrelevance. In that essay, Senator Moynihan outlined some of the manifold ways in which our society has attempted to deny deviancy by redefining it as normal or even, in some instances, as glamorous. In case after case, he showed how behavior that would have been considered unacceptable just a few years ago is excused or championed as normal. The result has been a blunting of our sensibilities and an increasing impotence in the face of social breakdown. Inured to the outrageous, we can barely recognize deviance as such, much less take effective action against it.

Senator Moynihan was concerned primarily with such glaring urban pathologies as illegitimacy, drug abuse, unemployment, and violence. But his diagnosis is equally applicable to the realms of culture and morality. There, too, we have witnessed concerted efforts to deny deviancy by redefining it. As a result, basic standards of propriety, taste, and accomplishment have been eroded—where, indeed, they have not collapsed altogether. Much that would formerly have been rejected as repulsive trash is now not only countenanced but also celebrated. The contemporary art world offers a Caligari cabinet of examples; so do our colleges and universities.

For nearly thirty years, *The New Criterion* has regularly reported on these cultural and educational deformations. Back in 1999, for example, we alerted our readers to an "interdisciplinary" writing class taught in the College of Letters at Wesleyan University called "Pornography: Writing of Prostitutes." It was, we noted, one of the new-breed sex classes that have recently infested American universities, especially in the politicized intellectual slums populated by women's studies, gender studies, gay and lesbian studies, and kindred forms of academic grievance-mongering. The official description of this educational travesty is still worth savoring:

> The pornography we study is an art of transgression which impels human sexuality toward, against, and beyond the limits which have traditionally defined civil discourses and practices—defined, that is, by regimes of dominance and submission, inclusion or exclusion, in the domains of organ and emotional pleasure. Our examination accordingly includes the implication of pornography in so-called perverse practices such as voyeurism, bestiality, sadism, and masochism and considers the inflections of the dominant white-heterosexual tradition by alternative sexualities and genders, as well as by race, class, age, mental, and physical competence. We also attempt to identify the factors, intrinsic and extrinsic, which align the pornographic impulse with revolutionary or conservative political practices. But our primary focus is on pornography as radical representations of sexuality whose themes are violation, degradation, and exposure.

Note the deflationary "so-called" before the word "perverse." The "dominant white-heterosexual tradition" might regard (say) "voyeurism, bestiality, sadism, and masochism" as perverse, but not a professor at Wesleyan University! The reading list for this class included such monuments of cultural insight as works by the Marquis de Sade and *Hustler* magazine. When it came to student projects, the teacher boasted that "I don't put any constraints on it. It's supposed to be: 'Just create your own work of pornography.' " One young woman, a freshman, shot photos that "included oral sex with her ex-boyfriend", while another partially disrobed, "bound her wrists with rope and asked others to flog her with a cat o' nine tails." Ah, bright college years, with pleasures rife!

The smug, minatory insouciance of the professor presiding over this tawdry display was repellent. But somehow even worse was the smarmy, invertebrate response of Douglas Bennet, then President of Wesleyan, who contented himself with circulating a memo to the faculty questioning "the appropriateness of this course in the Wesleyan curriculum" and ordering a review of but otherwise supporting "one of Wesleyan's most dedicated, serious, and effective" teachers.

You might think that what happened at Wesleyan was a freakish outlier, a lamentable but also exceptional occurrence. Freakish it was, but, far from being exceptional, the academic embrace of graphic and outré sex has become business as usual in American higher education today. We think, for example, of "Revolting Behavior: The Challenges of Women's Sexual Freedom," a conference that took place at the State University of New York at New Paltz in 1997 and featured the investigation of such important educational topics as "How to Get What You Want in Bed" (an "interactive group workshop") and "Sex Toys for Women," at which the owner of a New York City sex boutique displayed, and illustrated the uses of, various appliances—all of which were on sale later in the day.

Or think of Annie Sprinkle (*née* Ellen Steinberg), the former prostitute and porn star reborn as a "feminist porn activist," who travels around the "women's studies" circuit inviting the curious to employ a speculum and flashlight to inspect her cervix and (as one report put it) "educating students and faculty on how better to pleasure themselves." Who says a liberal arts education is bereft of practical application?

The latest episode in the continuing saga of campus sex follies comes to us from Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois. In February, John Michael Bailey, a popular psychology professor who has been at Northwestern for twenty-one years, organized a special after-class session as part of his class on human sexuality. Some 120 of the 600 students in the class attended. In the words of a college newspaper, the session featured "a naked non-student woman being repeatedly sexually stimulated to the point of orgasm by . . . a motorized phallus"—i.e., a hand-held reciprocating saw with a custom-fitted dildo attached.

Professor Bailey's classes included other educational highlights. "This year," he said in a statement, "we have had a panel of gay men speaking about their sex lives, a transsexual performer, two convicted sex offenders, an expert in female sexual health and sexual pleasure, a plastic surgeon, a swinging couple, and the February 21 panel led by Ken MelvoinJBerg [*sic*], on 'networking for kinky people.' " A full-service emporium, this psychology class at Northwestern University. No wonder, as the university's catalogue boasts, "This course counts toward the Weinberg College social and behavioral sciences distribution requirement, Area III."

It is not surprising—at least, we hope it is not surprising—that news of the "naked non-student woman's" performance unleashed a cataract of criticism. Professor Bailey repeatedly noted that attendance at the event was strictly optional and that students were warned about the graphic nature of the performance. Are those extenuating observations? Not really. For what we are dealing with in Professor Bailey's course on Human Sexuality is yet another symptom of an educational establishment that has been perverted out of all recognition. Professor Bailey proudly reports that "student feedback" for this "singular

college experience" was "uniformly positive." You don't say? We suspect that a free trip to the local red-light district would also elicit "positive feedback" among many eighteen- to twenty-one-year-olds. The question is whether it has any place in a college curriculum. As the enrollment of 600 students in this course on Human Sexuality suggests, Professor Bailey is an enormously popular teacher. But what does that tell us? Pornography is a multi-billion-dollar business. It is popular. Does that make it salubrious? Does it, moreover, make it fit for inclusion in a liberal arts curriculum?

As we noted in this space when Annie Sprinkle brought her act to Hamilton College a few years ago, the response of the professoriate when faced with criticism of such pornographic exhibitions always begins by invoking the protection of academic freedom. But academic freedom has nothing to do with the case. As the sociologist Edward Shils observed, academic freedom is not a universal human right. On the contrary, it is a "qualified right," a "privilege" extended to people fulfilling a certain role in exchange for the performance of certain duties. At bottom, Shils wrote, academic freedom is "the freedom to seek and transmit the truth." It does not, he pointedly added, "extend to the conduct of political propaganda in teaching." Nor, we might add, does it extend to the misuse of grotesquely altered hardware appliances on "naked non-student women" exhibitionists. As we noted when writing about Annie Sprinkle, academic freedom does not purchase a blanket immunity from moral censure; it is not a license to engage in moral subversion. There is no reason that parents, for example, need countenance the corruption of their sons and daughters because some college dean or women's studies professor claims the prerogative of academic freedom.

In the end, however, any talk about "academic freedom" is out of place in discussing Professor Bailey's circus of perversity. To invoke academic freedom is to dower it with a rhetorical seriousness it doesn't deserve. What we're dealing with here is a fundamental failure of educational leadership. Morton Shapiro, the President of Northwestern, issued a spineless statement about the incident: he was "troubled, disappointed, and disturbed" about the "demonstration in psychology" (is that what it was?) in Professor Bailey's "popular [see: it is popular! That counts for something, right?] Human Sexuality course." The demonstration took place after hours, President Shapiro bleated, and it was optional. Still, he thinks it "represented extremely poor judgment on the part of our faculty member." You don't say? And what is President Shapiro proposing to do about this exhibition of "extremely poor judgment"? As of this writing, nada. Rien. Or, in plain English, nothing. Keep your heads down, comrades, this too will pass.

We've been hearing more and more about the "higher education bubble" recently. Usually, the bubble in question is the financial bubble, the hypertrophy of college tuition at a time of economic contraction. But there is a moral and intellectual bubble evident in academia as well. It is the bubble of decadence: that situation that ensues when an institution has abandoned or betrayed its defining principles and yet continues to mouth the rhetoric and enjoy the perquisites those principles bequeathed. Consider this statement by a college administrator about the Bailey motorized dildo parade: "Northwestern University faculty members engage in teaching and research on a wide variety of topics, some of them controversial and at the leading edge of their respective disciplines. The university supports the efforts of its faculty to further the advancement of knowledge."

"Controversial." "The leading edge of their disciplines." "The advancement of knowledge." What rubbish! What is on view here is the advancement of perversity and the exhibition of decadence. To an astonishing extent, the liberal arts in this country have lost their moral and intellectual compass. They employ a language that is reminiscent of the humanities but is put to anti-humanistic ends—ends which, as Joseph Epstein noted in a fine essay on this sorry episode in *The Weekly Standard*, are "exploitative, coarsening, demeaning, and squalid." It used to be that colleges served *in loco parentis* to their charges. These days, they are more and more just loco.

Upstairs & downstairs in Amherst

by Denis Donoghue

Emily Dickinson was born in Amherst, Massachusetts, on December 10, 1830 and died there on May 15, 1886. She left behind, in manuscript, nearly 1800 poems, mostly untitled lyrics and brief allegorical narratives; only ten poems were published in her lifetime, and those anonymously. Some of the poems are trivial, mere quips, but about thirty of them, by my count, are among the finest lyrics in the language. Dickinson also wrote more than 1,000 letters—an unknown number have been destroyed—most of them distinctive enough in style to invite the same kind of attention as the poems. It was her occasional practice to enclose her poems in letters to friends, especially to her sister-in-law, Susan Dickinson, who lived with her husband Austin in the house next door called the Evergreens. Sometimes it is hard to separate a poem from the letter that accompanied it.

In her new volume, *Dickinson: Selected Poems and Commentaries*, Helen Vendler has chosen 150 poems and added a commentary on each of them—two or three pages apiece, usually:

> I have included many of the familiar poems, but I have wanted to make space, too, for daring poems that have rarely been anthologized or taught in school, and so have not reached a large general audience. There are poems of varying achievement here, the lesser ones included to show the conventional or occasional Dickinson, the greater ones to sustain her right to fame.[1]

The plan is reasonable, though particular readers will find some of Dickinson's most achieved poems missing. I miss "The Difference between Despair/ And Fear," "I shall know why," and "Through what transports of Patience."

Professor Vendler's commentaries are the work of a heightened consciousness, fully in keeping with her appraisal of a few of the same poems in *Poets Thinking* (2004)—except that there she had a complex interpretive thesis to negotiate:

> Dickinson initially constructs her poetic structures to suggest a view of existence experienced intelligibly, serially, and chromatically, whether in delight or apprehension. She then modifies her structures to show seriality mutating into iterative stasis as others repeat her fate; or to suggest serial hope deliquescing into uncertain termini or no termini at all.

This thesis does not appear in the new book. Vendler's attention is concentrated on each poem as it comes; she rarely looks before or after. But sometimes she seizes the occasion to make a brilliant general observation, as when noting the "sternness [Dickinson] exercised against her own charm" or remarking on the "simmering dismissiveness she has so often felt for others." Vendler seems to say to her readers: "this is what it is like to give the poem in front of us a serious reading, following its arduous line of thought, untying its knots." Teachers and students will appreciate and learn from her elucidations, espe-

1 *Dickinson: Selected Poems and Commentaries*, edited by Helen Vendler; Belknap Press, 535 pages, $35.

cially when the chosen poems are cryptic, as they often are.

In this volume, Vendler's method is paraphrase even though, in earlier books, she has treated the practice with disdain:

> As is often said, but as often forgotten, poems are not their paraphrases, because the paraphrase does not represent the thinking process as it strives toward ultimate precision, but rather reduces the poem to summarized "thoughts" or "statements" or "meanings."

Dickinson must be the exception that tests the rule. To get to the poetry at all, one has to puzzle out her thoughts, statements, and meanings, without the irony of quotation marks. We are fortunate to have Vendler to lead us so cogently through the poems. But paraphrase remains an issue.

In the Preface to his translation of Ovid's *Epistles*, Dryden made a distinction between paraphrase and metaphrase. The distinction is one of degree. Metaphrase is "turning an author word by word, and line by line, from one language into another." Paraphrase is "translation with latitude, where the author is kept in view by the translator, so as never to be lost, but his words are not so strictly followed as his sense; and that too is admitted to be amplified, but not altered." Vendler deals with a poem as if she were writing it out in longhand, resolving the hard passages, and taking whatever latitude she wants in putting the poem where she likes to see it—among other poems.

Context for her does not mean social, economic, or political considerations that may bear on a poem. It entails, rather, setting a line or a stanza in relation to companionable passages in the poets Dickinson read—especially Shakespeare, Vaughan, Milton, Keats, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and Emily Brontë—or poets we should read in critical association with her—often Tennyson, Whitman, Melville, Wallace Stevens, and Elizabeth Bishop. Above all, Vendler pays attention to the Bible, Dickinson's book-of-books, especially to the New Testament, and more especially Revelation. Vendler adds to her commentary two practices that would not normally be included in a paraphrase. She examines the alternative words, variant possibilities that Dickinson considered before settling on the best one. Vendler completes the commentary by attending to prosody: a poem's meters, rhymes, alliterations, and other such features.

The latitudes Vendler takes are bold. She exempts herself from the contests and dissensions that have preoccupied scholars of Dickinson for the past fifteen or twenty years, mainly on the issue of manuscript versus print. Every editor of Dickinson's poems from T. W. Higginson and Mabel Loomis Todd in 1890 to Thomas H. Johnson (1955) and R. W. Franklin (1998) has incurred rebuke for preferring the fixity of print and decorum to the daring irregularity of Dickinson's manuscripts. The poet-scholar Susan Howe has this bravura sentence, representative of the spiritedness of recent scholarship on the issue: "For T. H. Johnson, R. W. Franklin, and their publishing institution, the Belknap Press of Harvard University, the conventions of print require humilities of caution." The Dickinson she loves is wild ("Wild Nights!"), lawless, "antinomian." Maybe the *Dickinson Electronic Archives* project will bring peace. Meanwhile Vendler is content to cite the poems from Franklin's *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Variorum Edition* (1998) and his *Reading Edition* (1999). She is not beset by the privilege claimed for manuscripts or the fact that often the printed form of a poem by Dickinson doesn't look much like the manuscript original.

Vendler takes more latitude in deciding that the "I" so frequent in Dickinson's poems is the empirical Emily Dickinson, the daughter of Edward and Emily Dickinson and sister to Austin and Lavinia who lived in the Homestead, their family home in Amherst. Sending Higginson some poems, Dickinson told him that she was not the "I." "When I state myself, as the Representative of the Verse—it does not mean—me—but a supposed person." Vendler is not troubled by this declaration. When I was growing up into the reading of poems, I took instruction from the New Critics that I should read ev-

ery lyric as a dramatic monologue and try to intuit the drama the poem implied. I was not to submit to the "I." The "I" was someone else, an imagined person, not to be identified with the poet. I found the injunction difficult to practice in some cases, but I have retained a prejudice in its favor.

Vendler hasn't, evidently. Inward with Dickinson's sensibility as she supposes she is, she often runs a step or two ahead of the poet, especially when there is an opening to say, bluntly indeed, that Dickinson was an atheist. What Dickinson believed or didn't is still in dispute—Ted Hughes and Craig Raine argued over it in *Times Literary Supplement* some years ago. There is evidence on both sides. But Vendler doesn't want to dispute it. Commenting on "'Tis so appalling—it exhilarates—," Vendler glosses the middle stanza—

> The Truth, is Bald—and Cold—
> But that will hold—
> If any are not sure—
> We show them—prayer
> But we, who know,
> Stop hoping, now—

with:

> At one extraordinary moment in this poem, Dickinson declares her atheism, choosing firm (if frigid) Truth over religious Delusion, secular (if unaesthetic) Despair over theological Hope. . . . She is certain of the Truth, but gestures briefly and dismissively to those who need illusion. . . . She then reasserts her own affirmation, as one of a company: "we, who know."

"Those who need illusion" is an uncaring paraphrase of "If any are not sure." And who are "we," and what do we know, and how do we know it? Dickinson has another poem—one of many such—in which she says that "This World is not conclusion." Vendler can only assert that the claim is a mistake on Dickinson's part which she corrects in the remainder of the poem. She asks, of the last lines of that poem—"Narcotics cannot still the Tooth/ That nibbles at the soul"—"What are the 'Narcotics' that might (erroneously) be thought to still the nibbling Tooth of Doubt?" and answers:

> The various anti-anxiety nostrums of religion—a presumed God, promises of an afterlife, heaven-sent angels guarding the souls of the faithful, the Eucharist—can quell the churchgoer's doubt only insofar as they dull the churchgoer's mind.

Christians who have retained enough mind to read Vendler's book will find her insult amusing—the Eucharist as Valium. They will also note the fact that in the quoted verses Dickinson does not indulge herself in such blatant explicitness. More often, I think, she believes in God but thinks Him vindictive; that is not atheism. She regards Christ as "the Criterion Lover."

Vendler puts her finger on the scale again in her commentary on "Those—dying then," when she quotes the last lines:

> The abdication of Belief
> Makes the Behavior small—
> Better an ignis fatuus
> Than no illume at all.

Vendler says:

> Dickinson's ironic recommendation "Better an ignis fatuus/ Than no illume at all—" rings precisely and dismissively because it is a relief unavailable in her own case; but her distaste for "small" behavior leaves her ambivalent toward those who still rely on the grand aspirations of belief. Nonetheless, the resemblance of "illume" to "illusory" hovers at the close.

The sarcasm of "still rely on the grand aspirations of belief" is Vendler's, not Dickinson's. Besides, there is no resemblance, in meaning or in sound, between "illume" and "illusory." Vendler strains for it so that Dickinson can be shown to walk boldly into skepticism. In fact, if you want to give "illume" a resembling neighbor, you should choose "illumination," but that would point the poem in a direction alien to Vendler's.

Enough grumbling—going back over the book, I note how often Vendler shows me the way through brain-breaking poems and provides luminous perceptions in their vicinity.

Lyndall Gordon's book, *Lives Like Loaded Guns*, is not strictly a biography of Emily Dickinson; her death is reported on page 227, with half of the book still ahead.[2] But there are many chapters of sustained biographical interest. There are signs that Gordon does not much like Emily Dickinson, that she is irritated by her "Little Me" and her "Daisy" manners. She also makes a point of showing that the recluse of the Homestead could be as cruel as other people; her busybody letters to Mary Bowles in March and April 1862, when Samuel Bowles was away from home, in Washington to begin with and then in Europe, make unpleasant reading. Gordon maintains that Dickinson had a secret—she suffered from epilepsy, which was then regarded as a shameful illness. This was the main cause of her seclusion.

Gordon agrees with those scholars who think that Otis Lord was the crucial man in Dickinson's emotional life, an even more passionate relation than any she had with other claimants—notably Benjamin Newton, George Gould, Charles Wadsworth, and Samuel Bowles. Gordon assigns to a footnote two sentences that deserve a place in the main text:

> Critics who foreground what was undoubtedly an intense tie to Susan [Dickinson] are tempted to minimize her attraction to men. In my view she was susceptible to both sexes but with a verbal excitement and abandon that eludes current categories.

That seems to mean that women in love don't write letters like Dickinson's any more. Probably true, but in any event Dickinson is marginal to the main story Gordon tells involving Austin Dickinson and Mabel Loomis Todd. The story has been well-known since Polly Longsworth edited *Austin and Mabel: The Amherst Affair and Love Letters of Austin Dickinson and Mabel Loomis Todd* in 1984, but Gordon places it in a far-reaching context and gives more detail.

Austin Dickinson and Susan Gilbert, as she was then, married on July 1, 1856. By 1875 they had three children, Ned, Mattie, and Gib, to give them their colloquial names. Gib died in 1883 at the age of eight. In 1882, Austin fell in love with a new faculty wife and she with him. Mabel Loomis Todd was the wife of David Todd, a professor of astronomy at Amherst College where Austin was a trustee and the treasurer. Austin and Mabel consummated their passion, if that is the right verb, on December 13, 1883 in the dining room of the Homestead. The affair continued, with somewhat diminishing returns, till Austin died on August 16, 1895. Assignations were not a problem. The lovers had two houses available to them, and often a third. Over the years, a comfortable arrangement developed in which Austin and Mabel met for love-making in the Homestead, or in the Todds' house, or—if Susan and the children were away—in the Evergreens. David Todd was an assiduous philanderer. Mabel continued to make love to him and to Austin, often on the same day, afternoon, and evening.

There was no jealousy, it appears. The only sufferer in the case was Susan. Austin disengaged himself from her and the children. Susan survived on the little attention he gave her and on her custom of taking the children on lengthy vacations. I believe that Austin was a cad, Mabel a society queen, and David—"our mutual friend," as the lovers called him—a complacent husband. Polly Longsworth estimates that in 1884 Mabel slept with her husband "an average of eight times a month" and with Austin "twelve." Complications arose only when Mabel started cultivating murderous fantasies against Susan and demanding that God or Austin put an end to her, presumably by having her wilt into the grave. In the event, Susan survived Mabel's lurid imaginings for many years and died in 1913.

2 *Lives Like Loaded Guns: Emily Dickinson and Her Family's Feuds*, by Lyndall Gordon; Viking, 491 pages, $32.95.

What did Emily Dickinson think of her brother's adulteries and Mabel's frequent visits to the Homestead? Some scholars have held that Emily lived in such a world of her own that she did not know what was going on downstairs. Gordon doesn't agree; she must have known. She made sure never to see or be seen by Mabel. The few letters she felt obliged to write to her are so riddling that they could be deciphered only by the combined attentions of Lyndall Gordon and Helen Vendler. But she had little choice, given the conditions she faced in the Homestead. After Edward's death in 1874, Austin became master of the house; he paid the bills and could come and go as he pleased. He did not have to ask anyone's permission to entertain Mabel behind a closed door. His sister Lavinia condoned the affair because she thought Susan was more to be blamed than Austin for the bleakness of the marriage. Emily loved Susan, but she had to accept Austin's jurisdiction. Mostly she did so by staying upstairs.

The ethical question seems not to have arisen: Emily Dickinson's sense of sexual morality seems to me to have been feeble at best. Besides, her own fantasies were often so extreme that the difference between having them and putting them into practice may have seemed merely nominal; though the evidence indicates that she did not put them into practice, even when Otis Lord urged her in that direction. Still, the moral question hardly casts a shadow on the erotic behaviors of Austin, Mabel, and David. Lyndall Gordon pointedly quotes the passage in Henry James's *The Europeans* (1879) in which Gertrude Wentworth indicates that she is ready to be carried off to Europe by Felix Young, whom we know to be a Bohemian adventurer. Her poor distressed father exclaims, "Where are our moral grounds?," a question that no one in the room thinks of taking up. Someone should have taken it up, a few years later, in Amherst.

Emily Dickinson had to put up with Austin's adultery, although it intruded on her privacy, but she drew a firm line on a question of property. In the autumn of 1885, Austin, pestered by Mabel, decided to give the Todds a piece of the Dickinsons' estate on which to build a house. He needed Lavinia and Emily to sign off on the official deed. Lavinia signed, but Emily refused: she would not allow him to deprive Susan and their son Ned of their rights. After she died, the Todds got the gift. But there were legal problems. On October 6, 1895, after Austin's death, Mabel showed Lavinia a letter from him giving "Mrs Todd" his share of his father's estate. The letter had no legal validity, but Mabel assumed that Lavinia would act in its spirit. She refused at first, but, later, she capitulated. Later still, she regretted her capitulation and, on May 25, 1896, took the case to court to have her signature declared invalid. On April 15, 1898 she won, mainly on the evidence of the Dickinsons' Irish maid, Maggie Maher. The Todds had to return the land.

Meanwhile another feud was proceeding, over the disputed possession of Dickinson's poems and letters and the right to publish several volumes of them. On one side, Mabel and her daughter Millicent Todd Bingham; on the other, Martha Dickinson Bianchi, Susan's daughter, Emily Dickinson's niece. Chapter 16 of Gordon's book, "The Battle of the Daughters," is especially absorbing as it rehearses the later years of the feud. Gordon holds that most of the biographical work on Dickinson, including Richard Sewall's *The Life of Emily Dickinson* (1974), has been unjustly skewed in Mabel's favor. Sewall's approach, she says, "leaves the poet more elusive than ever." I interpret her book as speaking up for Susan Dickinson, whose presence in Emily's life Austin and Mabel conspired to erase: it is an honorable motive; the justice of it pleases.

The subtle Scotsman

by Adam Kirsch

One of the first and simplest ways a reader gets his bearings when exploring the unfamiliar territory of a poet's work is by learning to recognize the poet's favorite subjects. Eventually, you move on to the subtler signatures of rhythm, imagery, and metaphor; but it's only after you know, roughly speaking, what the poet writes about that you become confident enough to start examining how he writes about it. To say that Robert Frost is a poet of New England country life, or Elizabeth Bishop a poet of travel, is not to say very much about them, but it's enough to start making their acquaintance—much as a person at a party might be introduced with "Mary is a lawyer" or "John is from Chicago."

It follows that one of the most disconcerting things a poet can do is to appear to have no favorite subjects, no recurrent themes. Such a poet appears unplaceable; like someone who conceals his native accent, or stays deliberately vague about what he does for a living, he is a little disconcerting. What kind of a person refuses to resemble himself, after all, except a con-man or a sociopath? Such poets put us on guard, making us work unusually hard to figure them out, and it's no coincidence that the modern poets who have a reputation for difficulty—from Robert Browning to Ezra Pound to Paul Muldoon—are all masters of the persona and the dramatic monologue.

Mick Imlah is one of those elusive, brilliantly unsettling poets. Open his new *Selected Poems* and you will find poems about mountain-climbing and the battle of Culloden, rugby and zoology, alcoholism and religious pilgrims.[1] Among the speakers Imlah channels are an aborted fetus, the Hunchback of Notre Dame, a Cockney social climber, an eighty-three-year-old Scotchwoman at a bus stop, and the Edwardian politician Lord Rosebery. Even his own name, he writes in "Namely," carries a jumble of paradoxical associations: "this mongrel and seeming-Islamical M. IMLAH,/ the SMITH, J. of phonebooks from Fez to the Indian Ocean," is not actually Arabic but Scottish.

Imlah's anonymity is nearly complete in the United States, but he was a well-known and well-liked member of the British literary world, a longtime editor at the TLS (where I worked with him on a number of articles, though we never met). When he died in 2009, at the age of just fifty-three, he was widely mourned by British writers. Imlah's *Selected Poems* comes with a long, affectionate introduction/memoir by the Booker Prize–winning novelist Alan Hollinghurst, his former Oxford tutor, who describes Imlah's love of sport, his fascination with Scottish literature and history, and his reticence about publishing his own work. In his lifetime, Imlah issued just two collections: *Birthmarks*, in 1988, and *The Lost Leader*, twenty years later. "For at least ten years before its publication," Hollinghurst writes, "the second book was

1 *Selected Poems*, by Mick Imlah; Faber and Faber, 176 pages, £12.99.

expected, its name was chosen, it was about to be sent to a publisher—on occasion was sent, and then retracted." When it finally did appear, it was highly praised, winning the Forward Prize.

Hollinghurst introduces the reader to Imlah the man, but getting to know Imlah the poet is more of a challenge. Like all poets who love masking, Imlah recognizes that it presents a wonderful stylistic challenge: if your face is disguised, your voice must be all the more distinctive to be recognizable. From Browning on, "persona" poets have cultivated extremely individual, even eccentric, styles, and Imlah carries on the tradition. His fastidious diction, his erudite references, and the elegant movement of his verse suggest a very literary writer, and Imlah is certainly that. But the power of his work, especially his early work, comes from the uncanniness of hearing that voice tell such weird and astonishing stories.

Take "Abortion," in which the title does not seem to match the poem it introduces. It starts out as the tale of a ship's passenger who wakes up with a hangover: "Uncurled at noon,/ As dry as a Dead Sea Scroll,/ I rose and wobbled/ Blank about the cabin like a reclaimed monster/ Learning to eat." Suddenly the ship begins to rock violently, and a menacing noise is heard—"Like something familiar mistaken, becoming/ As I struggled to call it a pump or the cistern/ Neither, nothing else, and very loud." The payoff, as in a horror story by Poe, comes at the very end:

> I passed clean out
> And was lucky to survive; the boat
> Melted in blood, but I stiffened safely,
> A rabbit's foot, gristly
> In someone's cabinet.

Now the title becomes clear, and we understand that the rabbit's foot is a preserved fetus in a jar; the pumping noise came from the hose used during the abortion procedure; and the passenger was really an unborn child, afloat in the ocean of the womb. The metaphor is so baroque, and so internally incoherent, as to become grotesque—and it shocks us into seeing the subject in an unforgettable fashion.

In *Birthmarks*, Imlah relishes these kinds of surreal disjunctions; he obviously enjoys making the reader's skin creep. In "The Zoologist's Bath," a Victorian scientist—fictional, though Imlah prefaces the poem with a fake biographical note from a fake scholarly book—propounds a theory that human beings are evolving back into fish, and in the bathtub, he apparently grows a fin himself. In the sequence "Mountains," Imlah offers a prose poem about a polar explorer who realizes that the ice he has been walking on is full of "*beaks* . . . it became unpleasantly clear that we had been climbing in the mist on a sort of frosted mud made of penguins, for miles and miles."

The best of the early poems are those in which a startling, creepy image is made to serve some larger metaphorical purpose. That is what happens in the first poem in *Selected Poems*, "Tusking," in which Imlah briskly and elliptically describes a hunting expedition by English schoolboys who saw the tusks off of sleeping elephants. Exactly what is going on in the poem is hard to figure out—confusingly, the "foolish boys" themselves are described as "Harrow Elephants," after the English public school—and Imlah's tone at first sounds half scolding, half amused: "The English elephant/ *Never* lies!" But the second half of the poem concentrates on the piteous image of elephant corpses:

> Out in the bush
> Is silence now:
> Savannah seas
> Have islands now,
> Smelly land-masses,
> Bloody, cold,
> Disfigured places
> With fly-blown faces

In this way, the poem resolves into a little allegory about imperialism and its lingering cost. What might seem sentimental or familiarly polemical, if stated directly, becomes newly powerful when Imlah tells it slant.

The strangeness of Imlah's second book, *The Lost Leader*, is less stark and willful. But

it is in some ways even more formidable for an American reader because it is so densely and playfully allusive, saturated in British and especially Scottish culture and history. There is a long sequence of poems about important Scottish figures, including the medieval theologian and alchemist Michael Scot, Robert the Bruce, and Sir Walter Scott. (The series seems to culminate in "Gordon Brown," but this is a characteristic Imlah joke: the subject of the poem is not the Scottish-born Prime Minister, but a rugby player of the same name, known as "the Ayrshire Bull.")

The terse World War I elegy "London Scottish" is a good example of Imlah's method. The title counts on the reader knowing (or discovering on the internet, as I did) that it is the name of both a football club and an army regiment. When Imlah writes that sixty players for the club "volunteered for the touring squad" in 1914, he means that they enlisted to fight in France. There, the poem tells us, "three-quarters died," and the survivors "sometimes drank to 'The Forty-Five':/ Neither a humorous nor an idle toast." Here the toast refers to the forty-five players killed in combat, but it is also the way Jacobites—supporters of the Stuart dynasty—referred to the Rebellion of 1745, which ended when the Scottish supporters of the Young Pretender, Charles Stuart, were routed at Culloden.

In this way, Imlah draws an indirect but thematically crucial link between two wars and calls them both into question. That questioning becomes explicit in the book's title poem, which turns directly to "the '45" and the role of the Scots' "lost leader," Bonnie Prince Charlie. (Typically of Imlah, it's impossible to capture the title's full flavor without recognizing that it alludes to Browning's famous poem of the same name, which denounced the political betrayal of Wordsworth.) With the Battle of Culloden lost, Imlah writes, the prince told his followers "Let each seek his own safety/ The best way he can," before escaping "To France at last, your safety,/ Prince, Your Highness,/ Your brandy, gout and syphilis." The leader is not worthy of his country's devotion, much as the British generals in World War I were not worthy of their troops' sacrifices. Yet Imlah finishes "The Lost Leader" by declaring, "*The cause was light,/ A flower worn in the heart . . . / And all we did was sweetened by it*."

This kind of patriotism, loyal not to Scotland's official heroes but to its people and their capacity for self-sacrifice, is at the heart of the book. The first poem in the Scottish-history sequence, "Muck," depicts Saint Kevin, the sixth-century Irish monk, leading his followers on an expedition to the island of Mull. But this leader literally gets lost, ending up on Muck, which is as unpromising as its name suggests: "a/ black upturned platter of rock, stained/ with sea-lichen and scummy pools/ of barge flies and crab water." In "Braveheart," Imlah narrates in heroic couplets the less-than-heroic attempt of Robert the Bruce's followers to bury his heart in the Holy Land. They get as far as Spain before being ambushed by Moors, and the heart ends up stomped "into mince."

Still, Imlah shows, that's not the end of the story—even after this ill-treatment, Bruce's heart keeps going, "trailing his pipes," and it is buried today in Melrose Abbey. This kind of endurance, this taciturn resilience in the face of defeat, seems to be Imlah's ideal of Scottishness. The most genuinely heroic figure we meet in *The Lost Leader* is the abandoned sailor in "Maroon," a "man of Fife" who refuses to "dwell . . . on the rights and wrongs of his own case," but gets to work making himself at home on his deserted island:

> and since he is unquestionably marooned—
> four hundred to the west of Valpareez—
> he might as well settle to whittle the staves
> of his new place: a basic shelter first,
> until in time a house of logs should crown
> all these unlikely acres.

The poems of *The Lost Leader* are definitely more bookish than those of *Birthmarks*, and sometimes Imlah mixes the roles of poet and critic. Long poems on Walter Scott and James Thomson, while brimming with affec-

tion and biographical detail, are at a lower temperature than his more original work. But "Gray's Elegy," one of Imlah's most slyly moving poems, puts literary history to an almost confessional purpose. It's always dangerous, with Imlah, to take any story as autobiographical, but the poem at least professes to be a memory of one of the poet's schoolmasters, a distracted and ineffective figure.

When the class asks him about the meaning of the title *Far from the Madding Crowd*, he replies, "the man you'd have to ask/ Is Thomas Gray," and it says something about his lack of authority that "the sharper boys" all assume he has made a mistake—"You mean, Thomas *Hardy*." But as the teacher explains, Hardy took the title of his novel from Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard." He "brightens briefly" at the prospect of having the class read the poem, but it turns out that "there were no Grays left in the stock room,/ So we talked about Hardy's wives till the bell went."

To appreciate what Imlah is up to in this skillfully compressed character-study, the reader has to be better acquainted with Gray than the schoolboys are and remember the elegy's concern with the forgotten and the obscure: "Nor you, ye Proud, impute to these the fault/ If Memory o'er their tomb no trophies raise." Imlah's "Gray's Elegy" is just such a trophy over a forgotten man. The school-bell that dismisses the class and sends the teacher back to the shades of oblivion echoes the church-bell with which the Elegy opens: "The curfew tolls the bell of parting day." Here, as in all of Imlah's best work, subtlety is allied to sentiment, and the pleasure of figuring things out gives way to the deeper pleasure of serious feeling.

Frost's horse, Wilbur's ride

by William Logan

American literature began with the horse. Our poetry had to wait for Whitman, but the stirrings of an American fiction—a fiction that did not slavishly imitate whatever the British were doing—are found in the ride of the Headless Horseman. Like Frost a hundred years later, Washington Irving had to go to England to write his most original work, and he came bearing news from the backwaters. The British loved tales of empire, loved them long after the empire had collapsed, and the better when written by exotics. Irving was followed by Kipling, Frost, Walcott, Naipaul, and Rushdie.

Perhaps a national literature must begin in myth. "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" gave nightmares to generations of children. Irving offered not merely German folk tales transplanted to the New World, but also a sense of the uncanny lurking on foreign ground (home and yet not home with its New York, New Jersey, New London), the uncanny found in the more stiff-collared, psychological version of Hawthorne a couple of decades later. Like Cooper, that other mythographer of the American East, Irving contributed more to the American matter than to the American style; his humor was so drily secondhand, so calcified and genteel, it had an almost anonymous character. A sentence will serve:

> In this by-place of nature there abode, in a remote period of American history, that is to say, some thirty years since, a worthy wight of the name of Ichabod Crane, who sojourned, or, as he expressed it, "tarried," in Sleepy Hollow, for the purpose of instructing the children of the vicinity.

If Irving's tales are almost unread now, they were not unread when Frost and Wilbur were boys.

We forget how much of the American myth was founded in nightmare rides. Revere's midnight gallop is part of our textbooks now—we can scarcely escape it—but Longfellow's myth was not composed until the last of the Revolutionary veterans were dead. (Tennyson wrote "The Charge of the Light Brigade" when bulletins from the Crimea were warm on the table.) Until Longfellow, Paul Revere had been just another obscure Boston silversmith. He owed his late fame less to his heroic ride than to the convenient rhymes upon his name (*Prescott* and *Dawes* offer less attractive rhymes, but William Prescott was the only rider to make it to Concord). If there was Revere, whose fictive history we eagerly recall, there was also Israel Putnam, whose real history we have dimly forgotten. That farmer-general, that latter-day Cincinnatus, rode eighty miles overnight to volunteer after the Battle of Lexington. And what of Sybil Ludington of New York, who was called the female Paul Revere? (She rode twice as far as Revere—he might have been called the male Ludington.) Such rides did not stop with the Revolution. What of General Sheridan's ride from Winchester, the subject of a poem much beloved in its day? The horse entered our poetry already lathered in exhaustion, and

a century later found its place in our great pastoralist, Robert Frost.

The Draft Horse

With a lantern that wouldn't burn
In too frail a buggy we drove
Behind too heavy a horse
Through a pitch-dark limitless grove.

And a man came out of the trees
And took our horse by the head
And reaching back to his ribs
Deliberately stabbed him dead.

The ponderous beast went down
With a crack of a broken shaft.
And the night drew through the trees
In one long invidious draft.

The most unquestioning pair
That ever accepted fate
And the least disposed to ascribe
Any more than we had to to hate,

We assumed that the man himself
Or someone he had to obey
Wanted us to get down
And walk the rest of the way.

"The Draft Horse" begins with the almost throwaway observations typical of Frost, but the balky lantern and frail buggy announce mishap and incipient disaster at the outset. Frost occasionally betrays the theme in his opening line (think of "Something there is that doesn't love a wall"), but he prefers to enter a poem by the side gate: "A lantern-light from deeper in the barn," "Out walking in the frozen swamp one gray day," "There were three in the meadow by the brook." These aren't the stuff of pastoral so much as backwards introductions to backwoods tales. (There were farmers long before pastoral poems; for all we know, with their long bets on the future, such men have always told stories in a sidelong way, so as not to tempt fate.) Frost loved the quiet before drama—but he loved the quiet after drama, too. Very few of his poems, and perhaps none of his best, end on a dramatic note—his poetry was built for reflection over the ashes or the grave.

"The Draft Horse" doesn't take long to lay out this couple's plight: "With a lantern that wouldn't burn/ In too frail a buggy we drove/ Behind too heavy a horse/ Through a pitch-dark limitless grove." Part of this nightmare is that the grove is *limitless*. Woods can be large, forests immense; but you can usually see from one side of a grove to the other—this half-real grove is half unreal. ("Grove" is without cognate in any Germanic tongue, its origins as mysterious as Frost's tale.)

Frost could not imagine the day when a reader wouldn't know a thing about buggies. The lantern is mounted outside (the absence of a comma at the end of the first line might suggest otherwise). A buggy is delicate by nature, not made for rough roads or the long haul, and too fragile here for how far the couple has to go (the buggy's load would be trifling)—besides, the horse is *too heavy*. Why? Because, as the title has explained without explaining, it's a draft horse, thickly muscled, normally used for plodding the field. It's the wrong horse for the wrong carriage. If the couple do have a long way to go, the draft horse will be forever getting there. Draft horses, the Percheron or Belgian or Clydesdale, are famously docile—you have to be of mild temperament to pull plough or wagon all day. A buggy wants a trotter with deep bottom.

Why is this woebegone couple using an ill-suited horse? The answer must be, because they have to—they no longer have anything better. As so often, fate intervenes without warning: "And a man came out of the trees/ And took our horse by the head/ And reaching back to his ribs/ Deliberately stabbed him dead."

The dark trees of "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" are as beautiful and hypnotic as the Sirens; but the grove is malevolent, haunted like Dante's wood of suicides. Frost piles up his matter-of-fact *And*'s—what might seem like Biblical anaphora reads like blackboard addition (a more theatrical storyteller would have started with *Then*). Frost knows how dramatic the undramatic can be; the stranger simply steps from the grove and

slaughters the horse. This is no accidental madman, but a man trained to the task. He's a good Stubbsian anatomist—he grabs the bridle to steady the beast for the fatal blow, knowing just where to strike between the ribs. The disturbing physical detail reads like an autopsy report. This Nemesis, this embodiment of random fate (or a preordained fate more awful for being planned), acts seemingly without motive. Perhaps he has an obscure grudge, perhaps he just hates horses—but Nemesis doesn't need motive. Frost comes fatally close, not to the fatalism he loved to toy with, but to the Greek notion of Anangke, or Necessity. This is a poem not about a depraved act of cruelty, but about the consequences. The murderer disappears as soon as he stabs the horse—he's as much an instrument of the poem as an instrument of fate (poets are dismissive gods, too).

The melodrama is over almost before it has begun—the horse goes down. Frost is good at telling more than we realize. The sound of the splintered shaft (there would have been two, connected to the buggy by shaft clips) is more terrible than anything he could say about the animal's death throes. Nothing follows but a postscript: "And the night drew through the trees/ In one long invidious draft." This afterthought is not the only case where Frost is clever with the trimeter—you can read the line most radically as an ionic followed by an anapest, with the load-bearing spondee like an announcement of doom ("And the | *night drew* | through the *trees*"); but perhaps it sounds more sinuous as anapest-trochee-iamb ("And the *night* || *drew* through | the *trees*"), which requires a syntactic pause after *night*—the reversal of rhythm and slightly forced pause are intensely dramatic. It might be most telling, however, to scan this simply as anapest-iamb-iamb ("And the *night* | drew *through* | the *trees*"), which would put rhetorical stress on *through*—there would be little advantage to the meaning of rhythm here, if the line didn't sound so chilling that way. Stressed thus, the night slips through the wood like the murderer. If the night approaches only now, the grove must have been dark as a grave by evening, the draft horse finding the road only by feel (the reference to *a* grove suggests the place is unfamiliar).

Americans did not invent the poetry of the gallop or canter. (The rhythm of prose is not quite the rocking horse of meter.) Browning's "I sprang to the stirrup, and Joris, and he" and Tennyson's "Half a league, half a league,/ Half a league onward" must haunt any poet who writes of horseback—or, for that matter, *on* horseback. I don't believe that poetry has much mimetic faculty; but I'm willing to suspend my disbelief at the metrical choice here, in part because it makes no great difference, and in part because the little difference rhythm makes is perhaps crucial to the routines of pause and release into which Frost's language has been cast—the movement, or in other words the rhythm of understanding.

"The Draft Horse" requires only five sentences across these five stanzas—had Frost been liberal with semi-colons, he might have managed it in three. The final sentence sidles toward moral knowledge of a bewildering kind:

> The most unquestioning pair
> That ever accepted fate
> And the least disposed to ascribe
> Any more than we had to to hate,
>
> We assumed that the man himself
> Or someone he had to obey
> Wanted us to get down
> And walk the rest of the way.

A buggy normally seats only two—the poem reveals nothing much about the couple; but, given Frost's compelled interest in husbands and wives, it's tempting to make the poem betray the exactions of marriage. Frost takes a whole stanza to describe the couple as a philosophic condition; yet the lines of the penultimate stanza are a dead end syntactically, lying in apposition to the sentence's real subject, "We." This puts the horse before the cart, if such a résumé is not to disrupt what follows. Think how much tension is lost if the penultimate stanza began, "We were the most unquestioning pair"—the ending would seem presumptive, instead of charged with the premonitions of syntax. Frost was always canny about syntax (I admire the homeliness of a line that would otherwise be barbaric, "Any more than we had

to to hate," which violates *The Elements of Style* in about four different ways, merely to hit the rhyme.)

The construction here is almost too sophisticated (country yarn-spinners don't need lumbering syntax to deceive their listeners). The advantage of backing into the sentence is that when we finally reach the subject and verb, they seem a revelation. The poem is based on false clues, of course. The title has all along been an act of misdirection, for the draft horse is only proximate to the argument (the poem would not have been wildly different had the couple been driving a good square trotter)—the title has let Frost undersell what follows.

The couple know who they are—they accept the virtues of their limitations. Never questioning their fate, they ascribe nothing to hate, or no more than they have to. (Indeed, if they are the "most unquestioning pair," they have almost made a vice of it—they're as docile as their beast). This is Christian submission taken to a slightly deranged degree. They're not Manichaeans: they don't believe the universe is a permanent struggle between good and evil. Yet they don't believe that evil does not exist.

Though it requires more strength than most Christians could muster, the couple refuse to act as if their lives were ruined by tragedy. This mysterious stranger, the instrument of fate or perhaps fate itself, must have *wanted* them to get down (no other conclusion fits the naiveté of their philosophy). If he had no motive, he must have his own Nemesis and his own employer. They have answered the God of Job with the forbearance of Christ.

This seems a sapheaded way of thinking; but, if the couple bewailed their fate in the dark grove, beyond any immediate aid (otherwise the husband would walk to a farmhouse and borrow), they'd be better off dead. We know too well the preacher's graveside humbug—the Lord works in mysterious ways; the death of an innocent child is part of God's plan; the Almighty gives us no burden greater than we can bear. Such emollient lies are no comfort to the cynic, but this is not a poem about cynicism.

The poem would be an allegory, if we knew exactly of what. Even with their fragile buggy, and their muscle-bound horse, and their malfunctioning lantern, and pitch-black grove without end, someone thinks this couple has it too easy. The action of their faith is to get down and walk. They must bear their burdens afoot, as Christ did to Calvary, and as imitation Christs do in penance. Half of Frost's brilliance is to leave the killing unexplained. It merely and terribly *is*, among the other unknowings of life. The couple don't speculate, because the universe's mysteries are inscrutable. The majesty of their religion lies in their acceptance of whatever befalls them. (Think how discomforting Frost is where someone *can't* accept fate, as in "Home Burial," or where the many shockingly can, as in "'Out, Out—.'") It is not an allegory—it's a parable.

"The Draft Horse" is ill at ease with a world reduced to science; but the poem implies that any response other than submission is fatal (for the Old Testament Christian, God tries his faithful by such humiliation). We know we wouldn't act this way, and we're not sure we should—but we're not sure we shouldn't, either. Frost isn't interested in the horror of circumstance. His pathos lies in how people adapt—the daily grind is always, for the poet, the choice to live. There's a lot of death in Frost, but there's a lot of survival, too—and it takes poems like "Home Burial" and "Snow" to force the confrontation. The couple are really too mild to be Stoics, just as they're not gloomy enough to be fatalists (they also lack the rueful irony). Their primitive faith is scarier than Christianity, invoking neither God nor Devil, just the unknowable agency that drives Frost's universe (Frost was no believer, but he wasn't quite an unbeliever, either). Modern examples of such behavior are rare; but I'm reminded of the Amish families in Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania, who a few years ago embraced the family of a man who had murdered five of their children in the village schoolhouse. What irritates us about this couple is that they don't respond to the murder with righteous anger—it would be easy to see them as slightly stupid. The terror for a reader comes, not because they don't feel rage, but because they have mastered it. They submit to their fate, and by doing so conquer fate. Such acts are difficult to bear. The couple are nearly as incomprehensible as the murderer.

In an undated blue buckram notebook, Frost left a late draft of "The Draft Horse" that shows how subtly he wrestled with the occasion of verse. "Too heavy a horse" was once "a great Percheron horse"—the revision's gain in implication is far greater than the loss of specificity (this is a model example of when telling is better than showing). The effect would have been blunted, the couple's knowledge of the horse's shortcomings more opaque, had only the breed been mentioned. In the third stanza, "ponderous" is merely "cumbersome"—a word so slightly wrong, perhaps it was just a placeholder until Frost thought of a better one. He fiddles with the next lines, having arrived at "The night sighed through the grove/ In one long terminal draft." "Drew through the trees" is more insidious, ridding the wind of sentimental personification. (The night *draws*—from that ancient root that gives us tractor—just at the moment the buggy can draw no longer.) "Invidious" is a judgment, "terminal" too knowing—and too meaningful, in an Empsonian way, for this couple straitened in what they can know.

Frost published "The Draft Horse" in his final book, *In the Clearing* (1962). I long thought it the best of his late work, a revenant among the case-hardened Yankee poems he wrote after fame got the better of him; but he admitted to his biographer Lawrance Thompson that it had been written nearer 1920. It might have been included in *New Hampshire* (1923) with the equally death-haunted "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" (the poem it genetically most resembles) and "The Witch of Coös." "The Draft Horse" is one of the last uses of the American uncanny that began with Irving and Hawthorne. By the end of Frost's life it had been demoted to genre.

Frost knew by hard fact the behavior of the horse in "Stopping by Woods"—he kept a horse and a democrat wagon on his poultry farm south of Derry. The horses in "Stopping by Woods" and "The Draft Horse" have been closely observed, not imagined after some lesson in Dotheboys Hall. The culture of the horse lasted longer in America than in England, as a matter of poetic knowledge—but then American poets were more likely to have been ploughed up on a farm. (In Seamus Heaney's childhood, his father's horses were stabled in part of the farmhouse, as was common when Ireland was still an agricultural country.) Horse-drawn streetcars vanished from Manhattan in 1917, but until after World War II it was common to keep horses on an American farm. (They were driven off, of course, by the tractor.) Even in the suburbs now, the culture of the horse has not entirely been lost—indeed, the last public stable in Manhattan closed as recently as 2007. For most British poets of the past century, however, riding a horse could be treated only nostalgically, as in anthology fluff like Alfred Noyes's "The Highwayman." I doubt English poetry had a decent horseman after Byron.

The horse was probably domesticated upon the steppes, perhaps as early as six thousand years ago. The archaeology takes us no further than the chariot graves a thousand years before Homer. Homer was no historian—he was ignorant of the tactics and weapons of Mycenaean warfare; indeed, his sense of how such battles were fought is confused and anachronistic. He does, however, retain a trace memory of the horse's importance in battle, though he thinks that chariots provided a taxi service for the likes of Achilles and Hector.

The epithets of oral composition are often fossilized remains of a vanished world (just as idioms like *hue and cry*, *at loggerheads*, *spick and span* retain linguistic fossils). Homer's running epithet for the Trojans was "breakers of horses," hence the irony—really a tactical joke—of gulling them with a wooden horse, which they mistook as an offering to civic pride by their vanquished enemy. Domestication has in fact left only the thinnest coat of civility on a beast that is essentially still wild. The horse quickly reverts to a feral state—apart from Przewalski's Horse, on the Asian steppes (which has sixty-six chromosomes, versus the sixty-four of the modern horse), there are no longer true wild horses, merely feral domestics.

"The Ride," published in 1982, throws us on horseback in medias res, without even the breathless preamble of "I sprang to the stirrup:"

The Ride

The horse beneath me seemed
To know what course to steer
Through the horror of snow I dreamed,
And so I had no fear,

Nor was I chilled to death
By the wind's white shudders, thanks
To the veils of his patient breath
And the mist of sweat from his flanks.

It seemed that all night through,
Within my hand no rein
And nothing in my view
But the pillar of his mane,

I rode with magic ease
At a quick, unstumbling trot
Through shattering vacancies
On into what was not,

Till the weave of the storm grew thin,
With a threading of cedar-smoke,
And the ice-blind pane of an inn
Shimmered, and I awoke.

How shall I now get back
To the inn-yard where he stands,
Burdened with every lack,
And waken the stable-hands

To give him, before I think
That there was no horse at all,
Some hay, some water to drink,
A blanket and a stall?

This is the course of dreams—and perhaps only on re-reading the first lines does the reader notice the sly admission that this is a dream. The poem needs no cause but the ride itself (no reader really gives a damn about the news brought to Aix—and in any case Browning made the whole thing up), just as we don't know if Frost's doomed couple are abandoning a bankrupt farm or traveling home the best way they can.

Wilbur's rider is cast into the midst of a blizzard, that terror for early settlers. A man could die between his house and his barn. The dream requires no reason for its terrors—if dreams permitted reflection, the real terror might be how the speaker got there in the first place. This is a more metaphysical point than it seems. The rider plunges forward, apparently all night (this must be the night in the dream and the night of the dream—apparently, because dream imagination may be almost instantaneous, then retrospectively filled out and given body).

In small ways, Wilbur allows the dream its absurdities—the ability to ride without holding rein, the "magic ease"—but its illusion is embedded in a sharpened experience of the character and provision of riding. A rider hugging the horse's neck would receive a fair amount of heat from the beast, and there are convincing records of long-distance night-long rides like Israel Putnam's. Such a ride can't be taken at a gallop. No horse can gallop for ten hours; for long rides, an easy lope or Wilbur's "quick, unstumbling trot" is necessary. (Thoroughbred races give a misleading impression of stamina—blood horses can go flat out for a mile or so, but at the end they're knackered.)

"The Draft Horse" is set during a blackout, in a tar-black grove with no lantern to see by; Wilbur's dream vision lies in a whiteout, the nothing's nothing of a blizzard. (The seeing imagine that the blind are plunged into unearthly darkness, but some live in the swirling of an inner snowstorm.) Being lost may be, as I suggest, a metaphysical condition—one of the poem's quiet virtues is that this does not exhaust the subject. The first five stanzas of "The Ride" live on trust—the rider abandons himself to the horse. Trust, however, is the medium of betrayal. The "pillar of his mane" must mean, by metonymy, the neck of the beast; if you cling to a pillar, you grasp a symbol of strength. No one thought that the blind Samson (blindness is often mistaken for weakness) could bring down the pillars of the temple.

This reading of "pillar" is no more than a likelihood, because it's a word that has so much metaphorical substance—there is Jesus's pillar of flagellation, the Scottish pillar of repentance

(the whipping post), the pillars on which the earth rests, the Pillars of Hercules, the upright post in a harp, the phrase "from pillar to post" (which comes from tennis), various uses in anatomy, metallurgy, conchology, typography, mining, horology, and dressage; and of course the compounds of pillar box, pillar-brick, pillar dollar, pillar drill, pillar hermit (like St. Simeon Stylites), and much else, none of them apparently relevant to the *pillar of his mane*.

The blizzard dissipates. Just as an inn appears, the dreamer wakes. The rider's first reaction on escaping the dream is not relief, but the terror of having left something unfinished—a sophisticated version of thinking in Ohio that you left the stove on back in Massachusetts. If sleep offers the absolution of our cares, sometimes waking relieves us of the burden of sleep, like the dream of murder (though that is not necessarily unpleasant). "The Ride" leaves us in a state of sin, in other words—and the worse for being imaginary, for who can ever be released from an imagined state of sin? Even the dreamer admits that in an instant he will realize there was no horse. Yet for that instant, a terrible obligation descends—and the guilt is not, as so often in dreams, over the adultery indulged or the murder committed, but over something never done at all. Damnation is the guilt of having left something forever undone, something that can never be atoned for.

In the dawn of that earlier Wilbur poem, "Love Calls Us to the Things of This World," the sleeper is roused to a half-waking state where things are not what they seem. The simplicity of "The Ride," from a poet once so deliriously baroque, pares away the literary accretion of consciousness. Dreams often fail to provide the gratifications foreseen (no wonder, having woken, we so often want to return). The only relief will come in the realization that the horse never existed.

Wilbur has been given too much credit for his essential good nature, as Frost has suffered for his pretense of wisdom. Here, however, the later poet offers terror without catharsis. "The Ride" denies those satisfactions a rhymed poem usually promises in its perfected form—the form does not bring analysis to extinction. The reader is refused release, the matter left undone, even when the manner is at rest. This is the approximate condition of life when it longs for the absolution of death.

Wilbur's dream was part of a past itself already unreachable—at least, the sort of inn where you could get hay and a stall hasn't been much available in our country since shortly after the Model T rolled out. That makes the predicament of the dream horse more pathetic. The poem ends on a question to which there is no answer—but there are some debts we can never repay. There is always darkness at the edge of Wilbur's brightness—behind that good cheer lies the shadow of mortality. In "The Ride," this is not simply joined to the matter, but embraced in some damp wedding of the soul.

Where Wilbur's rider plunges "on into what was not," the literal emptiness of the dream might be thought the figurative emptiness of the imagination (for the dreamer, there is no there there). The plummet into a world of nothing is, for a poet, always preliminary. The real blizzard, in no way trivially, is the stark emptiness of the page; but this poem is an *ars poetica* in the weakest sense, the sense of Stevens's "The Snow Man," where the speaker, like a poet, is *nothing himself*, and where at last, in the absoluteness of perception, he beholds "Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is." There is no better description of the burden, and the gift, of modernism's impersonality.

"The Ride" is an homage to "The Draft Horse," borrowing the meter (Frost the more liberal with anapestic substitution) and reworking the quatrain (Frost's is ABCB, Wilbur's ABAB). Both are indebted to our long identification with the animal that was necessary to our farming, our mails, our military, our modes of travel, and the romances we spun around the struggle for the land itself. The horse was once the most valuable thing a common man could own; it was his guarantee of independence (a good horse was more expensive than a good car today). Wilbur has taken a poem of philosophic acceptance and made it one of psychological torment—not what the world does, but what

we do to ourselves; not what the world asks, but what we ask of ourselves. The Sermon on the Mount might be Frost's text; the Book of Common Prayer, Wilbur's. There's an old quarrel between resignation and guilt—acceptance over what is versus guilt over what was. (It is a theological point which is worse, the sin of commission or omission—in narrow legal terms, omission can be punished severely. One term for it is guilty knowledge.)

In folk etymology, the nightmare has something to do with a horse; but the *mare* is instead the Anglo-Saxon's malign, suffocating spirit that squats upon your chest (Wilbur's night mare turns out to be a nightmare, of a sort). Tales of running or being chased are no doubt lodged deep in the reptilian brain—indeed, the dominant motif of horror is being hunted by an unkillable foe. The *Terminator* movies, like "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," deftly reinvent "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight"—and earlier, in the chases of Burns's "Tam O' Shanter" and Bürger"s "*Der Wilde Jäger*," the ordinary horror has been made the horror of art. Perhaps the dream of riding is the conceit of a brain rationalizing what used to be known as Wittmaack-Ekbom's Syndrome, now unromantically called Restless Legs Syndrome, a condition first recorded by Thomas Willis, one of Charles I's physicians. (Willis coined the term "neurology," and a portion of the brain is still called the "Circle of Willis.") When a sleeping dog twitches its limbs, we assume it is dreaming of hunting; but perhaps the prey is merely the invention of a canine brain trying to keep the dog asleep, as the human dreamer turns an annoying alarm clock into a fire alarm or ringing telephone. But what is being chased by a ghost, or an apparition, or even a living enemy, to that of being chased by another poem?

In the shadow of a poem, there is sometimes a forgotten poem that served or provoked it. A great sonnet haunts both Frost and Wilbur, Milton's poem about duty.

> When I consider how my light is spent
> Ere half my days, in this dark world and wide,
> And that one talent which is death to hide
> Lodged with me useless, though my soul
> more bent
> To serve therewith my Maker, and present
> My true account, lest he returning chide,
> "Doth God exact day-labour, light denied?"
> I fondly ask. But Patience, to prevent
> That murmur, soon replies: "God doth not need
> Either man's work or his own gifts: who best
> Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best.
> His state
> Is kingly; thousands at his bidding speed
> And post o'er land and ocean without rest:
> They also serve who only stand and wait."

"When I consider how my life is spent" marks blindness as a physical crippling that makes a moral failing inevitable, and asks a question not the least rhetorical—how can a man serve his God, if he cannot do his job? Analyzing the poem some years ago, I thought "Patience" an external, almost pagan force; but it is surely the inner calm—"patience" in our modern sense, that quality most rational in a man, though with a dark undercurrent of the original almost sacred idea, embodied in Frost's couple: "uncomplaining endurance of pain, affliction, inconvenience."

Milton's poem is transparently about writing poetry. Thousands of couriers already bear the word of the Lord (they are his mail service); but others must stand by, awaiting His call, no doubt bored and anxious—patience is the hardest of virtues, far harder to practice than faith, hope, or charity, whose rewards are more immediate. For a poet worried about the cost of blindness to his art, worried that his art may be extinct, Milton provides his own answer in writing the sonnet—that call is the vocation of poetry. Being called to an action is no small part of the bewildering faith of Frost's couple and the duty implicitly felt by Wilbur (guilt can be triggered by illusion—that is the pity and terror of art). Poets are haunted by poets, because beneath every poem lies another poem avoided, cannibalized, stolen, or betrothed. Milton's patience tells him that numberless messengers already carry the Lord's dispatches. But how did those "thousands at his bidding speed"? They sped by horse.

Committed to detachment

by Paul Dean

"The poetical character," according to Keats in an 1818 letter to Richard Woodhouse, "has no self. . . . It has as much delight in conceiving an Iago as an Imogen. What shocks the virtuous philosopher, delights the chameleon poet." Keats means to commend the poet's versatility here, but when Nigel Smith calls Andrew Marvell (1621–78) a chameleon in the subtitle of his new biography, the epithet is more barbed.[1] His contemporaries found him inscrutable. "He was in his conversation very modest, and of very few words. . . . He had not a general acquaintance," observed John Aubrey, the seventeenth-century antiquarian.

This poet, politician, pamphleteer, and stubbornly private man has been the subject of many critical commentaries but few biographies. The last one before Smith's was Nicholas Murray's in 1999 (which I reviewed in the June 2000 *New Criterion*). Smith is rather supercilious about Murray ("no early modern scholar") although his own book, while undoubtedly scholarly, is a less lively and engaging read. Since Murray, there has been a new edition of Marvell's prose, which appeared in 2003, and Smith's own weighty edition of the poems (2003, revised 2007), from which the notes are taken over verbatim in many parts of the present biography. Smith undoubtedly knows more about Marvell than most people, but, even when he has told us what he knows, it is hard to see the sum of the parts.

Those who knew Marvell personally speak of him as a solitary drinker, apt to flashes of bad temper, even violence. The public record reveals him as a seasoned traveler (Smith is particularly informative about this), a good linguist, a diplomat, and, sometimes, a spy. His writing indicates he was deeply versed in the classics while borrowing creatively from the poets of his own day. He had no independent income and depended on patronage, living in other people's homes; disappointed in his ambitions, he nursed grievances with a jaded eye for folly, yet also with a reputation as a defender of tolerance and liberty of conscience. He had early Royalist leanings, and seems briefly to have been a Catholic convert—both enthusiasms which waned. ("Flecknoe, an English Priest at Rome" [*c.* 1645] guys the Catholic church with informed mockery, and is more genial than Marvell's later anti-Catholic work.)

Having been conveniently abroad during the crucial years of the Civil War, between 1642 and 1647, he was then close to Milton and, like him, a member of Cromwell's civil service. As Member of Parliament for Hull, where he had gone to school, from 1659 to his death, he was co-opted onto numerous committees. We have some records of his speeches and his correspondence with his constituents, in which he is conscientious about such local issues as the assignment of the right to build a lighthouse. Typically, in one year (1677) he both opposed a bill to limit the royal succession to Anglicans, and published his anti-Catholic *Account of the Growth of Popery*. In 1668, in a debate on the

1 *Andrew Marvell: The Chameleon*, by Nigel Smith. Yale University Press, 400 pages, $45.

misconduct of the Second Dutch war, he accused the Secretary of State, Lord Arlington, of having bribed his way into high office. The official record, which describes Marvell as speaking "somewhat transportedly," adds, "He was called to explain himself; but said, The thing was so plain, it needed it not." The same cannot be said of his poems. There are only about seventy, most of which did not appear in his lifetime, even in the established form of manuscript copies, but had to wait for a posthumous volume of 1681. Few can be dated with precision, and their meanings continue to tease the reader.

Smith is, by instinct, more of an historian than a literary critic. He offers the fullest available account of Marvell's political activities, fully contextualized, and pays more attention to the public poetry than to the lyrics. Some of this material is less than exciting. Smith wants us to admire the verse satires of the 1660s and 1670s—which did enjoy manuscript circulation—on the Second Anglo-Dutch War, and the two-part prose satire *The Rehearsal Transpros'd* (1672–3). I cannot share these enthusiasms; Marvell lacks the ability of Dryden (sometimes) and Pope (usually) to raise topical subjects to universal significance, mocking types as well as individuals. The handling of the verse, the modulations of tone, are less accomplished than in his earlier work.Although we may feel we have heard too much of T. S. Eliot's "dissociation of sensibility" (Eliot certainly felt he had), *something* happened to English poetry during the seventeenth century, and it was not an improvement. Most of all, the partisanship of these writings seems crashingly unsubtle. Marvell is most interesting when he is most elusive.

It was probably also in the early 1670s that Marvell wrote his translation of the second Chorus from Seneca's *Thyestes*, of which the best-known English version is Sir Thomas Wyatt's "Stand whoso list upon the slipper top." Marvell's seven-syllable line achieves a greater terseness than Wyatt's pentameters:

> Climb at court for me that will
> Tottering favour's pinnacle;
> All I seek is to lie still.

There is a classical context here which we are expected to pick up: Seneca's pupil was the tyrant Nero, and his nephew was Lucan, the great poet of the Civil War, both of them relevant figures for Marvell's generation.

That yearning for retirement and privacy, composed amid the hurly-burly of public life, is characteristic of Marvell. Its best known statements are "Upon Appleton House" and "The Garden," poems traditionally dated close together in the early 1650s. Smith advocates a later date for "The Garden" (1668), urging that "we should also read the poem, as has very rarely been done before, against the backdrop of the momentous collapse of Clarendon's administration and humiliation by the Dutch." I, for one, do not find that this makes it a better poem. What is much more interesting about it is that it portrays a Garden of Eden without an Eve. Is there a reference here to Adam Kadmon, the figure of cabbalistic tradition, who was androgynous? Smith is doubtful: but in any case, for Marvell, two inhabitants in Paradise were one too many.

Some have thought that Marvell was a (perhaps repressed) homosexual; even "To His Coy Mistress" has been cited in support of this view. There is no evidence for it that I can see, but Smith detects "markedly alternative and even deviant versions of heterosexual love" in the lyrics. This is an odd strain in his writing. He even manages to vulgarize the lovely poem "The Picture of Little T. C. in a Prospect of Flowers," turning it into an exercise in voyeurism. But Marvell's tone is worlds away from that of the Restoration libertine and all the better for it. His darkly pessimistic view of the chances of emotional happiness, made impossible by "the conjunction of the mind,/ And opposition of the stars," in "The Definition of Love," may seem too abstract to be autobiographical, but perhaps his temperament was simply like that. His housekeeper claimed to be his widow when seeing his *Miscellaneous Poems* through the press in 1681; Smith feels we have too little evidence to know whether this was true or not. What stirs Marvell, in other poems, is more the potential for love than its realization, no doubt because no commitment is involved at that stage.

If Marvell shies away from commitment, he is fascinated by choice. Many of his most successful poems are about the difficulty of making decisions and the simplifications involved in taking sides. His intellectual restlessness was definitively described by Eliot in his 1921 essay "Andrew Marvell," which notes that metaphysical wit involved "a recognition, implicit in the expression of every experience, of other kinds of experience which are possible." (Eliot later wrote a second essay on Marvell withdrawing almost all his earlier approval, but nobody reads that one.)[2] It was precisely this awareness which made commitment so difficult. The resulting detachment, especially about politics, has been read as simple hypocrisy, but that is in itself too simple, and not what Eliot or Leavis meant when they praised Marvell's urbanity and poise.

In an early poem, the verse epistle to the Royalist poet Lovelace, which was published in the prefatory matter to the latter's *Lucasta* (1649), Marvell sees wit as degenerated by the Civil War and polemic pamphleteers as "Wordpeckers, paper-rats, book-scorpions,/ Of wit corrupted, the unfashioned sons." In the contemptuous "Tom May's Death" (1650), the shade of Ben Jonson, Marvell's most important English predecessor, denounces May, a former Royalist turned republican who had translated Lucan's *Pharsalia*, on his arrival in the afterlife. "The real concern of the poem," Smith argues, "is poetry itself, and the role of the poet as a commentator on public affairs." Between the poem to Lovelace and "Tom May's Death" comes Marvell's most famous political poem, "An Horatian Ode upon Cromwell's Return from Ireland," which also borrows from May's Lucan and is often seen as an endorsement of Cromwell, although it is, in fact, much more ambiguous. Smith reminds us that "Horace, who fought for the republicans at Philippi, eventually accepted the rule of Augustus Caesar" and that Marvell may have seen the politic praise of a former enemy as "enshrined in the very idea of a Horatian ode."

Unlike most of Marvell's poems, the "Ode" was known in his lifetime through manuscript circulation, perhaps aimed at attracting attention in the right quarters. Its shifting tones and stances should be seen as evidence of complexity rather than evasiveness. John Carey, in his brilliant essay "Reversals Transposed: An Aspect of Marvell's Imagination" rightly observes, "the Ode depicts the collision of two kinds of goodness, Cromwell's and Charles's, and for Marvell it is part of the restricting nature of reality that one good must destroy another."

In the opening of the "Ode" Marvell glances at his own artistic position:

> The forward youth that would appear
> Must now forsake his Muses dear,
> Nor in the shadows sing
> His numbers languishing:
>
> 'Tis time to leave the books in dust,
> And oil th'unused armour's rust;
> Removing from the wall
> The corselet of the hall.

Versifying is a luxury these stirring times cannot afford. Cromwell is an artist of a different kind, an iron-founder—almost an iron man, like Talus in Spenser's *Faerie Queene*—who can "cast the kingdoms old/ Into another mould," yet Marvell, a more subtle artist in a more supple medium, is equally with Cromwell a man who can "both act and know." He earns the right to his final warning: "The same arts that did gain/ A pow'r must it maintain." Smith is not quite accurate, I feel, to say that Marvell's "muse gives way to the sublime poetry of the substantial living warrior-poet, Oliver Cromwell"—the ambiguities are too radical for that.

S. L. Goldberg, whose fine essay "Marvell, Self, and Art" I am quarrying, judges that Marvell's wisdom is ampler than Cromwell's prudence, adding that the former's awareness of the limitations of his own detachment makes him at one and the same time as far removed from aestheticism as can be imagined and free to exam-

2 Eliot's review of H. M. Margoulith's edition of Marvell's *Miscellaneous Poems* appeared in *The Nation and Athenaeum* of September 19, 1923. He declared that Marvell is not only *not* a great poet, but that he is not even as good as Henry King, nor even "a safe model for study."

ine both his own and others' consciousness with unsparing honesty. When Marvell is writing in a more propagandist vein, this balance is absent, as we can see by comparing the "Ode" with the poem on the first anniversary of Cromwell's rule, published in 1655, in which the Protector is unironically lauded as the savior of the nation.

Marvell was equally flexible in his choices of genre, achieving a subtle mingling of tones through a richly allusive use of earlier poems (the best study of this is still J. B. Leishman's *The Art of Marvell's Poetry* [1966]). "Bermudas," written in 1653 or 1654, is a handy example; it is poem containing a poem, a psalm-like song put into the mouths of English colonists en route to Bermuda. At this time Marvell was lodging with the Puritan John Oxenbridge at Eton and tutoring Cromwell's ward, William Dutton. Oxenbridge had lived in the Bermudas and was a member of the commission set up to oversee their government. The poem offers an idealized account of the islands as an earthly paradise, "Safe from the storms, and prelates' rage" (in reality, the settlers had run into serious difficulties). It is another haven of retirement. Yet the form is complex: Marvell uses the metrical psalm, associated with the Court, to praise Puritan sentiments and to compliment Oxenbridge. Pure isolation, complete withdrawal from worldly ties, is unattainable in the Bermudas, as so often in Marvell's poetry and life.

"Upon Appleton House," at 776 lines Marvell's longest non-satirical poem, provides a convenient closing focus. Acclaimed by Smith as "joy-giving," it dates from 1651 when Marvell was living at Nun Appleton, the Yorkshire residence of Thomas, Lord Fairfax, who had retired from command of the Parliamentary army, and was tutoring Fairfax's daughter Maria. It combines the genres of the country house poem, of which the classical English statement in the previous generation had been Ben Jonson's "To Penshurst," and the more novel "prospect" poem which linked geographical and intellectual perspective metaphorically. The models, however, are not slavishly followed; the treatment is superbly original.

Choices are again in question. Marvell retells, from a Protestant perspective, the story of how Fairfax's great-great-grandmother had wished to enter the nunnery which originally stood on the site of the house, rather than marry, and had been rescued from the convent by her fiancé to find herself, ironically, the owner of the property after the Dissolution. The house thus becomes, for her and for her descendant Fairfax, a secular version of the convent, a place of seclusion, withdrawal from worldly cares, and a chance to cultivate the inner life. Although, in fact, local unrest from Royalist sympathizers, and the threat of a Scottish invasion had led to Fairfax being entreated to resume command, Marvell does not refer explicitly to this. Instead he puts himself into the poem as a mage, skilled in hermetic lore, identifying himself with the landscape even more than in "The Garden," so that he actually becomes part of it, once more a solitary Adam in Eden, until called away by his young pupil—a symbolic return to the public world and its responsibilities:

> But I, retiring from the flood,
> Take sanctuary in the wood;
> And, while it lasts, myself embark
> In this yet green, yet glowing ark. . .

The overflowing of the river on the estate becomes a replay of the Flood, and the wood the Ark in which Marvell survives.

Fairfax's Protestant piety is gracefully complimented in the extensive network of biblical allusions in the poem. Even in this brief extract, the puns on "sanctuary" (recalling the convent) and "embark" (set sail, and hide among trees) bear witness to the care for detail. Later, when Marvell declares, "How safe, methinks, and strong, behind/ These trees I have encamped my mind," "encamped" is only one among many military images which serve to remind us of the conflict even while keeping it at bay. All the ideas are held in solution; Marvell's touch is characteristically at once airy and weighty.

Nigel Smith has labored long on his book, and as a documentary record it is authoritative. It is no disparagement of his efforts to say that Marvell's best writing remains enigmatic. We can only discern him, if anywhere, in the rich textures of his poems—to which Smith's own edition remains the indispensable guide.

The corrupted treasures of this world

by David Yezzi

"Anthony Hecht is, without question, the best poet writing in English today," Joseph Brodsky declared in 1984, despite what he called his own "foreigner's natural prudence with epithets." Brodsky's full-throated encomium attests to more than collegial good feeling (though the two were friends from Hecht's teaching days at Harvard in the early 1970s). In Hecht's exquisite and tenebrous poems, Brodsky discerned the presence of the tragic muse, operating in much the way she had on Brodsky himself—through history. Few American poets qualify as children of history in the way that a Russian of Brodsky's generation would have understood, and even fewer children of history become poets. True, Hecht was fortunate never to endure political persecution and exile (or worse); nevertheless, the events of his life do amply—and, in some instances, horribly—fulfill the putative Chinese curse about living in interesting times.

Born to upper-middle-class, secular Jewish parents in New York City, Hecht (1923–2004) was keenly aware as a boy of the bitter effects of the Depression. While never "seriously in want" (Hecht's phrase), his anxiety about his own family's difficulties was amplified by the shocks he encountered around the city, including the covered bodies of suicides laid out on the sidewalk. His stockbroker father made ruinous investments, repeatedly losing "his shirt (and the frock coats of others)," as Hecht told Philip Hoy in 1998.

His father's subsequent suicide attempts and his mother's rages at having to ask her family for yet another bailout combined to sour the atmosphere of Hecht's childhood home. A number of other factors contributed to what Hecht came to see as his unhappy childhood, among them his brother's epilepsy, his parents' perennial dissatisfaction with him, and his own natural melancholia. Or, as he writes in "Apprehensions," from *Millions of Strange Shadows* (1967), now in *Selected Poems*:

> A grave and secret malady of my brother's,
> The stock exchange, various grown-up shames,
> The white emergency of hospitals,
> Inquiries from the press, such *coups de théâtre*
> Upon a stage from which I was excluded
> Under the rubric of "benign neglect"
> Had left me pretty much to my own devices
> (My own stage was about seven years old)
> Except for a Teutonic governess
> Replete with the curious thumb-print of her race,
> That special relish for inflicted pain. [1]

Hecht's lackluster elementary and high-school career—at Dalton, Collegiate, and Horace Mann in Riverdale—landed him at the "experimental" Bard College, where he first fell in love with poetry. But his college years, the happiest of his life up to that point, were curtailed by the Second World War. Hecht's experiences as an infantryman—both in com-

1 *Selected Poems*, by Anthony Hecht, edited with an introduction and notes by J. D. McClatchy; Knopf, 272 pages, $17.95 paper.

bat and at the liberation of Flossenbürg in Bavaria—haunted him for the rest if his life. And *haunted* is surely the mot juste. Christopher Ricks enumerates, in his Anthony Hecht Lectures in the Humanities recently published by Yale, many of the ghostly presences, both personal and historical, that inhabit Hecht's poems from the beginning.[2] Occasionally, these chthonic voices strike a wry and lively note, as in "The Ghost in the Martini," where the poet's concupiscence is chastised by a voice emanating from a lemon twist. More often, they are bleak and tormented, like the specter of the forsaken woman reproving her forgetful lover in "Death the Whore."

Another unhappy chapter of Hecht's life followed his divorce in 1961 from his first wife, who quickly remarried and moved with their two sons to Belgium. This separation from his children caused a severe bout of depression for which Hecht was hospitalized. (He had previously suffered a "nervous breakdown" just after the war, which caused him to return to New York and enter psychoanalysis.) At Gracie Square Hospital, he was treated with Thorazine but avoided the shock therapy that other poets of his generation—such as Plath, whom he knew—underwent.

So fully does Hecht's life resonate with the brutal events of the last century that it now may be seen as emblematic, his poems a lens on what Auden called the Age of Anxiety, a fever chart of its atrocities and sustaining graces. (It should be added that caustic hilarity and even full-throated joy are also essential, if less frequent, notes in Hecht's oeuvre.)

Hecht's identity in his poetry is, as Adam Kirsch has said of Brodsky, "universalist and cosmopolitan," composed of echoes from Shakespeare and the Bible, the Greeks, European painting (both Old Master and modern), and Classical music. "The story of the orphaned Jew who is reborn as the child of civilization is one of the great and ambiguous legends of modernity," writes Kirsch, "and all such stories include a scene where the child is forcibly reminded that civilization doesn't always trump history." For Brodsky, that moment occurred the year before he met Hecht for the first time, in 1972, when Brodsky was among the 32,000 Jews to leave Russia, a token gesture prior to Nixon's visit to Moscow. For Hecht, that reminder came during the war.

Hecht's disillusionment, begun in the chilly solitudes of childhood, became all-encompassing during his Army service. Immersed in French and German languages in the Army Specialized Training Program, ostensibly a fast-track to cushy service, he was in the event assigned to the 97th Infantry. Rising no higher than Private, First Class, he was deployed with C Company to France, Czechoslovakia, and Germany. Hecht admitted to Hoy that there was much about the war he never spoke of, and never would. This is particularly striking given the horrors Hecht did describe, including this incident following a firefight with German soldiers. After an extended bout of shooting, during which Hecht's company was pinned down, a pause:

> And then, to my astonishment, a small group of German women, perhaps five or six, leading small children by the hand, and with white flags of surrender fixed to staves and broomhandles, came up over the far crest and started walking slowly toward us, waving their white flags back and forth. They came slowly, the children retarding their advance. They had to descend the small incline that lay between their height and ours. When they were about half way, and about to climb the slope leading to our position, two of our machine guns opened up and slaughtered the whole group.

But this was not the worst. Hecht goes on to tell Hoy, with characteristic understatement, about what was for him the greatest trauma of the war—the liberation of Flossenbürg, an annex of Buchenwald:

> It was both an extermination camp and a slave-labor camp, where prisoners were made to manufacture Messerschmitts at a factory right

2 *True Friendship: Geoffrey Hill, Anthony Hecht, and Robert Lowell under the Sign of Eliot and Pound*, by Christopher Ricks; Yale University Press, 258 pages, $28.

> within the perimeter of the camp. When we arrived, the SS personnel had, of course, fled. Prisoners were dying at a rate of 500 a day from typhus. Since I had the rudiments of French and German, I was appointed to interview such French prisoners as were well enough to speak, in the hope of securing evidence against those who ran the camp. Later, when some of these were captured, I presented them with the charges leveled against them, translating their denials or defenses back into French for the sake of their accusers, in an attempt to get to the bottom of what was done and who was responsible. The place, the suffering, the prisoners' accounts were beyond comprehension. For years after I would wake shrieking.

The survivors were naked, skeletal, their yellowed skin stretched over bony frames. As one soldier from Hecht's company reported: "Many had died with their eyes wide open staring into space as if they were seeing over and over again all the torture the Germans had put them through—their mouths open, gasping for that last breath that might keep them alive." When a prisoner died, one of his fellows would carry his body to the stack of bodies beside the incinerator. The smell, he added, was unimaginable.

Hecht's experience of Judaism—a source of childhood unease due to the genteel anti-Semitism of the day—changed significantly after the war. "In time I came to feel an awed reverence for what the Jews of Europe had undergone, a sense of marvel at the hideousness of what they had been forced to endure. I came to feel that it was important to be worthy of their sacrifices, to justify my survival in the face of their misery and extinction, and slowly I began to shed my shame at being Jewish." The tension in Hecht between justice and injustice, hope and hopelessness (which like honor and dishonor, beauty and horror, are frequently paired or juxtaposed in his work), takes on a nightmarish cast in "Persistences," a rare statement of the poet's memorializing "task":

> Who comes here seeking justice,
> Or in its high despite,
> Bent on some hopeless interview
> On wrongs nothing can right?
>
> Those throngs disdain to answer,
> Though numberless as flakes;
> Mine is the task to find out words
> For their memorial sakes
>
> Who press in dense approaches,
> Blue numeral tattoos
> Writ crosswise on their arteries,
> The burning, voiceless Jews.

A number of his greatest poems—"Rites and Ceremonies," "'More Light! More Light!,'" "'It Out-Herods Herod. Pray You, Avoid It,'" "The Book of Yolek"—come out of the war, yet Hecht is not in the end primarily a war poet. Still, there is a sense in which the war is always present. As J. D. McClatchy puts it in his percipient introduction to *Selected Poems*, "scenes described from Hecht's childhood, where we find a lonely boy staring blankly out of the window, or standing paralyzed in front of a hill in winter," mingle with austerities derived from his wartime experience, such that those "wartime memories—of sickening fear or helplessness—serve to focus earlier, deeper memories, and the way they each recall and reinforce the other is part of the force of a Hecht poem." For Hecht, the war was the original sin that suffused all subsequent (and recalled) experience with a dry-eyed and terrible melancholy.

An imaginary map of Hecht's sensibility, McClatchy points out, "would most certainly note how, as it were, Germany and Italy border each other. His experiences as a combatant in World War II and later as a sojourner in Italy were central for Hecht as landscapes over which deeper issues were deployed." His poems insistently patrol the imaginary boarders of European culture—between civilization and barbarism, between sublimity and atrocity, between the meliorating power of art and its failure in the face of evil. Edward Hirsch, in his essay "Comedy and Hardship," further characterizes the dual nature of Hecht's aesthetic, noting that, for Hecht, "The hero

who needs to maintain purity can't in fact live in the world as it is. He wants a simpler and cleaner place. The survivor, on the other hand, learns to accept the cold self-mocking compromises of reality." The impossibility of the hero in the eyes of the survivor becomes a recurring theme in Hecht's work.

Hecht conveys such bitter realizations without bitterness, painstakingly discovering how the tenets of civilization—art, religion, culture—also contain their opposites (not unlike what he calls elsewhere the "corrupted treasures of this world"). Hecht can illustrate the disparity with a single image or phrase, as in "*Gott mit uns*" ("God with us," literally, Emmanuel), engraved on the belt buckles of Wehrmacht soldiers, or the Iron Cross, at once sacred and profane—"The sign of the child, the grave, worship and loss."

Alicia Ostriker gets at this Hechtian paradox as follows: "At its most energetic and disturbing . . . Hecht's art registers a Hellenic delight in beauty and order undermined by the Hebraic conviction that the beauty and order of high culture have been founded on suffering and cruelty." That the bucolic wood alluded to by Goethe in a poem of 1780 ("The little birds fall silent in the woods") later becomes the location of Buchenwald is an irony not lost on Hecht; neither is the "*Sturm-Abteilungs Kommandant*/ Who loves Beethoven and collects Degas."

A similar revelation, or lifting of the curtain, occurs in Hecht's early masterpiece "A Hill," in which the bustle of an Italian market at midday gives way, in an ominous and unexplained reverie, to a boyhood scene of desolation. The daydream or vision that intrudes on the Italian piazza resonates in tone and imagery—the cold, the gray, the gun shot—with scenes of the war:

> And even the great Farnese Palace itself
> Was gone, for all its marble; in its place
> Was a hill mole-colored and bare. It was very
> cold,
> Close to freezing, with a promise of snow.
> The trees were like old ironwork gathered for
> scrap
> Outside a factory wall. There was no wind,
> And the only sound for a while was the little
> click
> Of ice as it broke in the mud under my feet.
> I saw a piece of ribbon snagged on a hedge,
> But no other sign of life. And then I heard
> What seemed the crack of a rifle.

"Nothing is purely itself/ But is linked with its antidote/ In cold self-mockery—," Hecht writes in "Three Prompters from the Wings," singling out in particular "triumph and chagrin," "wisdom and ignorance," "happiness and pain." Hecht represents this two-sided coin in "The Deodand," which begins with the description of women in a painting by Renoir who are costuming themselves in Arab garb. "What are these women up to?," the poem asks. "They've gone and strung/ Drapes over the windows, cutting out the light/ And the slightest hope of a breeze here in mid-August." In the dim light, Hecht depicts a scene of ornate beauty:

> Gauzy organzas with metallic threads,
> Intricate Arab vests, brass ornaments
> At wrist and ankle, those small sexual fetters,
> Tight little silver chains, and bangled gold
> Suspended like a coarse barbarian treasure
> From soft earlobes pierced through symbolically,
> They are preparing a *tableau vivant*.
> One girl, consulting the authority
> Of a painting, perhaps by Ingres or Delacroix,
> Is reporting over her shoulder on the use
> Of kohl to lend its dark, savage allurements.

But, in Hecht's world, such playacting is never purely innocent sport. ("The coltish horseplay of the locker room" transforms, in "The Feast of Stephen," to a scene of brilliantly oiled bodies at a stoning.) History is always looming and posing pointed questions:

> Have they no intimation, no recall
> Of the once queen who liked to play at milkmaid,
> And the fierce butcher-reckoning that followed
> Her innocent, unthinkable masquerade?

The ironic use of "innocent" sets the tone of the poem. The unthinking masquerade

of the harem girls becomes the unthinkable masquerade of Marie Antoinette. Then the poem itself veers from reasoned argument to irrational cruelty. The shift is made without transition or comment; it is an identity, as fierce and strange as metaphor—

> In the final months of the Algerian war
> They captured a very young French Legionnaire.
> They shaved his head, decked him in a blond wig,
> Carmined his lips grotesquely, fitted him out
> With long, theatrical false eyelashes
> And a bright, loose-fitting skirt of calico,
> And cut off all the fingers of both hands.
> He had to eat from a fork held by his captors.
> Thus costumed, he was taken from town to
> town,
> Encampment to encampment, on a leash,
> And forced to beg for his food with a special
> verse
> Sung to a popular show tune of those days:
> "*Donnez moi à manger de vos mains*
> *Car c'est pour vous que je fais ma petite danse;*
> *Car je suis Madelaine, la putain,*
> *Et je m'en vais le lendemain matin,*
> *Car je suis La Belle France*."[3]

Hecht works out a similar juxtaposition in what is perhaps his most well-known poem, "More Light! More Light!," which twists Goethe's final words into the repeated phrase "no light." The poem begins with an unnamed Renaissance martyr burned at the stake. As described, the death is brutal but courageous and not without dignity. Then: "We move now to outside a German wood./ Three men are there commanded to dig a hole/ In which the two Jews are ordered to lie down/ And be buried alive by the third, who is a Pole." When the Pole refuses, the Jews willingly bury him, until they are commanded to dig him out again. In the end, the Pole buries the two Jews alive and is shot to death in reward. There is no honorable death in the heroic sense, only victims.

Hecht, along with James Merrill, Richard Howard, Richard Wilbur, and McClatchy, is pre-eminent among what Merrill once jokingly referred to as the "great fancies." Mandarin and high-toned, at a distinct remove from everyday speech, Hecht's poems are always having to be defended, in this age of free-verse ditch-water diction, against those who would dismiss the hieratic as out of register with the way people live and talk. In fact, Hecht's use of high and low is deliberate and masterly. There is a great tonal range in his work between what Ted Hughes identified as "fastidious and elegant" and an "absolute raw simplicity and directness" (about which territory Hughes himself was a seasoned guide).

"The dramaturgy of culture versus barbarism is a familiar one," writes Kirsch in *The Modern Element*. "What makes it unusual in Hecht's poetry is that, at the same time that he reflects on the shattering of humanism, his own language pays homage to it." But perhaps here is no real contradiction. Hecht's great achievement was to discover a "semantic" style, one in which the refinements of culture and beauty are continually being undermined by the squalid truths of history communicated through his diction and subjects—an affecting disconnect between the high music of his verse and the seemingly endless parade of human failing it describes.

Hecht's second act—his long and distinguished teaching career, his happy second marriage, the Poet Laureateship, and the Pulitzer Prize—was far rosier. He acknowledges his good fortune in a number of his poems, perhaps most notably "Peripeteia," in which Miranda steps from the stage and leads him out by the hand. The event is a kind of miracle and more real "than any dream/ Shakespeare or I or anyone ever dreamed." It is a true Shakespearean ending: after witnessing so much that was unspeakable, and weighing for so long the sins of men, the happiness of Hecht's later life is as heartening as it is unlikely. To Hecht's credit, he seems not to have gainsaid or ironized this blessed peripety, only to have humbly acknowledged it and memorialized it in poetry.

3 Hecht translates this as "Let me be given nourishment at your hands/ Since it's for you I perform my little dance/ For I am the street-walker, Magdalen,/ And come the dawn I'll be on my way again,/ The beauty queen, Miss France."

Poems

Osip Mandelstam: new versions

by Christian Wiman

What began as a whim for me—translating a single eight-line poem by Osip Mandelstam to show my wife something I could sense but could not find in any existing translation—turned into an obsession. And after waking many mornings at 3:30 to work (I have twin infants, you see) and immersing myself in prose by and about Mandelstam, and coming closer and closer to hearing a voice that contains such extremes of serenity and wildness that you sometimes can't believe it's one person—I find that I've now done a book of them.

I call these poems versions and not translations, hoping to skip over the abyss of argument that opens underneath that distinction. Not because the argument isn't often valid, but because I have little to add to it. Mandelstam, especially in the early work, is a poet of high stylistic finish and formal control. Later, particularly in the *Voronezh Notebooks*, he attains—or is overwhelmed by—a seething, almost savage, Stravinskyan sort of music that is always testing, and teeming out of, its own angularities.

Previous translators, as they freely admit in their introductions, have not tried to reproduce this music. Nor have I, since that would be impossible. But I have wanted to make poems that sing in English with something of Mandelstam's way of singing, poems that follow their sounds to their meanings, and that evince a formal imperative that is as strong as—indeed, is inextricable from—their emotional one. The result is that some poems—"Hard Night," for example—hew quite closely to the originals, and others—"Casino" or "Not One Word"—veer into what I hope are faithful arrangements of existing scores. It seems wonderful and apt that the editors of *The New Criterion* have decided to include "To The Translator," since it casts a cold eye on the whole enterprise!

Some things that might be helpful: the titles, aside from "Casino," are all mine. Except for a handful of instances, Mandelstam didn't title his poems. My translations, and the book that began to emerge, seemed to require them. The poems here are mostly early, but you can get a feel for the storm that has already started. (After initially supporting the revolution, Mandelstam, like most artists and intellectuals of the time, was destroyed by Stalin.) Mandelstam and his wife, Nadezhda, were constantly returning to Moscow and being forced to flee again (see *Hope Against Hope* for a great, moving account of these years). "Night Piece" memorializes a moment of that fearful intimacy. And in "Not One Word" I take that one word "prison" to refer, not to Mandelstam's own experience of being interrogated and tortured, which wouldn't happen for another four years, but to the fate he could already feel was his.

I couldn't have written any of these poems without Ilya Kaminsky, who helped me every step of the way. I'm also grateful to Helena Lorman for all kinds of intricate information about idiom, word choice, and formal details.

Casino

Pointless any happiness that happens by plan:
To live in nature is to suffer luck.
Thus blessed, thus cursed, I am myself again,
Empty-tipsy, drinking to the lees my lack.

Wind-tousled cloud, cloud-tousled chance,
Deep in the unseen an anchor drops, and clings.
O my lilting, my light-sheer, my linen existence:
As of another nothing floating over things.

I like the cakelike casino on the dunes,
And how the strict fingers of skeletal light
Come alive on the baize, and the view, vast as mist.

I like the tone of green that oceans in,
And the tight rosebuds of wine that bloom in the mind,
And the towering, scouring seagull, in whose eyes nothing
is lost.

(1912)

Hard night

Hard night. Homer. Homeless sails.
I've listened to the list of ships in my own voice.
I've seen, as my own voice fails,
Those strange cranes arrowing sorrowing over Hellas.

Ever alien, ever more interior, these shores,
And the sun-flecked, god-picked wings glinting spray—
Anxiety's army, ghost souls of Achaea,
Without your one longing, what is dying for?

The singer and the sea, all things are moved by love.
But what is that to me? Homer is dead.
And a wall of silence, eerily eloquent,
Breaks like a black wave above my bed.

(1915)

Not one word

Not one word.
Purge the mind of what the eye has seen:
Woman, prison, bird.
Everything.

Otherwise some wrong dawn
Your mouth moves
And a sudden pine
Needles through your nerves,

A trapped wasp crazes
In your brain,
And in the old desk's ink stain
A forest mazes

Inward and inward
To the unpicked
And sun-perfected
Blueberries

Where you now and now always
Must stand,
An infinite inch
Between that sweetness

And your hand.

(October 1930)

Night piece

Come love let us sit together
In the cramped kitchen breathing kerosene.
There's fuel enough to forget the weather,
The knife is ours and the bread is clean.

Come love let us play the game
Of what to take and when to run,
Of come with me and come what may
And holding hands to hold off the sun.

(January 1931)

To the translator

Forget it. Don't tempt yourself with tongues
Whose blood is not your own.
Better to bite a light bulb, eat an urn.

How long the haunting, how high the cost, that sky-wide
scream
Of the bird we cannot name—
Like a happy man undone by an alley-flash of lace.

In the end, when the soul rends a man toward that
timelessness
It was his whole ambition to express,
To speak a denatured thing is to fling the first dirt on your
own cold face.

Happy Tasso, Bittersweet Ariosto, how they enchant us,
enchant us,
Until they don't. And if it's they who come, in the hour
of ice,
Throbbing their blue-brained truths, their starved and
larval eyes?

So: you, then. Your animal urge. Your primal pride.
To you is given this sponge dipped in vinegar, bitter wad
Of silence: you, who thought love of sound alone could
lead to God.

(1933)

Dance

The birds: Odette-Odile at NYCB

by Laura Jacobs

When *The Red Shoes* was released in 1948, it was the fifth triumph in five years for the director-writer team of Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger. The roll began with lyric wartime love stories: the haunting idyll of 1944's *A Canterbury Tale*; the windswept romance of 1945's *I Know Where I'm Going*; and the romance interruptus of 1946's *A Matter of Life and Death*, which takes place on earth and in heaven. Then the focus shifted. *Black Narcissus*, in 1947, was the eerily eroticized tale of a nuns' order in the high Himalayas. In 1948, *The Red Shoes* told the story—gorgeously—of a ballerina's consuming need to dance. This unexpected, record-breaking sensation brought a new audience to classical ballet and sent generations of little girls to the barre.

Love. God. Art. Powell and Pressburger pursued their theme of passion into stark, steep, and sacrificial places. "A Matter of Life and Death" could work as the title for any of these films—especially the last two, which in ravishing Technicolor move from commitment to compulsion, *Black Narcissus* drifting, *The Red Shoes* leaping. As Powell later put it: "We had all been told for ten years to go out and die for freedom and democracy . . . now that the war was over, *The Red Shoes* told us to go and die for art." The postwar audience understood this. It was the same principle under which Christian Dior was operating when he brought out his earth-shaking New Look collection of 1947. "Our civilization is a luxury," Dior explained, "and we are defending it." Not with bombs, he might have added, but with beauty.

The latest ballet film sensation, Darren Aronofsky's *Black Swan*, is not a descendent of *The Red Shoes*. Aronofsky is neither conversant with the art form of classical dance nor interested in the generative resources of an artist. Just as there are critics who think a ballerina's performance will improve if she reads a good book, Aronofsky's film implies that it will improve if she has hot sex. Such views are insulting. And if one goes into *Black Swan* expecting a "Technicolor fantasy"—as *The Red Shoes* was described in its day—the movie's cinder-block cinematography will disappoint. *Black Swan* is really more of a schizophrenic fantasy with S&M intonations. The movie descends not from Powell and Pressburger but from that other British director, Alfred Hitchcock. And not the early, charming Hitchcock, but the late work: *Psycho*, *The Birds*, *Marnie*, *Frenzy*—psychosexual studies dealing with mother issues, hysteria, misogyny, and murder. Acknowledging his debt, Aronofsky has said that his much-read copy of François Truffaut's interviews with Hitchcock "literally fell apart." *Black Swan* sits squarely in the suspense/horror genre.

So where *The Red Shoes* celebrates the art of ballet, *Black Swan* demonizes it. Where *The Red Shoes* shows us transcendence in a scene from *Swan Lake*'s Act Two—the "white act" that introduces the white swan, a spellbound princess named Odette—*Black Swan* focuses on Odile, the seductive imposter swan of Act Three. Most balletomanes don't care deeply

about a ballerina's rendering of Odile. Yes, there's the technical challenge of those thirty-two *fouéttes* in the Black Swan pas de deux, an ordeal coming late in the ballet when a dancer is tired. And of course we want to see how each ballerina remakes herself in the key of evil—as a heart of darkness, a temptress in black tulle. But it's not as if Odette herself isn't a sum of darkness and allure mingled with purity and light. Odette is the true test for a dancer, not Odile. Odette is the summons to greatness.

The New York City Ballet is not a *Swan Lake* company. George Balanchine was clear on that when he discussed the ballet with Solomon Volkov. "How can you take the story of *Swan Lake* seriously?" he asked. "It's time for a young prince to marry, he falls in love with a girl-swan, and naturally nothing good comes of it. It's nonsense!" Also, Balanchine didn't like the musical liberties ballerinas often took with the role, slowing down the tempos so they could stretch and "swan." He wanted the music played as marked—or faster. Still, he knew that for much of the public, ballet=*Swan Lake*. In 1951, he premiered his own version, condensed and shortened to one act, dominated by the corps, and definitely uptempo (NYCB dancers familiar with traditional tempi have frequently been dismayed by this insistence on speed). Balanchine's take was no longer a story ballet but a tone poem on the subject of Odette. Tellingly, the black swan Odile was cut, gone. "We try not to drag out *Swan Lake*," he said, "so that Tchaikovsky's music sounds in all its beauty." Left unsaid is the fact that Balanchine dancers weren't schooled to be swans. They didn't, and still don't, have the Russian back—its pliant bending and bowing borne up from the tailbone. Deriving low in the spine, as well, is the gravity in port de bras that gives flapping arms the weight of huge wings.

"His major comment was always 'larger, wilder, more creaturelike,'" Barbara Walczak says of Balanchine in *Repertory in Review*, "especially in the case of the very long-legged ballerinas. He seemed to be asking for more than anyone was able to give. In addition, all of the ballerinas were very tense about this role."

They knew Odette wasn't in their comfort zone, so much so that some would have been happier without the test. As Jacques d'Amboise relates in his fabulous new memoir, *I Was a Dancer*, the super-leggy Tanaquil Le Clercq "didn't want to be the Swan Queen, 'I'm not a swan, I'm a crane,' she'd protest. But she forced herself to be a swan for Balanchine. He would push her onstage—literally, he would stand in the wings and shove her on . . ."

Maria Tallchief, who premiered the role in 1951, has said, "It was one of the most difficult things I ever did. I remember when George choreographed it; I could see what he wanted, but then I couldn't do it. I think that he perhaps had in mind Spessivtzeva [a Russian], whom he always admired."

Balanchine's *Swan Lake* comes in and out of NYCB repertory—large, wild, creaturelike—but as of 1999 there has also been a full-length *Swan Lake* in rep, the work of Peter Martins. This production has abstract backdrops by Per Kirkeby, the most effective being the tangle of blue-black paint drips that looms over the lakeside scenes and suggests a neurological storm. It's a decor that wouldn't have been out of place in Aronofsky's *Black Swan*. Indeed, when the Martins production was performed this past February at NYCB, all the *Swan Lake*s were sold out and *Black Swan* fever was heating up the house. Or was it Oscar fever? No matter. Joyless as it is, Aronofsky's Oscar-winning film has put ballet front and center in the cultural conversation. And while the Martins production remains thin and flat, rushing the tempi radically, and the NYCB corps often does look more like cranes than swans, the company has a bona fide Odette in Sara Mearns.

Mearns joined NYCB in 2004 and her rise has been as steady as the tide coming in. She danced a premature *Swan Lake* (the Martins) in 2006, when injuries among the principals left the role open to underlings. I didn't see her in the part but balletomanes were buzzing—she'd handled herself with aplomb.

Mearns has long legs and long, strong feet, but she doesn't have a typical City Ballet bee body. She's wide in the shoulders, wide in the ribcage, even wide in the face, with a square Grace Kelly jawline and high wide cheekbones. In contrast she has a tiny waist. But then there's the overdeveloped leg muscles. So she's a constellation of extremes that add up to lush, plush power.

In 2007, when Mearns danced the role of Lilac Fairy in *The Sleeping Beauty*, it all came together. Unusual among women at NYCB, where *épaulement* is on the skimpy side, she used the broad set of her shoulders and ribs to find amplitude, a serene space around torso, head, and neck. This wreath of space—a feeling of sovereignty—is necessary to ballerina roles and to Lilac Fairy in particular, though today it's less common, perhaps because so much contemporary choreography doesn't require it and actually doesn't want it. Mearns's dancing had a fullness we're not used to seeing at NYCB, where linear sweep is the rule, and it set her apart.

She wasn't, however, without challenges. As Sugar Plum in *The Nutcracker,* it was discernible that Mearns's turnout, the way the thigh rotates open at the hip, was not quite "easy." Moving the leg *en l'air*, through *à la seconde* and back into arabesque, there was something awkward, a bit of a hitch. And yet her concentrated attack, her continuing reach, was impressive. It was intelligence at work—you could see it—but it's hard to say whether it was the body leading the brain or the brain—the will!—pushing through the technical kink. This is one of the mysteries of ballet dancing as an art and why prescriptions of "more books, more sex" are irrelevant. The iridescence of a dance performance happens almost ecologically, within the fertile mix of training, hunger, heat, rehearsal, muscle, mettle, and music. Out of this emerges the flash of the dragonfly, the refraction of the marsh, the metaphysics of the swan.

Mearns just kept besting the problems. In *Jewels*, in 2008, when she debuted as the lead in "Diamonds," her authority was complete. Her turnout in the role's revolved and shifting extensions was smooth, and she counterpointed those whorling arabesques and ebullient spirals with a chilly stillness in *sous-sus* ("under-over"—a position on pointe in which the legs and feet catch together so tightly only the front leg is visible). An unmelting icecap, Mearns seemed to expand the role's height and horizons. Precocious, she understood "Diamonds" better than many seasoned dancers before her, including Kyra Nichols, who couldn't help pulling the role in around herself like a fur collar, selling it a little, melting it.

Mearns returned to Martins's *Swan Lake* last year and took it to another level. The scale of her dancing was immense, as though her work in the Gothic vaults of "Diamonds"—its high-sprung ceilings—had helped to enlarge her already compelling instinct for deep space. When Mearns is onstage, you know what's hitting you. Her Odette is curvaceous and fully stretched, swift and cool, a glamour blonde, those haute cheekbones setting off the full mouth and the fringed eyes. She has a way of putting her large beautiful face before the audience that is pleasurable and old-fashioned (it makes you realize how few faces these days project to the back of the orchestra or up to the gods). The way she looks, the way she moves, everything about her is upholstered in white satin. And unlike Suzanne Farrell, who is the model for "extreme sport" at NYCB, Mearns operates from a stable base, a fifth position that is as technically secure as Middle C. One could argue that you can't dance Odette-Odile without a stable base. Farrell, a dancer so chromatically alive she seemed to fly across the keyboard, was amazingly unmoored, her fifth rather slippery. In his memoir, d'Amboise relates that Farrell "had danced the full-length *Swan Lake* after she left NYCB, and had hurt her knee doing it."

But Farrell isn't Mearns's model; a Russian is. "Makarova was and still is my all-time inspiration," Mearns said not long ago. "I still have the tape of *Swan Lake* that she performed in 1976 at the New York State Theater. I would watch it over and over again. It's not all about the steps; she cared about every little movement of her arms, how she

closed her feet in fifth." You can see that same care in Mearns, yet coupled with her own G-force through the phrase. She danced the Martins *Swan Lake* again this February, drafting extra momentum off *Black Swan*, and looked as spectacular as ever—spinally pliant, her magnified precision sustained and thus superb.

It's elating to see a young dancer throw herself into a role as difficult as Odette-Odile and come up with such a volumetrically big, bold, and correct execution. But big isn't everything, and Mearns still has a ways to go. Despite the size of her performance, it doesn't send waves radiating beyond her wingspan. Mearns gives us Balanchine's "larger, wilder" swan, but she hasn't yet experimented with lambency, or the shadows that frame the flicker. While her attack is certainly impressive, perhaps if it were variously softer, smaller, absorbed into musical contours that are allowed to be larger than she is, this Odette would be more songful, more imaginative. In short, Mearns lacks a light touch. She lets her power—her *appetite* for power—get the better of her, with the result that her dynamic loses lyricism and becomes predictable. In fact, in yet another of the mysteries of ballet, the impression left by her performance, the memory I carried away, was of an effortful Odette—too pushed and too loud.

And what of the black swan? Mearns's exultant Odile was different from her charging Odette in facial expression only, meaning that she brought the same structure of attack to both. If you go to Mearns's inspiration, Natalia Makarova, in the performance of *Swan Lake* that was the historic first ballet from "Live From Lincoln Center," broadcast nationally on June 30, 1976—now viewable on YouTube—you see a mature vision of the role. It's just one vision, but a legendary one. As Odette, Makarova is always centered, always quiet, never pushing, which lets her body float. Her supporting leg is often more profoundly, visibly energized than the working leg in arabesque or *developpé*, and this gives her poise. Her gaze is inward, shielded it seems, by her port de bras, her white wings—she's not really connected to the world. And she is queen of the swans not because her reach is longer than that of the others, or her leg higher, but because her silence is more eloquent, her humanity more pronounced. As the black swan Odile, Makarova brings her gaze up and out. Her *poitrine* is open, figuratively bare-shouldered, because she has no experience of wings. She is clearly a fake, as should have been obvious to Prince Siegfried, but he is excited, blinded by desire. The performance as a whole contains many small but stunning moments. One in particular is unforgettable, an image both subtle and prophetic: it is Makarova's port de bras at the end of Act Two, when Odette turns back into a swan, the water calling. Her arms do not wing upward in flight. They breathe outward from the shoulders, a rippling horizon line as calm as the surface of a lake, the water that is her home and will become her grave.

We mourn the passing of
John Haines, 1924–2011
&
Moore Moran, 1931–2011
Valued contributors to The New Criterion

Theater

Staging violence

by Kevin D. Williamson

Several years ago, I had a conversation with the writer of a very well-received memoir, and told him that I was writing a book. Being a professional, he asked me the appropriate question: How much was your advance? When I confessed that I had neither an advance, nor a contract, nor a publisher, nor even an agent, he shook his head, wearily. Writing a book for money, he informed me, was low enough, but writing one for some other reason was madness. He wanted to know what manner of childhood trauma had led me to such a depressed condition. That there is some connection between creation and madness is an insight at least as old as the cults of Dionysus and Shiva. Around the time of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, the eccentric artist became an affectation, and in our own time it has descended into an outright banality, not to mention an excuse for antisocial behavior indulged in by several generations of MFA students, teaching assistants, and bartenders with artistic pretenses. Let us then be grateful for Neil Armfield's adaptation of Nikolai Gogol's *Diary of a Madman*, which strangles that conceit.

The attraction here is, as has become customary, the borrowed glamour of the cinema, in the person of the Australian actor Geoffrey Rush, an ancient of the stage who currently looms large in the American cultural mind for his role in *The King's Speech*, one of those fastidious anglophile-porn extravaganzas that win film awards for performing the priceless public service of making audiences feel good about having sat through it. Do I exaggerate? Question: What do celebrated Serious Bigfoot Thespians Geoffrey Rush, Tom Hollander, Jonathan Pryce, and Johnny Depp have in common? *Pirates of the Caribbean*, that's what, a film derived from an amusement-park ride. Do too much of that stuff and you end up like poor Orlando Bloom, sentenced to spend eternity speaking stupidly with Hobbits, so as a prophylactic you trudge out to the Brooklyn Academy of Music and do some cutting-edge Gogol, to maintain credibility. (Cynical? I'd prefer to think he's doing it for the money.)

Happily, though, those acts of penance sometimes bear sweet fruit.

Gogol's story is in part a satire of the regimentation, bombast, and imperial buffoonery of Russia during the reign of Nicholas I, and the design of the play very economically communicates the specifically Russian flavor of that authoritarianism. (One particularly nice touch was the opening announcements, read over a tinny loudspeaker in slow, thuggish Russian, the content of which—"turn off your cell phones, no photography during the play"—was perfectly comprehensible to the non-Russophone. Only the final line was rendered, menacingly, in English: "I know you know what I am saying.") But while the atmosphere of the play is appropriately repressive, scant attention is paid to the politics implicit in the work. Instead, the play unfolds as a meditation on the theme of writing as mania, and it is entirely unroman-

tic: There is never any hint of merit, imagination, or even unrealized artistic talent lurking within Mr. Rush's Poprishchin. He may have been neglected and brutalized by his fellows and colleagues, but he is mainly the victim of his own vanity. It is vanity that causes him to exaggerate, in his own mind, his rank and worth, and therefore to regard his humble status as the result of a conspiracy, evidence of which he spends the entire play manufacturing.

Poprishchin's job is to repair the quills of the minor bureaucrat for whom he toils, and he takes an absurd pride in the job. But his own quills keep breaking and his candles are snuffed, as though the universe itself is telling him to stop writing. (What is it with Geoffrey Rush and *quills*, anyway? He played His Excellency the Marquis de Sade in a film by that name, and lusted more heartily after writing instruments than sexual conquests.)

Those broken quills, of course, are the best thing for him. As T. S. Eliot wrote, "human kind cannot bear very much reality," and such creative faculties as Poprishchin has at his disposal are deployed to prevent his facing his lot in life and his culpability for his own state. That he later witnesses dogs exchanging gossipy letters and imagines that he is the rightful heir to the vacant Spanish throne requires a particular constitutional weakness on the part of the protagonist. But that is incidental—necessary for transforming Gogol's observations from a psychological sketch to a work of drama, surely, but not a fact that disconnects Poprishchin from the audience, either. We are not shielded from his madness, but share in it.

Which is to say, there is a kind of universality in Poprishchin, which this production helps to communicate by transforming him into an archetype: a clown, specifically. He begins the play clown-*ish*, with iridescent teal eyeshadow, poofy carrot-colored hair, and a tatty claret frock; a subsequent nose injury (thanks to one of those epistolary pooches) gives him a clown's nose, as well, a ragged and bloody one. Mr. Rush gives him a clown's soul, which isn't happy or carefree at all. (There is a reason many people cringe in terror at clowns.) Mr. Rush also gives him a clown's bodily vocabulary, careering through some of the finest physical comedy I have seen on stage. Poprishchin does not, alas, possess a clown's salvation: knowledge of the fact that he is a clown. The genius of Mr. Rush's performance is to carry on such resplendent buffoonery—employing the classical comic arsenal of double-takes and pratfalls, leering at the audience, and seething at the players in the two-man orchestra—while maintaining his character's deadly earnest seriousness of mind.

This isn't a one-man show, incidentally. The above-mentioned musicians get into the dramatic act, too: As Poprishchin scribbles away furiously, the fiddler plays a mockingly squiggly accompaniment; Poprishchin, aware that he is being mocked, tries to throw the musicians off with some sly orthographical maneuvers, finds himself bested, parries, and the comic interplay between them is superbly realized. He comes to regard the orchestra as one more nemesis in his sprawling collection.

Mr. Rush's presence is naturally dominating, but it is almost equaled by Yael Stone's. Ms. Stone plays Poprishchin's provincial Finnish housekeeper, the out-of-his-league young woman he pines for and stalks, and, finally, a fellow inmate at the asylum where he ends up. The housekeeper doesn't speak Russian, constantly misunderstanding her employer, but not to the point where she is rendered ineffective in her role as audience surrogate, witnessing the horror of Poprishchin's giving in to his delusions.

Mother of God is structured in much the same way as *Diary of a Madman*: The slapstick is a set-up for a concentrated dose of human agony, which is heightened by the chuckles that come before it. It is, unfortunately, less soundly constructed, well performed but defectively written. Fewer chuckles and more bathos, all of it on the cheap.

Here we have the story of Joseph (Charles Gerber), "the biggest schlemiel in all Judea," an elderly and showboatishly pious Jew who takes the teen-age Miriam (Keona Welch)

as his wife, only to discover that she is pregnant. Apparently inspired by some of the later Christian apocrypha dealing with St. Joseph, the playwright Michele A. Miller invents a complicated domestic backstory for him: an early, unconsummated romantic attachment to Elizabeth (Karin de le Penha), the mother of John the Baptist, and a failed first marriage that ended in ignominy after his wife slept with another man. Not eager to twice endure the shame of public cuckoldry, Joseph deals harshly with his young bride, refusing to allow the magi to render medical assistance during the childbirth that threatens to kill both her and the child.

That is a pretty heavy climax considering what comes before: a lot of poorly conceived comedy. Miriam's mother, Hannah (Marisa Petsakos), is a shrewish Jewish stereotype, all braying New York honk and grasping materialism. "Think about yoah muddah! Yoah poah, Jewish muddah!" Elizabeth is the loopy New Age crackpot, and Joseph the impotent old man. The Three Wise Men, who are running a con on Herod, make Larry, Moe, and Curly look like Laurence Olivier playing Lear.

It is unfair to compare the play that is written to the play that one thinks ought to have been written, but in this case the work will not suffer any diminishment: It is poor enough on its own terms. Tragedy can be faked, but not comedy: Either they laugh or they don't. (They didn't.) The pastiche of styles (vaudeville, Borscht Belt, silent film) and the mix-and-match, "one from Column A, one from Column B" theology of the play add nothing at all to the drama inherent in the source material; in fact, they detract from it. But the story of Joseph—not the saint, but the man, with manly jealousy and manly vulnerabilities—is an inherently interesting one, and one that has not often been well treated. (Not even in the Bible.) The dramatic arc of Ms. Miller's story takes Joseph from fecklessness to bitterness to wrathfulness, and finally to penance, where he looks into the unblemished face of the stillborn child (the infant is never named in this play) and concludes that such innocence does in fact qualify the baby as the child of God, worthy of a father's love. That is something out of which a great drama might have been made.

Another thing out of which a great drama might be made is a royal retainer intent upon murdering his king and kinsman under the influence of his over-ambitious wife: Set it in medieval Scotland, throw in some supernatural creepiness, and . . .

I've been on a bit of a jihad to see every *Macbeth* I can, both because I love the play, and am coming to love it more, and because I believe it is illuminating in these days of thriftless ambition. Just as the story of Mary and Joseph is shrunken rather than enlarged by the additions of Ms. Miller, Shakespeare's play is confused rather than clarified by the padding it receives from its current director, Andrew Rothkin, and Red Shark Productions.

Mr. Rothkin proposes to reimagine Macbeth as a work of film noir, dressing it up in mid-century Hollywood glamour. The idea is not inherently defective, but it demands originality of execution, of which there is very little in evidence here. Even in many of the play's smallest details, such as the substitution of a leather jacket for Macbeth's armor, it recycles things that have been done before, and done better. Such originality as this production does have is mostly destructive, the worst offense being to enlarge the role of the Weird Sisters to such an extent that they are practically the play's protagonists. I did not have a stopwatch handy, but I am confident that they spent more time on stage than did Macbeth (Tony von Halle).

There are basically two ways to take the sisters: bearded hags, as Shakespeare wrote them, or sexpots, as is the current vogue. Mr. Rothkin gives us sexpots (more precisely, two sexpots and one aspirant), clad in very short and disheveled sundresses (really), showing a lot of leg (welcome in four cases out of the six). (Sorry.) But these are not just any old sexpot hags: They take the lead role in the play, appearing on stage in practically every scene, using characters as ventriloquist's puppets, snatching MacDuff's dead

infant off the stage, and cackling from time to time as a form of commentary.

This is dramatically stupid for a couple of reasons. The first and most obvious is that *Macbeth* is in part a meditation on the question of fate and free will, and the paradox at the center of prophesy: If men are free to choose their actions, how can they be foreknown? (By God, for example, as may have occurred to audiences in Shakespeare's day, if not our own.) If actions are to be foretold, how can they be said to be freely undertaken? There was a time in our cultural history in which those were hot disputes, not the stuff of late-night dorm-room debates, and Shakespeare did his times the courtesy of taking them seriously. By expanding the role of the sisters from prophetesses to players, Mr. Rothkin's adaptation upsets that delicate balance. How much do we have to think about free will when these furies and fates are literally acting as puppet-mistresses?

Their expanded presence also upsets the polarization of the sexes in the play, which is essential to its energy: Macbeth's virtues are first and foremost manly virtues, and it is his manly goodness, especially his sense of military and political duty, that almost stays his hand and spares his soul. In opposition to those virtues are the specifically womanly wiles of Lady Macbeth, who perverts her husband's virtues with a classically feminine stratagem: "If you really loved me, you'd murder the king." Sexual polarization makes for dynamic drama (and happy marriages). But our Macbeth here is quite swarmed by women, covered up with writhing demonesses performing maneuvers that in the real world cost $20 for five minutes, plus a cover charge on weekends. There is no balance or symmetry, no sense of order, and Shakespeare's tragedies are mostly about political and social order: The wrong guy gets on the throne and the world goes to pieces until he's gone.

The witches even get the final word: After Macbeth is chopped fine and Malcolm is duly anointed, they begin to whisper seductively the name of Malcolm's brother, suggesting that there will be a sequel: *Macbeth 2: The Rise of Donalbain*. ("This time, it's personal!") None of these young ladies shows any ability to act, and the choreography they are given to perform is risible. A little of them would be too much, a lot of them—I suppose it *is* a tragedy.

Unfortunately, these experiments simply ruin the play, doing a disservice to some very fine actors. Michael Raver is very good as Malcolm, innocent and pure but not naïve, with elegant pronunciation. And Andy English is superb as MacDuff, manful, purposeful, laconic. The music and set design are sparse but functional, the costuming appears to be of the low-budget, army-surplus variety. I've seen better Macbeths than Mr. von Halle, but he is a wonderfully acrobatic swordfighter. He is plainly having fun at the climax (the big smile on his face suggesting that he must have been looking forward to the last act as much as I was) performing somersaults and kung-fu moves. Perhaps he should not see a dagger before him, but a katana.

Fighting on stage is something that's really hard to get right. *Beautiful Burnout*, a play about aspiring boxers in the Glaswegian underclass, takes an intelligent approach: Instead of trying to stage anything like a realistic boxing match, the fights are stylishly choreographed, a rotating stage providing the dizzying, out-of-body effect that will be familiar to anybody who's ever been well and truly punched in the face. (And it's in Brooklyn, so there's always a chance!) When one of the boxers takes a shot, the action freezes, the stage spins, and he steps out of the scene, frustratedly assessing the punch from outside the immediate frame of the action, and then shakes it off and steps back into position, his jaw or his sternum on his opponent's glove, and the action resumes. There's a lot of thumpa-thumpa-thumpa techno music from an outfit called Underworld to help drown out the dialogue, which is occasionally brilliant, but not often enough.

The play has no characters: It has types. Those types are the domineering coach, Bobby Burgess (Ewan Stewart), the harried

mother (Blythe Duff), the hooligan (Eddie Kay), the smart kid (Henry Pettigrew), the wide-eyed newcomer (Ryan Fletcher), the girl (Vicki Manderson), and the gifted non-white guy who is athletically a cut above the rest. The lattermost character, Ajay "The Cobra" Chopra, also known as the "Panjabi Jabber," is played with supreme confidence by Taqi Nazeer, who in spite of his delicate features is, appropriately, the one who most credibly resembles a boxer: He moves like one, brags like one, and swaggers like one.

The slightly cartoonish nature of the roles is only problematic in the case of Ms. Manderson's character, who, we are informed, has developed her tough-girl persona in response to the unwanted sexual attentions of her stepfather. It is never made quite clear whether those attentions are anything more than the occasional pervy leer or if they have found a more dire expression, but it all feels a bit tacked on. The implicit, lazy assumption—that the only thing that might make female characters interesting is the sexualization of them—might be found problematic on feminist grounds (if ever I meet one, I'll ask her), but it certainly is problematic on dramatic grounds: How much more moving a character might she have been if her rage were rooted in something less trite? Instead, the playwright Bryony Lavery escalates her sexuality; when she has gone as far as she can go as a girl boxer who refuses to participate in girls' boxing ("I don't wanna do girls' boxing, I wanna do *boxing*!"), she reinvents herself as a bikini-clad round-card girl ("with a bit of judiciously applied silicon.")

The play is not subtle: When the smart kid starts going on and on about how boxing is statistically safer than rugby, and the mother begins to fret that her amateur-boxer son is entering a world of hurt when he is engaged in his first professional bout, it is clear that Something Bad is going to happen. In the event, it does, and the resulting damage restores the son to his mother—"every second, of every minute, of every hour, of every day, of every year"—in permanently infantile condition.

It is not a beautifully written show, but it is beautifully performed. The athleticism of the performances is really something to see, and the workout sequences in particular are cleverly choreographed. Modern-dance choreographers have been borrowing martial-arts moves for many years, and *Beautiful Burnout*'s clever reversal—sit-ups, push-ups, calisthenics, and the boxing itself staged as dance numbers—is a testament to the power of sheer technique. I was reminded of a Baryshnikov performance I once attended, during which the great dancer performed works by some chic postmodern choreographer whose name has been purged from my memory, the movement consisting of his walking across a stage, sitting down in a chair, standing up, and walking across the stage again—in other words, not only doing stuff that your average desk-monkey *can* do, but *does* do, every day. There's not much in *Beautiful Burnout*'s athletic sequences that would make one think, Sure, I could do that, just like that. (If you could, you would.) Technique can concentrate the mind, bringing the audience into the world of the drama.

There are some very clever parts: The play does not open with pugilistic action in the ring, but with the mother's disquisition on the never-ending supply of laundry that sports produces. A washing machine rises from beneath the ring/stage, and she begins to fold, sermonize, and fold some more. Her son enters the scene—out of the washing machine, like Caliban rising out of the rock.

As the coach, Ewan Stewart offers an excellent performance, taking more out of the role than the script might seem to provide. He's scheming but sincere, dictatorial but humane, a man with real talent but limited resources trying to make the best out of what he has. He makes a mess instead, but boxing matches do not have happy endings: Somebody has to get beat.

Art

Picasso in New York & Virigina

by Karen Wilkin

How does the prologue of *Romeo and Juliet* begin? "Two households, both alike in dignity"? Substitute "Picasso exhibitions" for "households" and we might be describing this spring's more or less concurrent shows, "Picasso's Guitars 1912–1914," at the Museum of Modern Art and "Picasso: Masterpieces from the Musée National Picasso, Paris," at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond.[1] The two exhibitions are both alike not only in "dignity," but also in the artist they focus on and in ambition. Yet as their titles indicate, in most other respects, they are diametric opposites—in motivation, conception, realization, and intended audience. One is a deliberately limited, scholarly investigation aimed at fairly sophisticated museum-goers; the other is an exuberant, expansive celebration designed to attract habitual, casual, and first-time visitors in equal numbers. Comparisons between such avowedly disparate projects in widely separated locations are obviously pointless, but I'm afraid they are made irresistible not only by the overlapping of the two shows but also by my having seen both of them within the same week.

"Picasso's Guitars," at MOMA, organized by Anne Umland, the Curator in the Department of Painting and Sculpture, with Blair Hartzell, the Curatorial Assistant, is small and tightly focused. Meticulously researched and impeccably selected, the show is designed to set the record straight about a very specific group of works, and to sharpen and perhaps even alter our perceptions of Picasso's practice. Comprised of about seventy modest-sized works made during an intense two-year campaign, the exhibition will be seen only in New York. "Picasso: Masterpieces from the Musée National Picasso," by contrast, is an all-stops-out extravaganza, a kind of ad hoc retrospective, thoughtfully selected, but conceived for anything but scholarly reasons. Since the Musée Picasso is closed for extensive renovations until 2012, the show was organized by Anne Baldassari, the museum's Chairman—read "director"—as a fundraising effort to defray project costs not covered by subsidies from the French government.

The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts has the distinction of being the only East Coast stop in a seven-city international tour that began more than a year ago and will be extended, with some alterations, into Asia in the future. It can be argued that it's the proverbial "win-win" situation. The Musée Picasso receives needed funds. Institutions that take the exhibition pay a hefty price for the privilege, but they get bragging rights both for showing works by an iconic artist and for bringing art to their local audience that would normally require a trip to Paris to be seen together. The exhibition ti-

1 "Picasso's Guitars 1912–1914" opened at the Musuem of Modern Art, New York, on February 13 and remains on view through June 6, 2011.

"Picasso: Masterpieces from the Musée National Picasso" opened at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond on February 19 and remains on view through May 11, 2011.

tle's conflation of "Picasso"—repeated twice—"masterpieces," and "Paris" is guaranteed to generate record ticket sales, off-setting the cost of the show and, no doubt, boosting membership and future repeat visitors. At the VMFA, the exhibition adds additional luster to the inauguration of the handsome temporary exhibition galleries created by the museum's extremely effective recent expansion and renovation of the existing buildings and exterior campus by the London-based architect Rick Mather.

So far, so good. But even though the 176 works on view in Richmond span most of Picasso's career and include some important paintings and sculptures, the collection from which they were chosen is notoriously idiosyncratic. The Musée Picasso was founded to showcase the enormous body of work that remained with the artist at the time of his death, along with his eclectic collection of works by other artists, all of which were given to the nation in lieu of death duties. While the museum created to house this remarkable hoard includes examples from just about every moment in Picasso's long life, there are notable imbalances and, as a result, the selection at the VMFA, far from being a measured, comprehensive survey, reflects the strengths and weaknesses, the high points and holes, of its origins. Visitors seeking a coherent overview or a cogent introduction to Picasso may be confused (as well as enlightened) by the large, somewhat erratically installed exhibition.

If "Masterpieces from the Musée Picasso" seems, especially on first viewing, to be slightly overwhelming and slightly incomprehensible, "Picasso's Guitars" is most striking for both its intimacy and the seeming inevitability of each work included. After an introduction of apposite quotes, the first thing we see is the holy grail of modernist sculpture, MOMA's cardboard, paper, and string 1912 guitar, a fascinating object made even more fascinating by the recent re-attachment of its original cardboard tabletop. Nearby is the museum's other great treasure, the 1914 sheet-metal version of the casually assembled cardboard instrument, and, on the surrounding walls, a stunning selection of drawings, collages, and paintings that allows us to trace Picasso's excited exploration of the permutations of the motif and the various materials and processes with which he embodied the theme. Photographs, some by Picasso himself, provide compelling glimpses into the history and the evolution of these works. A digital facsimile of one of his sketchbooks offers an opportunity to leaf through the pages.

If we spend enough time with the show, we begin to feel that we are being permitted to watch the endlessly inventive Picasso in the studio, observing as he responds to ideas that arise in the course of working and following him into new territory as he explores these provocative suggestions. We can track his adoption of what he famously called the "papery and powdery procedures" of his friend Georges Braque. In 1912, when "Picasso's Guitars" begins, the two young men were still, as they described it, "roped together like mountain climbers," scaling the uncharted heights of Cubism in a close working dialogue. Braque, who joined Picasso that summer in Sorgues, near Avignon, in the South of France, had acquired a roll of commercially printed *faux bois* paper in a decorator's shop in Picasso's absence and had begun to incorporate cut-out paper planes into his work, along with aggressive textures made by mixing sand and grit into his paint; photographs record that he was also making paper sculptures, which have not survived.

As the ample number of superb collages that Braque and Picasso produced over the next years attests, they found the method to be liberating and fruitful. Working with physically discrete cut-out shapes added an element of contingency to their process, a possibility of endless change. At the same time, it showed the way towards solidifying, simplifying, and clarifying the transparent, densely packed, shifting, illusionistic planes that were the building blocks of their first Analytic Cubist compositions. The specificity of collaged planes pointed to the clearly bounded, unbroken, patterned, and textured elements of Picasso's and Braque's next paintings: the crisp, lucid compositions labeled Synthetic Cubism—"synthetic" in the sense of putting the shattered, transparent planes of Analytic Cubism back together again.

Why Picasso was so fascinated by guitars remains a moot question, as Umland points out in an illuminating catalogue essay. Unlike Braque, who could play just about any instrument by ear—there are alarming reports of Beethoven symphonies rendered on the accordion—Picasso was neither a musician nor interested in music. Perhaps, Umland speculates, he was attracted to the guitar because of its traditional Spanish associations and because modernist artists whom he admired addressed the motif, but, as she notes, that fails to explain his decision not just to make images of guitars, but also to construct the extraordinary object that initiates MOMA's show. In a sense, the cardboard guitar and its newly reattached tabletop (once parts of a larger still life construction documented by photographs) and the sheet metal version of the instrument provide keys to interpreting the drawn, painted, and pasted images that dominate the exhibition.

Because the guitars are three-dimensional, they make explicit the spatial (and often material) reversals, inversions, and dissections implicit in the two-dimensional works: the displaced relationship of the front and back planes of the guitar body; the play of rectangles against curves; the transformation of the sound hole—in reality, a round opening in a flat surface—into a projecting cylinder; and more. Yet Picasso, however radically he reinvents the defining elements of the guitar, in three dimensions or two, retains its frontality and the sense that a guitar body is fundamentally a pair of flat planes that contain space. In image after image, the guitar, whether upright, horizontal, or tilted, confronts us; the voluptuously curved planes of the body, whether squared-off or sliced, whether transformed or recognizably alluded to, are always parallel to the surface of the picture. These planes provide the organizing spatial principle of each image—like the cardo and decumanus of Roman town plans—against which everything else is oriented. It's as if the literal surface of the picture (or the wall against which the constructed guitars are hung) becomes a surrogate for the body of the person holding the instrument.

The title of "Picasso's Guitars" notwithstanding, the exhibition includes works whose nominal subjects are not guitars but heads, table-top still lifes, and violins. That variety is one of the most stimulating, engaging aspects of the exhibition; it's what most strongly provokes the illusion of being made privy to Picasso's thoughts. The similar scale of all the exhibited works—the fictive objects in the still lifes, the guitars, the violins, and the heads are all just about actual size—and their similarly centralized compositions make us acutely aware of the complex, intensely serious visual punning that unites them.

Picasso reminds us that guitars, with their curving sides and projecting, fretted necks, resemble both violins and human heads; he finds further cognates with these forms in wine bottles, with their swelling "bodies" and narrow necks. He makes sound holes interchangeable with eyes and mouths, the curved edges of stringed instruments with ears and cascading hair, and so on. We watch him tossing images back and forth; deconstructing and reassembling forms; outlining planes with assertive strokes of charcoal, translating masses and volumes into sheets of newsprint, *faux bois*, and wallpaper patterns; differentiating planes with shifts of texture. The great artificer plays games with our perceptions, destabilizing our ability to identify even the most familiar objects in our environment, revealing both unexpected connections and previously unnoted distinctions among them.

"Picasso's Guitars" demands and rewards close looking and concentration. The pleasures of "Picasso: Masterpieces from the Musée National Picasso" are different and require a different kind of effort. As at the Musée Picasso, we have to abandon preconceptions and become engaged by what is presented for its own sake. Visiting the museum has always been a rollercoaster experience of exhilaration, raised expectations, and disappointment. In Paris, the complicated story of Picasso's evolution is told by often extraordinary and sometimes surpris-

ing examples, but there are also conspicuous gaps in the narrative. Many of the most significant of Picasso's works are in public and private collections elsewhere, and certain decades are represented at the Musée Picasso largely by preparatory studies rather than by fully developed examples. An impressive selection of proto-Cubist works, for example, many of them on paper, leads one to expect, against all reason, to find MOMA's *Demoiselles d'Avignon* in the next gallery, as the fulfillment of the promise of the previous rooms and a prefiguration of what is to come. The absence of this pivotal work, or an equivalent, is felt. Something similar obtains in Richmond.

The exhibition is installed more or less chronologically, beginning in 1901, but the course of Picasso's evolution is described in fits and starts. In Paris, delights such as a vitrine of small cardboard and wallpaper constructions console us for the absence of major iconic works and help fill in the lacunae in the story. At the VMFA, we have to make it up, more or less, as we go along, especially at the beginning. Anyone familiar with Picasso's chameleon-like stylistic transformations can, with a little effort, mentally connect the dots, imagining some of the included dots as larger or more achieved and adding a few to bridge the gaps. Viewers with a less firm grasp on Picasso's development may have difficulty following the thread and may not easily grasp just what the most important moments are in relation to the history of modernism.

On the plus side, the selection includes many first-rate works, such as, early on, a 1901 portrait of the dead Carlos Casagemas, Picasso's friend, compatriot, and studio mate in Barcelona and Paris, who committed suicide, disappointed in love. Painted during the nineteen-year-old Spaniard's second extended sojourn in Paris, the fierce little picture announces Picasso's interest in van Gogh with its vigorous touch, nervous drawing, and saturated color. The Blue Period is encapsulated by the well-known portrait of the elderly one-eyed "Celestina," an etching, the Rose Period by drawings of Harlequin's family, and a characteristic but hardly major gouache. As in Paris, a fine selection of studies for *Les Demoiselles* substitutes for more important works. The most substantial inclusions, a pair of studies of nude women from 1907, one seated and one standing with clasped hands, affirm Picasso's debt to Paul Cézanne and Henri Matisse, but only hint at the radical anatomical reinventions, the peculiarity, and the authority of the developed painting.

The rigorous analysis of the period following *Les Demoiselles*—hence the term "Analytic Cubism"—is documented by works on paper and a pair of tall, narrow canvases of seated musicians, painted in 1911; one is flickering and painterly, the other, so subdivided and modeled that it seems a painted version of the well-known facetted bronze head of Fernande Olivier (1909), which is also on view. Some of the exhibition's highest high points are in this section: a few splendid collages, a painted sheet-metal construction of a violin, and, best of all, an elaborate 1913 construction in painted wood and paper, *Guitar and Bottle of Bass*; the wall-mounted improvisation should really be in MOMA's show, where its play of projecting, flat, and painted elements, including an angled table-top, could enter into a revealing dialogue with related works.

A noticeable gap follows; Synthetic Cubism, for all practical purposes, is not represented. In compensation, Picasso's post–World War I investigation of classicism is superbly documented by an astonishing 1919 "portrait" of a full-bodied white pitcher crowned with a plate of yellow apples. The serious punning so evident in "Picasso's Guitars" is paramount here: an intensely visual man's awareness of improbable resemblances between the things he encounters in his daily life, both human and inanimate; the jug has the presence and vitality of a poised woman carrying a burden on her head. Fastidiously rendered portraits of Picasso's wife Olga and their son, from the 1910s and 1920s, round out this section. Things improve dramatically from this point on, with a more than adequate sampling of the pared-down linear works of the 1920s, surreal beach scenes of the 1930s, with figures turned into piles of stone, and voluptuous images of the pneumatic blonde Marie-Thérèse Walter.

The selection of sculpture is particularly strong in the galleries that follow, devoted to the period between World Wars. We are treated to the marvelous, playful *Head of Woman* (1929–30), constructed with a colander, among other "non-art" components. The witty sculpture is testimony to Picasso's collaboration with the Catalan sculptor Julí González, as together they initiated a new tradition of open, additive sculpture in metal that forever altered conceptions of what three-dimensional works of art could be. The severe geometric figure proposed as a monument to Picasso's friend Guillaume Apollinaire, in 1928, is also present, as is a series of bulbous, over-scaled bronze women's heads, assembled from blunt, ambiguous swollen forms that evoke cheeks, noses, necks, hair, and other less decorous body parts. The last of Matisse's series of heads of Jeanette, with its fusion of protuberant forehead and nose, is thought to have provoked these works. The installation of the bronze heads with a noteworthy group of paintings from the period—large figures "assembled" with stony elements, along with a razzle-dazzle still life and lubricious evocations of Marie-Thérèse as an abandoned, eminently available reclining nude—makes the large gallery they occupy the most satisfying in the entire show. That the installation is beautifully lit—as is the entire exhibition—also helps.

Nothing, however, could help *Massacre in Korea* (1951), which occupies an uncomfortable territory between propaganda and kitsch, placed in a darkened gallery meant to evoke "the war years" in a section spanning 1940 to 1953. Some spiky monochrome pictures are, I suppose, intended to encapsulate the newspaper-photo intensity of the absent *Guernica*, while a small group of portraits of the Surrealist photographer Dora Maar, made in 1937, serve as additional metaphors for Picasso's outrage at the Spanish Civil War. Fortunately, the enchanting sculpture of a she-goat from 1950 and the celebrated bronze *Man with a Sheep* (1943) enliven this rather bleak period.

Finally, there's a selection of works from Picasso's last decade and a half that includes a spatially complex evocation of a studio interior, painted in 1956. Its arched windows, dappled with leaf-like patterns, propped canvases, and views of distant palm trees, read as an homage to Matisse, who had died two years earlier. There is also, not unexpectedly, some wishful-thinking quasi-erotica and a few of Picasso's well-known parodies of old master paintings in various media, translations of Delacroix's and Manet's most celebrated works into his own Cubist-derived language—evidence, perhaps, of a systematic Oedipal campaign to vanquish the competition.

At the VMFA, the chronology is broken to provide a dramatic finale: bronze versions of the six standing bathers originally cobbled together from scraps and studio props during a 1956 film project, and later modified and cast. Projections of stills from the filming provide a welcome context and enhance the playful quality of the pieces. Earlier, towards the middle of the exhibition, a long narrow space becomes a "spine," filled with works on paper, documentary material and photographs of Picasso, his family, and friends, from various periods, some of them taken by Picasso himself. While these inclusions are clearly meant as embellishments of the exhibition, they can be very instructive.

A view of the studio at La Californie, taken in 1960, shows a photograph of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, reminding us, as the selection of works does not, how much Picasso learned from him during his first years in Paris, six decades earlier; it also reveals the persistence of Picasso's admiration. A 1953 photo of Picasso and his children unwrapping Christmas presents at Vallauris allows us to identify an otherwise puzzling object in the upper left corner of a mysterious painting of a tall silhouetted male figure imposed on a reclining nude in a bedroom, *The Shadow*, dated December 29, 1953. It proves to be the toy Sicilian cart and donkey that Picasso displays to his children in the Christmas photo.

In the end, such intimate revelations sum up the largest pleasure afforded by the Musée Picasso exhibition: the possibility of seeing works that the artist kept for his entire life. Visitors to the VMFA may not gain a perfect understanding of the trajectory of Picasso's career from the exhibition, but I'm sure they will have a fine time with the works on view. It may even inspire them to find out more on their own and fill in the blank spaces for themselves.

Exhibition note

"Elegant Enigmas:
The Art of Edward Gorey"
The Boston Athenæum.
February 9–June 4, 2011

One can usually identify Edward Gorey to those not familiar with his name by reminding them of the opening credits for PBS's *Mystery!*. But this represents a single item in an oeuvre that includes over one hundred books of his own authorship, illustrations for fifty more written by others, designs for the stage, and stuffed animals that he sewed himself. Nearly 200 works are featured in an exhibition entitled "Elegant Enigmas: The Art of Edward Gorey," which originated at the Brandywine Museum and now appears at the Boston Athenæum, accompanied by a catalogue written beautifully by *The New Criterion*'s own Karen Wilkin. The show attests to the pictorial genius of a man with outsize erudition, a maudlin yet gleeful sense of humor, and an infectious love of language.

Gorey may not have been the first to mark off the territory between death and light entertainment—credit for that probably goes to Charles Addams—but he remains its key denizen. He created a universe in which the course of human civilization marooned in 1925, sometime around Halloween, in the dreariest hamlet that one could dream up. Misfortune pervaded the very atmosphere, and its maker, using chiseled English mined from the edges of common usage and a relentless cross-hatching technique in steel pen, inflicted catastrophes upon its hapless inhabitants with palpable delight.

"Elegant Enigmas" shows panels from *The Gashlycrumb Tinies*, an abecedary in which a child expires for each letter, which gives you an idea of the physics of this realm. "M is for Maud who was swept out to sea," says the caption for a drawing of a girl standing on a plank that bobs in a dark ocean as she waves her arms to no avail. The next drawing, "N is for Neville who died of ennui," shows the top of the young boy's head as it peeks out a window of a stone-walled edifice, his eyes reduced to empty black dots. In Gorey's world, life is cheap, but the gags never are.

The techniques by which he built this world bear literal close examination. Most illustrators working at his level of detail do so at a scale intended for reproduction, one-and-a-half or two times the printed size. This lends cohesion to the final print, but it's unnecessary if the artist can draw cohesively at actual size. Despite the fact that his formal training consisted of just one semester at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, he is one of the pen's greatest practitioners of the last fifty years. You can lose yourself in the fur coats, lovingly hatched to a hair, that his characters often donned. (The artist himself wore them, with sneakers.) One all but enshrouds a man with a notepad in "He wrote it all down Zealously," drawn for the letter Z in his 1975 alphabet book entitled, for no discernible reason, *The Glorious Nosebleed*. Because it allows tiny points of white paper to show through, the cross-hatching vibrates in a way that is not attainable in other monochrome techniques. "A clergyman staying at the Upturned Pig, the Rev. O. MacAbloo, wandered in a remote corner of the shrubbery," reports the caption for a drawing from *The Other Statue* (1968). The foliage, as rendered by Gorey, surrounds MacAbloo like a cloud of insects.

It is an act of high wit to produce nonsense that is just plausible enough for comedy. Gorey's ancestor in this is Edward Lear, and his illustrations for Lear's *The Jumblies* and *The Dong with the Luminous Nose* are in "Elegant Enigmas" as well. It would be hard to find an artist better suited in temperament to illustrate Lear, whose Jumblies "went to sea in a sieve." The same power to suspend order caused the scene from a 1989 series of postcards by Gorey in which a man appears to have been struck down by a topiary automobile. I hazard a cautious guess as to what it really addresses: that the sources of dread in one's troubled head, through humor, surmount life's duresses. Maybe this is what we needed, more than anything offered by contemporaneous fine art, as we exited the old century and entered the new millennium: an inoculation against horror in the form a little dose of it rendered droll.

—*Franklin Einspruch*

Gallery chronicle
by James Panero

Sculpture has a weight problem, and the laws of nature are rarely kind. Gravity never gives up trying to tug matter to the ground. How sculptors confront this force often determines the power of their work. Sometimes sculptors play up the heftiness. The minimalist Richard Serra built his career around work that menaces viewers with teetering sheets of metal. More often, sculptors aim to overcome gravity's pull. Rather than pressing down, their work reaches up, with an energy that seems greater than the scale and materials might allow. Occasionally, sculptures soar without leaving the ground.

The sculptor Peter Reginato came to his practice by way of the hot rod, that energized American demotic craft. Born in Dallas, Texas in 1945, Reginato grew up outside Oakland, California in the heart of postwar car culture. He moved to New York in the mid-1960s, around the time he started making abstract sculpture. He never forgot the lessons of the Kustom Kar Kommandos, to borrow the title of Kenneth Anger's 1965 cult film. Speed and invention, with a flash of machismo, became his hallmarks.

Starting out, Reginato dabbled in primary structures—another minimalist crystallizing the avant-garde into a weighty fortress of solitude. Yet he soon broke ranks, developing ever more whimsical, maximal composites of surrealistic planes, flattened metal sheets cut into amoebic shapes, fastened together, and painted in a riot of colors. Today he continues to work in the auto-body style of welded steel, a pyrotechnician with a helmet and a blow-torch building explosions in space, loud and indecorous, often with suggestions of leaves and figures, and titles like "Funk Happens."

In 2009 Reginato exhibited an iteration of his work at the Heidi Cho Gallery in Chelsea that was something of a breakthrough, a clearing out of the body shop and the start of something new. Here, instead of building works out of an assembly of steel planes, he "drew" the outlines of his recurring shapes with metal poles, polished rather than painted to a shine. The result lightened the load of the sculptures to a cloud-like state, with shapes now formed out of the negative space between the metal.

The work did more than shed pounds. It also took on a new energy in the way the eye ran over it. Rather than zero-in on the center of the cut forms, the eye observes the lines around it, following the bends and curves of the rods. The effect reminded me of Gjon Mili's famous 1949 photographs of Picasso in his studio working with a "light pencil," where he traces the outline of figures with a flashlight in the space between him and the camera, a process captured through the extended exposure of the film. In both cases, the eye looks over the long line from start to finish.

Since 2009 Reginato has been adding to his open forms, customizing and tricking out the factory models. Now again at Heidi Cho, we can see the conclusion, or rather the latest stopover, of the process.

Back is the color, lending this show its title of "Polychrome." As in that Picasso picture,

Reginato draws and paints in space, here captured in steel rather than photographic emulsion. An artist friend suggested that color makes Reginato's work unmistakable. I agree. Even more than form, color is his signature. He shares a sensibility for the handling of color with his peers of the 1970s loft generation. Gestural brushwork humanizes the coldness of the steel. It's not surprising that Ronnie Landfield, the great lyrical abstractionist, has been a friend of Reginato's since his California days.

In the sculptures now at Heidi Cho, several of them more figure-like than usual, the blended colors appear like the lights reflecting off a figure on a stage, bright and flashy, and sometimes campy and garish.[1] In each sculpture, Reginato starts with an assembly of planes cut in whimsical shapes, much like his older work, but then adds the rods of bent metal. *Hip Shaken Mama* (2010) comes on like a 1 a.m. set performer out to grab attention at all costs. The piece also serves as a case study in the rhythm that Reginato can attach to form, with each part suggesting a different sort of movement. The zig-zag of a narrow strip of body is a tight jitter. The curve at the waist is more a sashay. The rounded bumps of the left leg is a toe tap. The curving metal poles of the right leg and arm are limbs circling around so quickly we detect the movements more than the forms.

The larger *Drunken Angel* (2010) steals the show. The work is almost all bent tube, and there's a mess of it. Rather than merely outlining shape, the rods here trace out movement. The lower half never quite comes together. Too much armature gets used up in a base that seems needlessly clunky. The upper half is a different story. The wings of the figure are spiraling, circulating curves of wire. Just below is another vortex of wire, the air spinning beneath. The figure appears to arch back at the shoulders, chest out. An additional pole curves off the head and back down to the floor, a final flourish that I found distracting up close, if not a little dangerous. Once I backed away it made more sense. I no longer bothered to wonder about each strange, expressive part. After all, it's unwise to question an angel too much, especially at liftoff, especially one that's drunk.

Mel Kendrick is a sculptor of process, but his product was the big hit two years ago in Madison Square Park in Manhattan. In the center oval, the park conservancy temporarily installed five enormous new works, all of the same series called "Markers." The forms were unmistakable Kendrick, shapes he had been working on in wood for several years.

A number of these, in much smaller scale, went on view at David Nolan's former Soho gallery space in 2007. Each began with a cube of wood, which Kendrick cut and cored. Through this process, he extracted an internal section, a constructivist folly of interlocking cylinders. He left the outer cube intact enough to stay square. Kendrick then placed the core on top of the cube, a weighty figure held up on a hollow base of its former self. The pieces had strict internal logic, but I found them a little smug. They were more process than product, slightly too satisfied in their own art smarts.

For the park, Kendrick enlarged these shapes to over ten feet tall. The cube base became human-sized, like a sliced and diced version of Tony Smith's six-foot *Die*. Kendrick also enlivened his surface by creating the work out of alternating layers of black and white poured concrete, like a modernist fantasy of thirteenth-century Siena. With this surface treatment, the works took on a new sense of play. But the real play came after installation. Throughout the run, kids were all over them. They crawled through the carved-up bases and peeked through the holes. They moved through the work the same ways our adult eyes looked it over—usually from a little more distance.

Now at David Nolan's Chelsea space, a survey of earlier works reveals how Kendrick arrived at his monumental park accomplishment.[2] Much like the excellent arte povera artist Giuseppe Penone, Kendrick has a feel for

1 "Polychrome" opened at Heidi Cho Gallery, New York, on March 17 and remains on view through April 16, 2011.

2 "Mel Kendrick: Works from 1995 to Now" opened at David Nolan Gallery, New York, on March 17 and remains on view through April 30, 2011.

the logic of wood. In *Plug and Shell* (2000), he carved up a section of tree trunk, here following the wood grain of the limbs and preserving the vestigial stumps. Rather than stacking the results, he positioned the two parts side by side, the denuded wood on the left and its knobbly bark to the right. He also placed them on alternating bases, one built of stacked cinder-blocks, the other of four metal poles—one solid, the other hollow.

Other pieces have a similar binary relationship, with Kendrick working through different finishes and the question of how precisely to connect the two parts. The two sides of *Plug* (2000) are both stained black, with the shape of the core now less connected to the wood grain of its shell. In *BDF* (1995), the two parts are identical forms of assembled sticks, one a rubber cast of the other.

I found the towering *Black Trunk* (1995), the largest work in the show, to be the most compelling. Here Kendrick took a nearly ten-foot section of large tree, sliced it in smaller pieces, and carved out the center. He then restacked the now hollow tree and carved out a series of dovetail joints. Left open, the joints afforded keyhole glimpses of the interior. They also hinted at a sense of instability, as if someone last minute forgot a very important structural component and a bump could send it toppling over. Yet despite the theater of its display, the dominant feeling was one of arboreal mystery. The sculpture felt like an old-growth giant somewhere deep in the woods. I liked its expressiveness. A large rubbing of the trunk that Kendrick made on paper, displayed on the gallery wall beside it, maintained the binary logic of the show. It also spoke to the more poetic desire to preserve a record of the tree, something to take back out of the forest.

The painter Thornton Willis is a friend. I mention that less in the interest of full disclosure and more just for bragging rights. Willis is the embodiment of true painterly feel—a feel that is actually felt. In his hands the School of Hofmann gets schooled in old-time religion and the healing touch of the primitive South, where Willis was born to an itinerant minister's family in Pensacola in 1936. An evangelical for American abstraction, Willis is now working at his creative peak, quite an accomplishment for an artist who has been producing significant paintings since the 1960s.

One of the qualities I admire in Willis is his ability to change. When other artists would turn on the auto-pilot, he moves on to a new idiom. A few years ago it was prismatic triangles. Then in 2009 he left that for the lattice. His bright colors and dexterous paint-handling created an undulating sea of shallows and deeps, with parts coming forward and others receding in an energized surface. I contributed the catalogue essay for that exhibition.

Now at Elizabeth Harris Gallery for his third solo show there since 2006, Willis is on to his latest "primal, visionary, even shamanistic" accomplishment, as Lance Esplund writes in the catalogue essay.[3] A painter in the city, Willis translates the skyline into a Tetris-like puzzle, giving us cosmopolitan titles like *Gotham Towers* (2009) and *Streetwise* (2010). Yet as in his *Homage to Mondrian* (2009), Willis is more interested in the boogie-woogie of Broadway than in the literal streetscape.

Given the relative complexity of these recent shapes compared to the simpler squares and screens of the lattice series, the paintings with the most saturated, solid forms were the most successful. The more dissolving brushwork that made his earlier work so compelling couldn't quite hold these newest shapes together. *Juggernaut* (2010) was therefore the standout. Not only were the shapes rich in color, but Willis also separated them with heavy black lines. For all the talk of color, Willis knows his black. Rather than lock things down, these heavy lines gave the work its lift, as if forming shadows cast by the colorful shapes, rooftops in the twilight of a summer afternoon. Out of a puzzle of interlocking planes, suddenly there was a mountainscape of the city's vitality inviting us up and up and up.

---

3 "Thornton Willis" opened at Elizabeth Harris Gallery, New York, on March 17 and remains on view through April 23, 2011

Music

New York chronicle

by Jay Nordlinger

I don't think I've ever written about a trumpet recital in these pages. I don't think I've written about a trumpet recital in any pages. They are few and far between. It's a shame, really, because the instrument has a wonderful repertory—a repertory going far beyond the Haydn Concerto (wonderful as that piece is). Also few and far between are trumpeters—solo trumpeters. Years ago, there was only Maurice André, or so it seemed. Then we had Gerard Schwarz—who became a full-time conductor. At some point, we picked up Wynton Marsalis, the starry jazzman, who has made distinguished forays into classical music. And now we have Tine Thing Helseth. She is a young Norwegian woman—twenty-three—and a phenom. An impressive, even an exciting, musician.

She appeared in Weill Recital Hall, the upstairs venue in the building known as Carnegie Hall. (It can get complicated.) In the first half of her recital, she played three trumpet staples, by Martinu, Enescu, and Hindemith. She also played a new piece, written expressly for the occasion. She handled herself like a singer, and I found myself evaluating her as a singer. What I mean is, I noticed onsets, articulation, intonation, breathing, tone (or a variety of tones). I even thought of certain passagework as coloratura! Helseth passed in all departments. She has gobs of technique, and abundant musicality. Her phrasing was particularly admirable. Plus, she has tremendous poise, a dauntlessness.

The new piece was *Here*, by the soloist's fellow Norwegian Rolf Wallin. Our program notes described the piece as "an expression of gratitude for Carnegie Hall and concert halls in general, sanctuaries where the mind is active but distracted." That is a lot for a four-minute trifle to convey. At any rate, *Here* is a respectable trifle, featuring some anxious noodling, then some excited whizzing around.

In the second half of her recital, Helseth turned to music for the voice, transcribed for her own voice, or trumpet. First she played *Haugtussa*, the song cycle by Grieg—"our very own," Helseth said from the stage (meaning that the composer was Norwegian—and not just any Norwegian). She explained that, though we wouldn't be hearing the "beautiful words" of the poet Arne Garborg, "the beautiful music is enough, I think." Is it? I'm not sure. These are, indeed, songs—songs with words. But as songs without words, they are adequate, at least. As she played *Haugtussa*, Helseth had a problem or two. Some impurities sneaked in. For instance, she stopped phonating—making sound—at one point. But these problems were hardly major. They kind of popped out at you because the first half of the recital had been immaculate. Helseth may have been experiencing some lip fatigue.

She got a rest when her pianist played some solo pieces of Grieg—more song transcriptions, these for the piano alone. The pianist was another Norwegian, Håvard Gimse. (Do you know the motto of Haverford College? I learned it from an alumnus: "No, I did *not* say Harvard!") All evening long, Gimse was

keen, alert, alive—a tasteful and trustworthy player. You could do worse than hear him in a recital of his own.

When Helseth returned, she played Falla's *Siete canciones populares españolas*. She did not sound tired: She sounded eagerly and colorfully Spanish. Then she played two encores, also Spanish, or almost Spanish—two pieces by Piazzolla, the Argentinian tango master. In these works, she was alternately sultry and spicy. Not very Norwegian (meaning no offense to that sturdy and worthy northern race).

As Helseth was playing *Haugtussa*, I had a voice in my head. This was not deliberate; it was totally involuntary. I was "listening to" Anne Sofie von Otter, the Swedish mezzo, who sings that cycle so well. Oddly enough, she appeared in Carnegie Hall—in Zankel Hall, Carnegie's "basement" venue—the very next night. And she began her recital with Grieg: not something from *Haugtussa*, but Grieg nevertheless. She went on to songs by a couple of Swedish composers. No one is better in the Scandinavian repertory than she. But she is no specialist—the farthest thing from it. Virtually every repertory is her repertory, because she is one of the most cosmopolitan and versatile singers we have. She seems at home in every language, every style. She just slips into a different skin.

Does she sound like she always has? No and yes. No in that, at this stage of her career, the voice is smaller and somewhat frayed. Yes in that she still has the technical security, intelligence, and musicality that make her von Otter. In some of the Scandinavian songs, she sounded like some Nordic goddess-sage. Her gifts of communication—her way with music and her way with words—are very rare.

Her pianist was Brad Mehldau, who is mainly known as a jazz composer. He and von Otter have collaborated often. Unfortunately, in this first half of the program, Mehldau was simply too loud. You may remember how Gerald Moore titled one of his memoirs: "Am I Too Loud?" Mehldau made no attempt to accommodate his singer, and the lid on the piano was sky-high. This was an error. He covered a singer who was singing with modest volume, and whom we had all come to hear. Otherwise, he proved a passable accompanist. He also, on this first half, played two Brahms pieces on his own. He was less passable there. He is not a pianist like Håvard Gimse. He is something else. But his obvious sincerity, and talent, are not to be gainsaid. He and von Otter closed out the first half with songs of Brahms and Strauss. Is she a lieder singer? Oh, my.

The second half began with songs of Mehldau himself: *Love Songs*, to texts by Sara Teasdale. As far as I'm aware, von Otter and Renée Fleming are the two foremost champions of Mehldau's songs (meaning, of his songs in general). It would be hard to ask for two better champions. The *Love Songs* are pleasant, though they may not stick to your ribs. I would describe them as jazzy art songs, or arty jazz songs. And here is just one detail about von Otter's singing: When she sustains a note, *piano*, she retains the pitch. She does not sag. This is not all that common, even among high-echelon singers.

After Mehldau came a bouquet of jazz and pop songs: by Michel Legrand, Jacques Brel, Paul McCartney, others. Von Otter was a chameleon. She is a singer who avails herself of all of music, who is a gobbler of music. Barbara Bonney, the American soprano, is another. Strangely enough, in this second half of the program—starting with his own songs—Mehldau was not too loud. He was natural and sensitive. Von Otter likes to sing a Swedish version of "Walkin' My Baby Back Home," and she sings it deliciously. She also did a Joni Mitchell song, "Marcie." (Do you know who else loves Mitchell? Fleming. The composer Lee Hoiby loves her, too.) And I should mention "What Are You Doing the Rest of Your Life?" Von Otter sang it with what I can only call killer subduedness.

She ended with Richard Rodgers: "Something Good," from *The Sound of Music*. And here, in my opinion, she departed for the first time from taste. She kind of gilded the lily, laid it on too thick. You know what I mean: She oversang this little thing. But, for a couple of hours, she had given a clinic in how to sing songs.

Not long after, the Philadelphia Orchestra came into Carnegie Hall—into Carnegie Hall proper, the main auditorium. Leading them was their chief conductor, Charles Dutoit, the veteran Swiss. He began with a composer for whom he is known: Berlioz. This was the overture to *Béatrice et Bénédicte*, the composer's take on *Much Ado About Nothing*. The overture is touched by gaiety, charm, impishness, whimsy. From Dutoit, it was a little bit sober—but it was still itself. And the Philadelphia Orchestra was a well-oiled machine in it. They also made a beautiful sound. Was it the Philadelphia Sound, that cherished sound of old? I can't quite say, but it was beautiful, regardless.

After this brief and endearing curtain-raiser, we heard a new work by James MacMillan, the Scottish composer. On offer was a violin concerto—written in memory of the composer's late mother. I ask, How do you criticize such a work? Anyway, MacMillan is an interesting composer, and an interesting man. He has stood apart from the crowd. He is religious, and has composed much religious, or religion-inspired, music. And he has refused to be subject to modernist dictates. Two years ago, *Standpoint* magazine in Britain published "Music and Modernity," a long, searching statement by MacMillan. Here are two extracts: "The liberal elites who control the commanding heights of culture and criticism have an instinctive anxiety about religion." And, "The modernist hierarchy is still so powerful in places such as German radio stations and German and French New Music festivals that it acts like a politburo." Many musicians say these things (believe me). But they say them in whispers, to confidants. To say them publicly is extraordinary.

MacMillan's violin concerto is in three movements, marked Dance, Song, and Song and Dance. I will relate the briefest of impressions. The first movement, that Dance, is vehement, fierce, warlike. It does not skimp on the percussion. The second movement is a song indeed—sprinkled with fairy dust, courtesy of some chimes, or chime-like instruments. At various points, the work seems very Scottish: as though it could accompany *Braveheart* (the 1995 Mel Gibson movie). The last movement, that Song and Dance, is unusual, not to say eccentric. Orchestra members do some chanting in German. The music has much anger, and a hint—I swear—of doo-wah. Toward the end, there is an amplified female voice. All of this seems raw and personal—also unknowable. The composer knows exactly what he's doing. It's all in his head. Whether it is communicated to a listener—an outsider—is something else. The soloist in this Carnegie Hall performance was Vadim Repin, the Russian violinist. He is, in fact, the dedicatee of the work. We can assume that he played it as the composer wants.

After intermission, Dutoit led the orchestra in Tchaikovsky's Fifth Symphony—a stirring piece, after ten hearings, a hundred hearings, a thousand hearings . . . Shortly before he left the music directorship of the New York Philharmonic, I did an interview with Lorin Maazel. I asked him about conducting very familiar music. Take Tchaikovsky's Fifth: Was it still glorious and thrilling to him? He said, "It's as glorious and thrilling as the day it was written." And "if you become jaded because of overexposure, the problem is yours, not the composer's." The symphony has a very prominent clarinet part, and the Philadelphia Orchestra has a very prominent clarinetist: Ricardo Morales, who used to work in the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra. It was a privilege to hear Morales, night after night, in the opera pit. I was looking forward to hearing him in the Tchaikovsky: and he did his part splendidly. Also coming through was Jennifer Montone, the principal horn.

Very much coming through was Charles Dutoit. By the evidence, he does not regard this symphony as cheap or worn out. In his hands, it was fresh, alive, insinuating, robust—a knockout. The first two movements were unimpeachable. In my view, the third, that waltz, could have been a little swirlier, frothier. It was a little boxy and stiff. The finale was somewhat boxy too, without that impression of flying it can convey. But Du-

toit, on the whole, was magnificent. I got to thinking I had underrated him. And, from first note to last, the Philadelphia Orchestra gave us a soundbath—in addition to ample virtuosity. I had the feeling I was listening to a great orchestra. I had not had that feeling, with the "Fabulous Philadelphians," as we used to know them, in some time.

In the Metropolitan Museum, Nicholas Angelich gave a recital. He is an American pianist, who had much of his training in France. He opened his recital with a beloved Bach-Busoni piece, "Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland." It has been a recital-opener for generations, as well as an encore. A pianist should avoid plodding and thumping in it, and Angelich largely did. He exhibited one bad habit: the habit of inserting little pauses before top notes (top or cresting or climactic notes in phrases). This gets tiresome in a hurry. Generally, he let the piece proceed in its holy way. He did probably as much pedaling as you can do without overpedaling.

He continued his recital with untranscribed Bach, the English Suite in A minor. He really laid into the Prelude, rendering it in a clattering, insistent, almost percussive way. This was unorthodox, and maybe a little coarse, but interesting. Throughout the suite, he showed understanding and care. All of Bach's voices, inner and outer, were heard. The A-major Bourée had its angelic quality. But I will point out another habit, and not a good one: the habit of making little surges in sound. Angelich did this a lot. And, like the pauses before top notes, the surges grow tiresome, quickly.

Angelich played two sets of Chopin: three nocturnes and four études. He played them with clarity, reason, sensitivity. Personally, I don't think extended rubato—looseness with time—is desirable at the beginning of a nocturne. I think relative straightness is desirable, leaving room for rubato later. Angelich disagrees. Sometimes, he played with a lack of cantabile, a lack of singing—a phrase or note would lie dead on the keyboard. Sometimes you could have asked for more panache, more flair. I am picking on this pianist. But he is a commendable one, with good fingers and a good head. He did some really spiffy playing—for instance, in the "Aeolian Harp" étude, which was wonderfully floaty. Also, you sense that Angelich is a serious musician. There is a seriousness of purpose about his playing. And I will add a footnote: He bows deep, as musicians used to. A nice old-fashioned touch.

Carnegie Hall put on another night of MacMillan—in fact, a night of MacMillan only. Three pieces of his were performed in Zankel Hall. The concert began at 7:30—sort of. What began at 7:30 was a tête-à-tête onstage, between a Carnegie official and the composer. This was unadvertised, as far as I know. The music did not begin until 8:00. You were stuck in a pre-concert talk until then, whether you wanted one or not. Everyone is doing this, as you know: The performance of modern music is practically verboten without talk. Even traditional classical music is increasingly accompanied by, or preceded by, talk. Now, MacMillan is a very good talker. And it is a pleasure to listen to his Scottish English: very musical. But talking about composition, or other aspects of music, can deaden a musical evening, in my view. Can kill it dead, right from the beginning. Moreover, MacMillan said nothing that could not have been learned from the program notes.

Would you like a sample of how composers talk, some of them? In this period, the New York Philharmonic performed a piece by Erkki-Sven Tüür, an Estonian. The program booklet included these words of his:

> Why vectorial? An important role in voice leading is played by the position on the "blueprint" of the various directions and "curves." I perceive them as vectors, which are defined by intervals (which are in turn indicated by a sequence of numbers). In any case, what one hears (especially in the harmonies) is very different from the "meta-linguistic" work of the past decade.

That does not exactly make the heart—or most hearts—leap for music. By contrast, in this same period, a Carnegie Hall booklet featured

an interview with James Taylor, the folk-rock-pop legend. He said, "A trick that I seem to have used over and over again is to juxtapose a cheerful musical style with a grave or heavy lyrical content. These things are so beyond description and analysis. It's just that people really do come through when they sing." I smiled at the wisdom and humility of that.

The first work on the MacMillan program was a piano sonata, written in 1985. It includes certain sound clusters, and is quasi-Impressionistic. I also found it Scriabinesque. I believe it is too long, for the materials it works with, but this is not a frivolous piece, or a waste of a piece. (How's that for high praise, huh?) After the sonata, five suited men came out to move the piano and set up a few music stands and chairs. As they did this, I was guessing at the cost—not low, I wager. We then heard MacMillan's Horn Quintet, composed in 2007. It contains what I think of as some MacMillan hallmarks: playfulness, ferocity, sharpness of rhythm. Along the way, a drunken waltz appears. And at the end, the hornist walks offstage, still playing. I thought this was a little gimmicky. But then I remembered, "Well, Mahler has plenty of brass play offstage."

To conclude the evening was a song cycle with chamber ensemble: *Raising Sparks* (1997). The texts are by Michael Symmons Roberts, drawing on an eighteenth-century Hasidic rabbi and mystic, Menahem Nahum of Chernobyl. A creation story is being told. The songs are often disturbing—"challenging," to use a cliché—which I think the composer intends. At times, I thought, "This is worthy of attention." At other times, I thought, "What dreadful dreck. How do they get away with it?" No matter what I think, or what others think, there is life in this man—in James MacMillan. I think that accounts for his popularity around the world. There is someone at home inside, a questing mind, and a beating heart. About every composer, you can't be sure.

Until last season, the Metropolitan Opera had never staged Rossini's *Armida*. The company staged it for one of its star sopranos, Renée Fleming. And the Met brought back *Armida* this season—Fleming, too. The opera requires a formidable soprano in the title role, of course. It also requires six—count 'em, six—tenors. And not just any tenors, but Rossini tenors. Another Rossini opera, *Otello*—not to be confused with Verdi's—requires six too. But I will now say something that readers, I'm afraid, have heard me say over and over: The most important person in most any opera performance is the conductor. Not a singer, but the man in the pit, leading it all. On him, an evening often rises or falls. He is "the straw that stirs the drink," to borrow from Reggie Jackson. And the night I attended the Met's *Armida* this season, Maestro Riccardo Frizza was not at his best. The overture was feeble. And much of the subsequent conducting was flaccid—not intolerable, not incompetent, but limp. Frizza will have, and has had, better nights.

The tenors in this opera battle with their high B's, C's, and D's, as well as with their swords. Leading the pack as Rinaldo was Lawrence Brownlee, who started capably and finished fantastically. He can execute passagework with almost eerie smoothness. And La Renée? It is not given to every lush Strauss singer, which she is, to have a bel canto and coloratura gift, too. Fleming takes advantage of all her gifts. Like von Otter, she is a gobbler of all music, or much music. As Armida, she was exemplary in her breathing and exemplary in her rhythm. She sometimes imparts a touch of jazz, no matter what she is singing. (Lorin Maazel is another musician who does this.) At the end, when it really counted, Fleming poured on voice. Taking her bows, she was all charged up, as if knowing it had gone well: It had.

The production, you may remember, is the responsibility of Mary Zimmerman. And her *Armida* is jokey, campy, a little Dr. Seussy. I like a lot about it. It gives you plenty to look at, whatever its suitability to the story. But to the slo-mo swordplay, I am not quite reconciled. Maybe on a third visit?

The media

Cerebofacturers

by James Bowman

As winter turned to spring and the promise of something not too remote from democracy in Egypt and Tunisia remained as yet mostly unsullied by intimations of brutality, misogyny, Islamic fanaticism, and a renewal of tyranny, the two predominant matters of media interest were the popular rebellion against the Libyan dictator Moammar Gaddafi and the public pronouncements of the actor Charlie Sheen. I am not the first to notice certain similarities between the two central figures in these stories. Tina Brown's new, slicker, up-market, *Vanity Fair*–like *Newsweek*—the cover of whose first issue, like that of her ill-fated *Talk* magazine, featured the perfectly made-up physiognomy of Hillary Clinton ("How she's shattering glass ceilings everywhere")—kindly offered to instruct readers in "What Charlie Sheen's Meltdown Means for. . ." those who will be affected by it.

These include the gentleman himself ("This pileup is only the latest detour on Sheen's lifetime of adventures"), the rest of the Sheens, CBS, the rest of television, the women in his life and—the Libyan strongman:

> Few people should be as thankful for Sheen's theatrics as Gaddafi, who promises to fight to the end to keep his stranglehold over Libya. Just as Michael Jackson's death crowded out coverage of Iran's Green Revolution in 2009, so too has Sheen's spiral pushed Gaddafi off U.S. television screens. Sheen, for all his distance from reality, didn't miss the oddness here. "It's a little bizarre turning on the news and I'm the lead story," he said. "I'm thinking, 'The world is upside down.' But I guess that shows the power of the business I'm in."

Actually, I think he did miss the oddness. As did *Newsweek*. For the oddness is that there is no oddness. It is a mere affectation on both their parts to treat the idea that historic, world-transforming events might turn on the media's fascination with the dissolute behavior of a drug-besotted celebrity half a world away as unprecedented or even remarkable. Mr. Sheen's pretense of surprise at finding himself associated with or even involved in epoch-making revolutionary happenings is just an oblique reflection of his quasi-clinical delusions of grandeur.

These delusions, by the way, are only the most obvious things that he shares with Colonel Gaddafi. In *The Guardian*, Richard Adams offered a brain-teasing quiz, inviting readers to try to distinguish between various public pronouncements of the two men. If you happened not to have heard them in their original contexts, the attribution of these sayings to one or the other might have caused some little difficulty, although comically mixed metaphors ("These resentments, they are the rocket fuel that lives in the tip of my sabre") were more likely to be the work of the chief impresario and star of the forthcoming (to Detroit and Chicago at the time of writing) "My Violent Torpedo of Truth/ Defeat is Not An Option Show" while ex-

travagantly inapt comparisons ("I am like the Queen of England") were more likely to be a product of the Brotherly Leader and Guide of the First of September Great Revolution of the Socialist People's Libyan Arab Jamahiriya.

Back when media coverage of the death of Michael Jackson was crowding out coverage of Iran's Green Revolution, according to *Newsweek*, Andrew Calcutt wrote in *Spiked Online* that the overwhelming public interest in the late King of Pop's demise was owing to the fact that his childishness and obsession with making and remaking his public image were emblematic of our culture.

> In the West we really do live in a world of representation, where making a spectacle of ourselves is considered the greatest achievement. This makes Michael Jackson one of the highest achievers in the Western way of life, and it would be perverse not to comment on the relation between this high flier and the underachieving society which gave him his wings.

The same is of course true of Charlie Sheen who, though he is not yet dead, owes at least some of the fascination he exerts over his ever-growing public to the likelihood, given the apparently gargantuan scale of his self-indulgences, that he soon will be. I wonder if there could be any connection to the likelihood, at the time of writing, that the Iranian and Libyan revolutions will also turn out the same way—and, once again while the world superpower is busying itself with other matters?

The only obvious match among the ten sentences on Mr. Adams's *Guardian* quiz was the last, the contention that 9/11 was an "absolute fairytale, a complete work of fiction." That had to be Mr. Sheen (as, indeed, it was), since the Brotherly Leader early on had committed himself to the view that al-Qaeda was also behind the rebellion against his own brotherly leadership. Though he may have been as mad as Charlie Sheen, there was no shortage of experts advising against American involvement in what swiftly became a Libyan civil war who thought he was on to something. Ross Douthat of *The New York Times*, for example, pointed to a study of the Center for a New American Security showing that "Eastern Libya, the locus of the rebellion, sent more foreign fighters per capita to join the Iraqi insurgency than any other region in the Arab world." At any rate, the dictator seemed to have been successful in deprecating any serious American or allied involvement on behalf of the militarily unprepared rebels he and his Russian-trained and -equipped army and air force slaughtered in their hundreds, thanks to the one glass ceiling that Hillary Clinton thought not worth shattering: that which protected the Libyan Air Force from interference with its task of suppressing the rebellion.

Boastfulness and a florid rhetorical style were not all that Mr. Sheen and Colonel Gaddafi had in common. If each had (like Michael Jackson) a quasi-psychotic attachment to his own fantasy world, the two fantasies were also weirdly similar, as was their reason for holding on to them so tightly. Both, that is, offered a certain protection from unpleasant realities and both were based upon a founding narrative of the culture that each man shared with his less addlepated fellow countrymen. That word, "narrative," is much overused these days, I know, but it is sometimes vital because it reminds us that certain kinds of realities have to be manufactured. This is not in itself a bad thing and does not mean that these manufactured realities are less real than the raw or unmediated kind. Scientific narratives, for example, are necessary in order to make sense of what would otherwise be the incomprehensible welter of discrete measurements that are the scientist's raw materials. But the process of manufacture—or, to be more precise, cerebrofacture—is highly susceptible to corruption by those who engage in it with the kind of preconceived agenda and set of expectations that are associated with ideology, including the progressive ideology.

And it is different versions of the progressive ideology that both Charlie Sheen and Colonel Gaddafi were depending upon for

their self-justification. The founding narrative of the Socialist People's Libyan Arab Jamahiriya was anti-colonialism. Robert Fisk of *The Independent* of London wrote of how the Colonel, even in the midst of the rebellion that threatened his dictatorship, represented himself as the protector of his people from outsiders and invoked the spirit of the Libyan hero Omar Mukhtar, hanged by Mussolini's Italian occupiers eighty years ago, against the outsiders of al-Qaeda who, he imagined, were seducing his otherwise contented people away from him. Colonel Gaddafi needs the bare shadow of Libya's imperial history in order to counter the rebels by portraying himself as rebel—even though, ironically enough, the Italy of today under Signore Berlusconi is his régime's staunchest European friend. Karima el-Mahroug, the Moroccan teenage prostitute also known as Ruby the Heartbreaker from the Italian Prime Minister's notorious bunga bunga parties is said to have testified that "Silvio told me that he'd copied that formula from [Gaddafi]. . . It's a ritual of his African harem." Now who is colonizing whom?

Just as the Colonel depends on the bogeyman of European colonialism, so does Charlie Sheen depend on that of the equally remote—both were casualties of the revolutionary 1960s. Official culture in America, for the founding narrative of today's popular culture also involves a noble rebellion of the oppressed. Without the success of the free, egalitarian, life-affirming unofficial culture of yesteryear against the "uptight" and "repressive" official culture, Charlie Sheen would be unimaginable, and he depends as much on the pretense of this long-defunct cultural regime's continued existence as Colonel Gaddafi does. It's what makes him an interesting, rebellious, "transgressive" pop culture hero and not just a poor, self-destructive, strung-out nutbag. In this sense, his claim to be a "total rock star from Mars" with "tiger blood" had a certain truth to it, since rock stars who come from nearer to home and whose blood is anthropoid have been waving the same bloody shirt for almost half a century, ever since the official culture pronounced its dying benediction upon the noble cause of removing the stigma of hypocrisy from youthful self-indulgence and quietly gave up the ghost.

The paradox of the triumphant succession to officialdom of what was formerly and for centuries suppressed as unofficial and disreputable is that the latter requires a kind of zombified specter of its long-dead predecessor to remain ever before the public as the guarantor of its own legitimacy, just as the Guide of the First of September Great Revolution depends upon the specter of Mussolini's now laughable conceit of the Mediterranean as *Mare Nostrum*. The frequent identification of the forces of reaction with "fascism" by both sorts of *soi-disant* revolutionaries is therefore an essential part of their rhetorical strategy and not just the sort of "incivility" of which I have written perhaps too much in this space recently (see "Rise of the Trolls" and "Madness & the Media Mind" in the January and February 2011 numbers of *The New Criterion*). "Trolls," by the way, are what Charlie Sheen calls his critics and enemies and therefore, presumably, no longer (as I said two months ago) refers to the anonymous devotees of what used to be called "flaming" on the Internet. It will be interesting to see which of these two usages has the greater staying-power.

Another example of the extent to which our culture depends on validation by at least the pretense of rebellion turned up in the scandal which overtook National Public Radio when James O'Keefe, the prankster who had earlier played similar tricks on Planned Parenthood and ACORN, revealed that the network's chief fundraiser, Ron Schiller, held Tea Party members in contempt. "The Tea Party is fanatically involved in people's personal lives and very fundamental Christian—I wouldn't even call it Christian. It's this weird evangelical kind of movement," he told two of Mr. O'Keefe's associates posing as wealthy Muslim would-be donors, adding that the Tea Partiers weren't "just Islamophobic, but really xenophobic, I mean basically they are, they believe in sort of white,

middle-America gun-toting. I mean, it's scary. They're seriously racist, racist people."

Now none of this is anything that hasn't been said routinely by others in the media ever since the Tea Party emerged two years ago, nor is it possible that anyone could have been surprised to learn of Mr. Schiller's fashionably lefty opinions. The surprise would have been if someone associated with NPR held any other view of the Tea Party. But Mr. Schiller was seen as speaking for the network itself and therefore not only lost his own job but also brought down his boss and (unrelated) namesake, Vivian Schiller, who had already been weakened by her role in the firing of Juan Williams last autumn. The official media protocol requires that the pretense of NPR's objective and unbiased view of contemporary politics should be upheld at all times and even more fervently than the same pretense is upheld with respect to the other broadcast networks—except for Fox, of course, whose conservative bias is equally well-established by the media consensus of today.

The reason must have to do with the founding narrative of NPR, which also dates from the 1960s and has to do with "public" broadcasting's liberation from the corporate bondage imposed upon its commercial brethren. Nobody minds that the government-sponsored broadcasters rattle their tin cups before the same corporate behemoths which their own advertising—that which is not itself directly corporate-sponsored—brags of their independence from. Such high-class commercials—"made possible by a grant from" sounds so much better than "brought to you by"—have never been allowed to interfere with the public broadcasters' stirring story of their freedom from commercial pressures any more than their news operations' membership in good standing of the same media culture as that which prevails at other "mainstream" news outlets has been taken by anyone—or anyone who is not merely sniping from the right-wing media ghetto—to compromise their claim to the sort of special status presupposed by their government subsidy.

Thus Andrea Mitchell took the opportunity of an NBC interview with the House minority whip Steny Hoyer to decry the presumptive renewal and redoubling of the House Republicans' already mooted determination to defund NPR in the wake of the scandal by saying that "nobody is suggesting that their journalism has been at all biased." The sad thing is that she probably thinks this is true—"nobody" being for her, as for Ron Schiller, only those right-wing bigots to whom she (therefore) pays no attention. Certainly nobody *she* reads or watches is suggesting it—not because it isn't true but because she finds it as natural as NPR does to identify its critics with those "xenophobic" and "racist" Tea Partiers whose alleged bigotry, based on no visible evidence, is a rationale for ignoring their views on other subjects. Mr. Schiller's portrayal of them in such terms was thus not just a personal opinion of his own or even an opinion shared by the majority of those who work at NPR or in the media generally. In this sense, he might even have been right when he issued an apology on his resignation claiming that "I made statements [that are] not reflective of my own beliefs." Whether or not the statements were reflective of his own beliefs, they were as necessary and foundational a fiction for NPR as that of its freedom from corporate sponsorship, as they established that those most likely to deprive it of its government subsidy were self-discrediting.

That's also why, among the other embarrassing things that he said on Mr. O'Keefe's tape was that he was "proud" of the firing of Mr. Williams, because it showed that

> what NPR stood for is non-racist, non-bigoted, straightforward telling of the news. Our feeling is that if a person expresses his or her opinion, which anyone is entitled to do in a free society, they are compromised as a journalist, they can no longer fairly report. [Mr. Williams] lost all credibility and that breaks your basic ethics as a journalist

This identification of the unbiased with the unbigoted is a neat elision which also helps

to preserve the progressive conceit that bias is only of one sort. If resistance to the progressive agenda amounts to xenophobia and bigotry, then a passionate commitment to the same amounts to a "non-racist, non-bigoted, straightforward telling of the news." Colonel Gaddafi attempts to discredit those who say what he doesn't want to hear by identifying them with Islamicist terrorists; NPR, like others of the progressive persuasion, attempts to discredit those who say what it doesn't want to hear by identifying them with racists and bigots. Either way it's a useful technique for dodging unwelcome realities.

The other criticism Mr. Schiller made of the Tea Party, also a familiar one on the left against the right, was that it was "anti-intellectual." I have always considered myself proudly anti-intellectual on account of the historical association between those who describe themselves as "intellectuals" and the sort of utopian projectors whose intellects have been devoted to designing for me a better way to live my life than I could come up with on my own. But "anti-intellectual" is another characteristically progressive elision meant to suggest anti-intellect, anti-intelligence, anti-educational—even anti-rational. Thus Mr. Schiller told his supposedly Muslim interlocutors that what he was "most disappointed by in this country" was "that the educated, so-called elite in this country is too small a percentage of the population, so that you have this very large uneducated part of the population that carries these ideas"—meaning the ideas of the Tea Party bigots.

There are certain problems that arise when you identify education and intelligence with virtue and good sense, and one of them is that you begin to think yourself immune from stupidity. Among the casualties of the Libyan revolution was Howard Davies, Director of the London School of Economics, whose prestigious institution was revealed to have the kind of close ties with the Gaddafi régime that Ron Schiller could only dream of forming with Mr. O'Keefe's fake Islamicist philanthropists. It was widely supposed, in the one case as in the other, that the motive for these serious institutional "mistakes" which cost the top people their jobs was money. But I think that Daniel Finkelstein of *The Times* of London was closer to the mark when he wrote that the LSE scandal was one where it didn't make sense to "follow the money" as the intrepid Watergate sleuths in *All the President's Men* were advised, but rather to "follow the stupid ideas." Now there's a job for an intellectual.

Forthcoming in *The New Criterion*:

Carne-Ross reconsidered *by John Talbot*
Controversy at the Smithsonian *by Judith Dobrzynski*
Mayhew's London *by Alexandra Mullen*
Fiction chronicle *by Stefan Beck*
New poems *by David Mason & Richard Tillinghast*

Books

Tocqueville in private

by Daniel J. Mahoney

The writings of Alexis de Tocqueville are widely recognized as an indispensable resource for coming to terms with the political and spiritual condition of modern man. To be sure, some commentators continue to read him merely as the author of a travelogue, albeit one that is still remarkably relevant, rather than as the political philosopher and political sociologist that he was. The "making of democracy in America" included prodigious amounts of reading and reflection; it was much, much more than a simple chronicling of his experiences in the United States between May 1831 and February 1832. The nineteenth-century French statesman and political thinker Pierre Paul Royer-Collard was more on mark when he compared Tocqueville's achievement in *Democracy in America* to Aristotle's *Politics* and Montesquieu's *The Spirit of the Laws*.

Tocqueville kept two verbatim notebooks of the conversations he had with a host of American interlocutors from the famous (President Jackson, Daniel Webster, John Quincy Adams, Charles Carroll of Carrrolltown) to those influential or intellectually astute figures who could illuminate essential features of American life and politics (John Spencer, Jared Sparks, and Francis Lieber come to mind). He also wrote charming and instructive letters from North America to his family and friends, which he requested be kept safe. Without the firsthand experience of American things, *Democracy in America* would lack texture and a sure feel for what was truly distinctive about American democracy.

A new volume of the letters has been assembled in *Letters from America*, ably translated by Frederick Brown, a biographer of Zola and Flaubert and the author of a recent book on the "culture wars" in the age of Dreyfus.[1] They are of interest above all because they illumine the great work *Democracy in America*—and Tocqueville's political reflection more broadly. Many of the most important themes of Tocqueville's masterwork were broached for the very first time in his letters home. The ostensible reason for Tocqueville's visit may have been to write a report on American prisons but his deeper purpose was to explore the feverish new world which was American democracy. To be sure, Tocqueville and his friend and travel companion Gustave de Beaumont have much to say in these letters about the discipline and efficiency of the American prisons of that time, as well as about the arbitrariness ultimately underlying a system where prisoners worked in silence. But Tocqueville writes in one of his letters, "there is more in our minds than prisons."

From the beginning, the two young Frenchmen had a major work on America and American democracy in mind, a possibility they repeatedly raise in their correspondence. Near the beginning of their trip, Beaumont wrote to his father that he and

1 *Letters from America* by Alexis de Tocqueville, edited, translated, and with an introduction by Frederick Brown; Yale University Press, $28.

Tocqueville were "meditating great projects." And as they prepared to return home in the winter of 1832, Tocqueville raised the possibility yet again of writing a book about America that would be "of permanent interest and of moment."

Initially, the two friends imagined a joint work, much as they freely collaborated on *Du système pénitentiare aux Étas-Unis et de son application en France* (1833). Beaumont split off to write a novel (of sorts) on manners and morals in the United States, *Marie: or, Slavery in the United States* (1835), a penetrating and moving account of the connection between racial injustice and majority tyranny. Tocqueville pursued the book on American democracy on his own. The work became a classic of political philosophy, the first great work of political philosophy to make democracy its explicit theme, as Mill pointed out in his review of the first volume of *Democracy in America* in 1835.

Harvey Mansfield has suggested that this parting of ways was integrally related to the fact that Tocqueville's genius needed a vehicle all its own. But as Beaumont's letters in this volume demonstrate, he was also a thinker and portraitist of talent and insight. His observations about American manners and morals are astute, and they provide independent confirmation for many of Tocqueville's fundamental insights. Beaumont writes with particular sensitivity on the plight of Indians and blacks in the United States—the one the victim of the encounter of civilization with natural freedom, the other a reminder that democracy can give rise to new forms of injustice and pride. He was moved by the suffering of a once-proud people even as he commented over and over again that Indian women do not in the least resemble the beauties described in Chateaubriand's *Atala*.

These sad themes are, of course, also Tocqueville's. One letter in particular, written to his mother from Memphis and dated December 25, 1831, provides a poignant eyewitness account of the "spectacle of ruin and destruction" that accompanied the forced deportation of the Choctaw people to the American West. In important respects, Tocqueville and Beaumont embodied what Raymond Aron called the "humanitarianism of the aristocrat."

Above all, Beaumont was Tocqueville's trusted friend and interlocutor who held up a mirror to his friend's soul. On April 25, 1831, a mere three weeks after Tocqueville and Beaumont had set sail from Le Havre in France, Beaumont wrote to his father that "Tocqueville is truly a man of distinction, remarkable for his loftiness of intellect and nobility of soul." He added that the "better I know him the more I like him." In the course of their long friendship, Beaumont never changed that judgment.

The two had first become close as young lawyers at Versailles, but their friendship deepened during their sojourn in North America. They were keen observers of young women and enjoyed flirting with them (while making a somewhat humorous point of their admirable self-restraint). Beaumont lovingly cared for Tocqueville when he became sick during the trip. This friendship and intellectual partnership continued even after Tocqueville's death when Beaumont edited the first edition of Tocqueville's *Collected Works* (1865–67). The letters allow us to see from the inside one of the great and consequential friendships of all time, one perhaps rivaled only by the no less fundamental but undoubtedly less salutary intellectual partnership between Marx and Engels.

The letters also provide a rich account of a commercial people who are always in motion. The observations they make about Jacksonian Americans are fully recognizable in Americans today. There is, Tocqueville suggests, something feverish about the pace of American life. Americans are fickle and not given to profound thought, yet, at the same time, they are remarkably "disciplined" by their need to make their way in the world. Tocqueville and Beaumont are struck by the coexistence in the American soul of unbridled self-interest with respect for rule of law, of an unflagging desire for material gain with a relative "purity of mores" in domestic life. These accounts in the letters do justice to

these paradoxes. For instance, Tocqueville writes that American women, at least married women, are dull (he returns to this point a little condescendingly in letters to his sister-in-law), but he also says that they are the true guardians of public and private mores. There is more wit and élan in the French aristocracy, but more decency and solidity in the democratic family. Moreover, there is no group of idle rich who dedicate themselves exclusively to seduction.

Tocqueville does not recommend America for its cultural achievement. Fine arts are in their "infancy," American food is "barbaric," and Americans are often uncouth. But Tocqueville does not let these "superficial" considerations, as he calls them, undermine his judgment that the country is home to a great people and civilization. Tocqueville describes what is truly a "new world," one that gives hope that the "irresistible" movement of the modern world toward democratic social conditions might be compatible with the preservation of liberty and human dignity.

As more than a few letters make clear, he did not think it was possible or desirable for the French, the product of a long, ancient, and honorable civilization, to *imitate* American institutions or mores. Tocqueville appreciated the sheer diversity of the human world too much to support such a leveling and homogenizing project. But he hoped that his fellow aristocrats could learn from the American experience to support what is best in democratic self-government, particularly the "communal system," a mostly decentralized system that allowed for the vigorous exercise of local liberty. America is indeed a "new world," but it anticipates some aspects of Europe's future and provides evidence that democracy need not mean revolutionary chaos or the final degradation of the human spirit.

Tocqueville cannot, however, endorse the exaggerated pride of Americans nor their uncritical belief in democratic progress and human "perfectibility." In a letter to his cousin Louis Kergorlay dated June 29, 1831, Tocqueville goes so far as to say that there are no real "beliefs"—ancient mores, settled traditions, deep-rooted memories—in America, except for the belief in the self-evident rightness of republican government and the truth of human perfectibility. Nor can Tocqueville share the American democrat's faith in the inherent good sense of the people. He knows that statecraft depends upon "a special kind of knowledge"—a tradition of prudent statecraft—that is not available to the masses as such. Still, he appreciates the *political* superiority of the American model since the people are both enlightened and supportive of those structures and restraints that allow self-government to flourish. As Joseph Epstein has written, Tocqueville's endorsement of democracy is never "ebullient," but it is all the more sincere and convincing for its sobriety.

Tocqueville's correspondence also reveals his preoccupation with the fate of religion in America. From his first days in the United States in May 1831 he was struck by the growing presence and self-confidence of Catholicism in America. The church was on the rise everywhere, in the bustling city of 240,000 people that was New York (where all the Catholics had once fit into the chapel of the Spanish consul), in traditionally Protestant Boston, and on the frontier in Michigan territory. It was buttressed by immigration and by a growing number of conversions. Tocqueville draws a portrait of a religion that has not yet reduced itself to moral platitudes (as so many Protestant sects had done) and was not unduly concerned with democratic civilities.

In one of the letters, he provides a touching portrait of a Roman Catholic priest—Father Mullon—who travelled hundreds of miles to the upper peninsula of Michigan to do verbal battle with the local Presbyterians. American Catholics, like their co-religionists in the old world, were convinced that they had a monopoly on the truth. At the same time, they were good republicans who accepted the separation of church and state and who did not challenge the democratic civil religion at the heart of the American political order.

It is also in the letters that Tocqueville first introduces a point that is central to his analysis of religion in Volume Two of *Democracy in America*: Protestantism, in contrast to

Catholicism, is inherently ambivalent, torn between the requirements of dogma and individual consent. It is divided into "fissiparous sects," avoids proselytizing, and cannot speak with authority about the most fundamental questions. Thus, those who are serious about religious truth will be increasingly drawn to Catholicism. Democratic men will be forced more and more to choose between the ancient religion of Europe and the various species of deism and "natural religion" which are the natural consequence of the Protestant challenge to spiritual authority.

Tocqueville is famous for his analysis of the "restlessness" of the American people, and of democratic man more broadly. As Tocqueville memorably writes, they even come back from vacations more exhausted than before they had left. As one distinguished commentator has observed, Tocqueville's description of democratic man is a page torn out of Pascal's *Pensées*, with its account of the human propensity to divert oneself from a true situation, the "misery of man without God." Modern democracy turns "diversion" into a way of life: the unceasing quest for material acquisition replaces the stasis or harmony that was the goal of pre-modern politics. At its worst, this frenetic pursuit of happiness risks becoming what Leo Strauss has called "the joyless quest for joy," and Tocqueville's letters provide a powerful anticipation of his analysis. He repeatedly observes how humorless Americans seem always to be preoccupied with material pursuits; for his part, Beaumont observes that American gentlemen have one foot in the ballroom and another in their business enterprises. None of the wit or dash of a genuine aristocracy is in evidence.

Yet in letter after letter, Tocqueville comments that this restlessness, this feverish movement of thought and industry, for the most part does not have deleterious political consequences. This dizzying pace of life is absent only in those parts of America where democracy is not really present, in places like Kentucky where slavery has replicated aristocracy, but without the humanity or mercy that allowed one to admire it. There is one respect in which Tocqueville's America is not our America: Americans, he says, do not trouble themselves with the state, their "restlessness" does not lead to political agitation. His Americans might be said to be a "stateless" people. (Of course, contemporary Americans are no more revolutionary than they were in Tocqueville's time. In this sense, they remain a profoundly conservative people, benefiting from a rare political stability and the absence of public unrest.)

Tocqueville also was aware that democracy would give rise to new forms of dependency. The democratic idea has a logic of its own. It tends to reduce the human world to the twin poles of the individual and the state, crowding out those intermediate institutions which are schools of self-government and human responsibility. The anti-statism that Tocqueville observed during his trip to North America was arguably more an "American" than a "democratic" phenomenon, an aspect of American exceptionalism that was bound to dissipate over time, though Americans still possess a guilty conscience concerning their increasing reliance on a centralized state, as recent political events clearly demonstrate.

I would be remiss not to point out what Tocqueville's letters reveal about the writer himself. His intelligence, curiosity, charm, and humanity are constantly on display. One cannot help but like and admire him. We see a man who is endlessly curious about America, but who also never loses sight of upheavals in France and is anxious to get his hands on any news about his homeland. He works hard even as he suffers through endless soirées given in honor of French visitors (not *all* of which were a burden to bear). He is a private man who has a rich gift for friendship, particularly with the young men he had gone to school with at Metz or with whom he had worked at the courts at Versailles. He remained close to many of his American interlocutors until the end of his life. The reader cannot help but be moved to see Tocqueville heartbroken when his beloved Bébé (Abbé Lesueur), his priest-tutor from childhood, dies (at the age

of eighty) while Tocqueville is traveling in North America. Tocqueville's letters to family members are filled with affection more typical perhaps of a democratic than an titled family even as they reflect a certain aristocratic high-mindedness.

As the letters make clear, Tocqueville is in no way *reducible* to his milieu. He claims that, given his moderation and equanimity of judgment, he was not made to live in revolutionary times. (He prided himself on his "cool head" and his "scruples.") Nor did he think he was particularly made for domestic life, even if the letters provide ample evidence of his deep and abiding affection for his future wife, the English-born Mary Mottley whom Tocqueville always called "Marie." There is no reason to doubt what Tocqueville wrote to her from North America; whatever their problems in later years, she had "conquered" his soul, and he, too, loved her with his "entire soul." He had a wandering eye but never a wandering heart. In a letter to his old schoolmate Eugène Stöffels, Tocqueville even confesses that he is "a permanently insoluble problem to himself." He is torn between his reason and his passions and is afflicted by no small share of restlessness.

But in a beautiful letter to Eugène's brother Charles dated October 22, 1831, Tocqueville pleads with his friend to resist doubt, nihilism, and despair. Tocqueville tells him that one cannot expect either complete happiness or unhappiness in this world: "Life is neither all pleasure nor all pain; it is a serious responsibility of which we are duty-bound to acquit ourselves as best we can." This was the "virile" credo that Tocqueville lived, one grounded in moderate expectations and a refusal to despair. He could not find absolute truth in this world but rested content with those "likelihoods," those "approximations," that allowed men to live nobly in the light of the truth they discerned. He confessed to Stöffels that he was no "metaphysician" since he did not want to "torture" himself with questions that were insoluble. Tocqueville's noble and capacious soul is on ample display in this excellent volume, and it is one final reason to recommend it.

Honoring the compact

Gary L. McDowell
The Language of Law & the Foundations of American Constitutionalism.
Cambridge University Press, 428 pages, $32.99

reivewed by Andrew C. McCarthy

In an age when judges are habituated to invent rather than apply the law, a written Constitution is a thing of irony. We've become exactly what constitutions are designed to prevent: a nation not of laws but of men—er, sorry, of people. And not of just any people: We've become a nation of lawyers, a juristocracy in which courts first impose, say, gay marriage despite its total want of constitutional mooring, then re-impose it when 37 million Californians have the temerity to buck their robed betters in a referendum—with the law profs tut-tutting that such "fundamental" matters are beyond the competence of the rabble.

To show just how wayward the place we have landed, how removed from our trailblazing commitment to popular sovereignty, is the burden of Gary L. McDowell's powerful new book, *The Language of Law and the Foundations of American Constitutionalism*. Professor McDowell, a prolific author and an instructor on the intersection of law and political science at the University of Richmond, was a top speechwriter at the Reagan Justice Department. Those were the days when Attorney General Edwin Meese III famously forged the case for originalism, the interpretive philosophy which construes constitutional provisions in accordance with what they were understood to mean at the time of their adoption. Thanks to a generation of scholars raised on Meese's speeches and the jurisprudence of Robert Bork and Antonin Scalia, originalism swims strongly against the progressive tide of "organic" constitutionalism. *The Language of Law* is a vital and especially erudite contribution to that tradition.

The living constitution is, in McDowell's refutation, a Frankenstein monster created in the laboratories of Progressive-era law

schools, where the very conception of legal education—and of the law itself—underwent radical change. In the early days of the Republic, the profession of lawyering was essentially practical. Apprentice attorneys trained by reading law in the offices of established practitioners. The sprouting of school-based legal education in the 1780s coincided with the adoption of the Constitution. While legal study became more systematic, the tradition of politicized learning was also launched.

It was, however, much different then. Students were unabashedly steeped in the ideals of republicanism, the new nation's animating spirit. As the legendary Justice Joseph Story explained upon inaugurating his Professorship of Law at Harvard in 1829, this civic faith would guard against the dangers of internal rot to which republics were especially susceptible. For students to perform their essential role, however, law would have to remain for them a collection of bedrock principles revealed over generations of human experience, not "a little round of maneuver and contrivances" by which the shrewd would circumvent the law to win this or that case. Thus did legal education consist primarily of lectures from learned treatises expounding on these principles. Individual cases were given direct attention only to the extent they were vehicles for highlighting some antecedent principle.

Everything changed when Christopher Columbus Langdell was named dean of Harvard Law School and instituted, in 1870, the casebook method of legal instruction. There was a cosmetic appeal to this tectonic shift in focus; time-honored principles gave way to the rationales by which particular controversies were adjudicated. Proponents urged that it would train lawyers to think as courtroom advocates. The overarching concept, though, was that law was not merely a profession to be practiced but a science to be theorized—a notion Langdell reinforced by recruiting as his instructors academics bereft of practical experience. No longer would the primary source of law be the dilations on stale principles found in treatises but rather the act of judging itself, the machinations of jurists—which, predictably, became more willful as admiration for art overwhelmed dedication to craft.

The zeitgeist inverted the law into a force for applied change in society. An increasingly energized judiciary was encouraged by the emergence of law reviews, the theoretical oeuvre of the new professoriate. Gradually, the Constitution lost its revered place as fundamental law; it came to be seen as just a document, subsumed into judge-made *constitutional law*, the rough massaging of text was kneaded to suit the jurists' fleeting pieties and subjective sense of justice.

As McDowell demonstrates, cutting-edge political scientists of the Progressive Era were even more explicitly evolutionary (which is to say, revolutionary) than Langdell. For Princeton's Woodrow Wilson, the Constitution was not a set of injunctions derived from universal principles and therefore immutable except for the laborious amendment process. It was an adaptable "living thing" which fell "not under the theory of the universe, but under the theory of organic life. It is accountable to Darwin, not to Newton." To be a "vehicle of life" rather than a "mere legal document," the Constitution would need to become a "constitutional convention in continuous session"—with "judicial interpretation" the "chief instrumentality" by which law codified the "facts of national development."

Wilson's signal contribution to today's judicial supremacism was his 1905 recruitment of Edwin S. Corwin to Princeton. Nominating Corwin the "father of the age in which we still live," McDowell is meticulous in his deconstruction. To convert the Constitution into "a living statute palpitating with the purpose of the hour," Corwin conflated the common law with the "higher law"—which he took to be the natural law, reflective of permanent elements of human nature uniquely discoverable by the jurist. This "higher law" was portrayed as the embodiment of "right reason," which Englishmen from Henry II to Sir Edward Coke had elevated over centuries to the supreme law, voiding even acts of Parliament.

It is mythology. While the Progressive project was to free judges from the chains of

constitutional text so that they could enforce contemporary notions of right and wrong, McDowell recounts that Coke actually sought to tether judges to precedents—and not to some abstract notion of "law," but, very specifically, to the well-established laws of England. These he referred to as "artificial reason" precisely to distinguish them from "natural reason." The jurist's value was expertise in the firmly rooted authorities of British common law, not insights drawn from some amorphous "higher law" judges would invent as they went along.

The Progressive project also betrays the groundbreaking natural law theories that so influenced the Framers. McDowell's excursus on Hobbes and Locke may be the most valuable part of his invaluable book. Natural law was not a supernatural force inscribed by God on the hearts of men, manifested in custom and tradition. It was knowable by human reason. By the power of reason, man perceives the will of his superior creator, inducing him to enter civil society, to institute governments that secure rights nature leaves insecure. With no man having a right to rule another, the legitimacy of those governments lies in the consent of the governed, which alone provides the power to fashion rules of justice.

This philosophic tradition of popular sovereignty undergirds the Constitution. As McDowell illustrates, even such antagonists as Thomas Jefferson and John Marshall agreed that the Constitution had to be construed in accordance with its original meaning. This honoring of the social compact was the nation's security against tyranny. A judge's role was to enforce the compact, not to adapt it to fit what Corwin called "the advancing needs of the time." Constitutional meaning, Marshall admonished, does not change with "the peculiar circumstances of the moment." "Judicial power" was not transformative. It was exercised "to effect the will" of the lawgiver, not of the judge.

For Marshall, as for Professor McDowell, this was, and remains, "the most sacred rule of interpretation." *The Language of Law* is a clarion call for its restoration.

Put the book down

Charlotte Greenspan
Pick Yourself Up:
Dorothy Fields & the American Musical.
Oxford University Press, 298 pages, $27.95

reviewed by Michael Anderson

Tin Pan Alley's hall of fame is a boy's club: Berlin, Porter, Gershwin, Rodgers, Hart, Hammerstein, Arlen, Mercer, Kern, et al. Leading the line in the anteroom, however, is the finest female lyricist of American popular song, Dorothy Fields. Like other wordsmiths, her name is as little known as her lyrics are indelible. Think "On the Sunny Side of the Street," "I Won't Dance," "I'm in the Mood for Love," "You Couldn't Be Cuter." Think Bobby Short and "My Personal Property." Think "Starting today, we must pick ourselves up, dust ourselves off," which Barack Obama quoted in his inauguration speech and which Charlotte Greenspan has borrowed for her bizarrely inept gesture at a biography.

Dorothy Fields (1905–74) was a showbiz pro, to the boards born. Her father was Lew Fields, of Weber and Fields, the celebrated performers and theatrical entrepreneurs. (The most repeated anecdote about Dorothy has her father objecting to her work on shows for the Cotton Club: "Ladies don't write lyrics!" To which she responded, "I'm no lady, I'm your daughter.") Her Broadway career stretched from *Blackbirds of 1928* to *Sweet Charity* (1966); when she didn't provide the lyrics, she wrote the libretto, most famously for *Annie Get Your Gun*. During the great age of the Hollywood musical in the 1930s, Fields was a steady worker, principally with Jerome Kern. (Their initial collaboration was "Lovely to Look At." Fields tended to set the bar high from the outset: her first hit with her first collaborator, Jimmy McHugh, was "I Can't Give You Anything But Love.")

As a hard-working rhymester for hire, Fields wrote just about every variety of lyric in her 400-plus songs. Her versatility is on display in her finest film, the Astaire-Rogers

vehicle *Swing Time* (1936): the sardonic "A Fine Romance," the infectious "Pick Yourself Up" and the luminous "The Way You Look Tonight," the song that has survived thousands of senior proms (and won Fields her only Academy Award). Fields remains rare among lyricists in being equally adept at humor and sentiment; her love songs touch the heart as much as her comic songs tickle the funny bone. (An echo of the wisecracking humor of the Roaring Twenties, in which Fields came of age, can be heard four decades later in "Big Spender," when the hard-bitten taxi dancers assure prospective customers, "I don't pop my cork for every guy I see.")

Paradoxically, her professionalism may be what relegates Fields to the second rank. Never less than competent, her lyrics are also never more than that; an impenetrable patina of impersonality separates her from her listeners. Consider Porter, Berlin, Hammerstein: each creates a distinctive and lasting ambiance—however difficult to articulate, one feels one knows them. This is hardly true of Fields. Is this why she is largely missing from what purports to be her biography, *Pick Yourself Up*?

The majority of Charlotte Greenspan's book concentrates on ephemera surrounding her subject—endless quotations from newspapers, potted biographies of the most minor of figures—while the basic facts of Fields's life, like her marriage and children, and even her death, receive but passing mention. Her lyrics, too, are unexamined—indeed, not even quoted. (Ms. Greenspan writes that she declined to pay reprinting fees. She recommends the purchase of compact discs, which certainly would be money better spent than on her book.)

Ms. Greenspan is not a writer; she is identified as a musicologist and pianist. Let's hope she keeps the day job. Her prose, which alternates between bombast and portentousness ("a good musical requires a good score"), is clumsy when not unintelligible. Whatever can be stated with precision and clarity is sure to be expressed at length, vaguely. (The kindest explanation would be an inadequate translation from the Venusian.) Most irritatingly, no digression goes unwritten; if attention deficit disorder were actually a disease and a book could suffer from it, this would be that book. (Five editors are acknowledged; none of them, apparently, possesses a blue pencil.)

The life of Dorothy Fields, extending from Harlem cabarets in the 1920s through Hollywood in the 1930s and the heyday and afterglow of the Broadway musical from the 1940s through the 1960s, certainly offers an excellent perspective on "the American musical." One can only regard *Pick Yourself Up* as an opportunity wasted—worse, senselessly squandered. Adding insult to injury is that it was published by Oxford University Press, previously the premier source for scholarship on jazz and popular music. How the mighty have fallen. When the disintegration of American publishing is chronicled, *Pick Yourself Up* can serve as an exemplary illustration.

Nostalgie de la boue

Richard Wolin
The Wind from the East:
French Intellectuals, the Cultural
Revolution & the Legacy of the 1960s.
Princeton University Press, 391 pages, $35

reviewed by Paul Hollander

For the most part, *The Wind from the East* is a critical history of the French left and its numerous sectarian subdivisions during and after the 1960s, with a special emphasis on the student uprising of May 1968 and figures such as Althusser, Badiou, Foucault, Lacan, and Sartre. Prominent themes include the differences between the Soviet, or "Jacobin-Leninist authoritarian political model," and a seemingly more authentic and revolutionary Maoist leftism. The book also appears to be an attempt to salvage what its author considers the inspiring beliefs and attitudes of the 1960s. The latter disposition is captured in paragraphs such as the following:

> The May movement's uniqueness lay in the challenges it posed to traditional forms of po-

> litical struggle. . . . The May revolt corresponded to a new, multivalent political dynamic that transcended the Manichaean oppositions of a class-based society. Students and workers invoked norms of *openness*, *publicness* [*sic*] and *direct democracy* in order to contest new technocratic models of social control. . . . The May movement targeted impersonal, bureaucratic, and highly formalized modes of socialization that operated "without regard for persons."

There is a precarious balance between the author's lurking nostalgia for the ethos and hopes of the 1960s and his awareness of the destructive irrationalities of the period and some of its core beliefs. There is a further tension between his sense of reality and moderation and his restrained utopian longings.

The attributes of the French left here analyzed will remind readers of the American left (or New Left) and its sectarian conflicts and preoccupations in the same period. But the French radical left was far more deeply infatuated with Maoism than the radical left in this country that preferred to project its utopian hopes upon Castro's Cuba. (That is not to suggest that there were no admirers of Cuba in France: Sartre, for one, was convinced that the Cuban Revolution was "an example of happiness that had been attained by force.")

It is the major, and rather implausible, proposition of this otherwise informative study that there was an affinity in France between Maoism—or at any rate the French radical-leftist perception of Maoism—and the tolerant, anti-authoritarian, and libertarian protest movements of the 1960s:

> As it ran its course, the Maoist phenomenon underwent significant alterations and modifications . . . what began as an exercise in revolutionary dogmatism was transformed into a Dionysian celebration of political pluralism and the right to difference. . . . [French Maoism] had a strangely beneficial effect on French intellectuals . . . helping to promote a new, more modest and democratic cultural sensibility.
>
> [It was] . . . an approach that abandoned the goal of seizing political power and instead sought to initiate a democratic revolution in mores, habitudes [*sic*], sexuality, gender roles, and human sociability in general.

Wolin further observes that "among students and intellectuals, the identification with Cultural-Revolutionary China became an exit strategy to escape from the straitjacket of orthodox Marxism." But Maoism was another, more tight-fitting, straitjacket and the youthful sympathy for it rested on profound delusion and ignorance. The French radicals' preference for China over the Soviet Union was similarly rooted in monumental ignorance about Chinese Communism, including the Cultural Revolution. It is one thing to prefer the spontaneity of freewheeling Western student movements to the repressiveness of the Soviet system and something quite different to believe in the moral superiority of Maoism over Soviet Communism or that the Western protest movements had something in common with Maoism, and could learn and benefit from it.

The Soviet Union and Mao's China had much in common as regards intolerance and authoritarianism. But, as to fanaticism and irrationality, Mao's China was ahead of the Soviet system. The two systems also differed in their practices of political violence. In the Soviet Union it was more bureaucratized, impersonal, and secretive, whereas in China it was more impassioned, participatory, and seemingly spontaneous. If one tries to evaluate the comparative blessings of political systems by the number of unnatural deaths for which they are responsible, China under Mao easily beats the Soviet Union, even under Stalin.

It is difficult to see how the fanatical collectivism and murderous intolerance of Maoism—even as refracted by wishful and deluded Western perceptions—could have given rise to, or converged with, the kind of therapeutic individualism that was one of the hallmarks of the 1960s. Equally difficult is to discern an affinity between Maoism and the kind of liberating, classless identity politics the author favors and associates with the 1960s. If, as Wolin proposes, the essence of

the era was the rediscovery of "the virtues of participatory politics," neither Maoism in general nor the Cultural Revolution in particular had much to offer unless one confuses the hysterical mob violence with meaningful participation. Likewise, it is bizarre to see a connection between Maoism and "acts of self-transformation and the search for personal authenticity"—phenomena strictly limited to Western societies. Wolin understands this; he notes that "the less the *normaliens* knew about contemporary China, the better it suited their purposes. Cultural-Revolutionary China became a projection screen . . . [an] embodiment of a 'radiant utopian future.'" Those French students "who sought to affirm their status as libidinal beings" were grotesquely ill-informed about the repressive, Puritanical aspects of Chinese Communism.

Wolin seems to approve of what he calls the "seminal political lesson" Foucault supposedly learned from the May events, namely the attempt to expand the boundaries "of the political." He also seems to overlook the fact that that totalitarian systems were the most adept in expanding these boundaries and, in doing so, excelled in crushing individual and group freedoms. It is, in fact, not always clear when the author merely describes or when he approves of particular ideas.

For example, he writes: "One of the keys to understanding May 1968 . . . is that it was less concerned with seizing political power than with rescuing everyday life from the sinister clutches of the 'hidden persuaders' who had colonized it." Does Wolin himself believe that everyday life was colonized by sinister hidden persuaders? He also writes that the leaders of the May revolt "understood that . . . power could no longer be equated with or reduced to state repression or the negative effects of capitalism. Instead . . . power's tentacles had expanded to the point where it was capable of infiltrating the body politic's innermost recesses." These propositions are reminiscent of Marcuse's concern with the insidious, manipulative aspects of modern capitalism determined to inculcate false consciousness (though he is not cited or listed in the substantial bibliography). Wolin also appears to agree that under "consumer capitalism," "everyday life had been stripped of its naturalness, its informality and thus its integrity."

The key to understanding the contradictory sentiments informing this volume is to be found in the uneasy combination of nostalgia for the ideals of the 1960s and the realization that, time and again, good intentions proved compatible with the meting out of huge amounts of suffering—often on the putative beneficiaries of idealistic projects of social transformation.

Siding with the truth

Peter Coleman
The Last Intellectuals:
Essays on Writers & Politics.
Quadrant Books, 324 pages, $44.95

reviewed by David Pryce-Jones

Peter Coleman is a free spirit. He was once the editor of *The Bulletin*, an Australian magazine that backed the United States in Vietnam at a moment when that mattered. Then he became editor of *Quadrant*, an Australian magazine whose main purpose was to expose Communist ideology and practice. During those fraught Cold War years, the Congress for Cultural Freedom, an organization that was official though not declared to be so, sponsored *Quadrant* as an integral part of its defense of Western and democratic values. As a result, the Congress and the magazine and everyone connected with them were subjected by the left to constant abuse. Coleman participated in the Congress, and has written forcefully about it. In one of the essays in this collection he judges the world to be a conflict between the will to power and the will to truth. He takes the side of truth.

Rounding things out, and unusual in someone of such a temperament, he has occasionally been drawn towards power. Picking up what he now deprecates as the political virus, he became leader of the Liberals—as Australian conservatives describe

themselves—in the New South Wales Parliament and then the Federal Parliament. About a quarter of these essays concern Australian politicians and a little specialist knowledge is a help here. Some of the personalities and the battles fought around them seem far away and long ago.

Public life in Australia is a rough-house. Coleman took a conservative position in the intellectual and cultural issues of the day. He says what he thinks in very direct prose. Two eminent philosophers, John Anderson and John Passmore, influenced him. Poetry has been another influence, and as an editor he made a point of discovering and publishing poets. A particular friend who crops up throughout these pages is the poet James McAuley, very much his own man like Coleman himself, a Catholic whose lyrics in the 1950s may "without much distortion be labelled as Cold War Poems." Someone wrote a biography of McAuley to which Coleman took exception, and his demolition of this book is a pièce de résistance that merits a place in any anthology of vituperation.

What earns his praise is character, originality, the courage to be oneself in whatever the setting. He singles out Richard Krygier, a Jewish refugee from Poland who forced people to hear the bad news from Europe and was the publisher of *Quadrant*; the comic genius of Barry Humphries; Bruce Beresford's films with their theme of defeat; the stand-alone manner of the novelists Xavier Herbert who once walked out of his own book launch because the audience seemed insufficiently respectful; and Amy Witting (whose memoir, if ever she wrote it, she used to say, would be called *Recollections of a Barnacle on a Stationary Barge*). He has particularly warm words for the Belgian Pierre Ryckmans, writing as Simon Leys about the barbarism of Mao Zedong and his Western apologists. It was a source of amazement that the left-wing and politically correct Australian Broadcasting Company should have invited him to give a set of prestigious lectures.

Coleman doesn't explain anywhere in these essays exactly how and why he himself became a militant anti-Communist. A graduate student in the London School of Economics in the 1950s, he gravitated, as it were, on the wings of the zeitgeist into the orbit of like-minded intellectuals: Edward Shils; Leo Labedz, the editor of *Survey*; or Melvin Lasky, the editor of *Encounter*, the sister magazine of *Quadrant*. Raymond Aron, Isaiah Berlin, Robert Conquest, and others have cameo appearances in these pages. He records a visit to Malcolm Muggeridge, whose exposé of Stalin's Soviet Union was a memorable victory for truth. He shows his approval of the politics of George Orwell and Arthur Koestler by reviewing books about them.

A certain flush of dismay nonetheless seeps through here and there. Michael Oakeshott may have demoralized Coleman by teaching him that politics can never achieve their purpose, indeed that everything is vanity. He doesn't care for the permissive society or a state in which cultural grants are really a form of welfare. Philosophers and poets are distinguished by their absence. A grand old library in Sydney is no longer what it once was. Communism may have vanished but Islamism in his trumpet-call of a phrase means that "fate has knocked once again on the gate of existence" and the battle for Western values has to continue.

Realism without falsity

James L. Haley
Wolf: The Lives of Jack London.
Basic Books, 400 pages, $29.95

reviewed by Jeffrey Hart

On opposite coasts of the United States, Jack London and Stephen Crane fashioned the direct yet nuanced voice of the twentieth century. Contemporaries born in the late nineteenth century, both worked in the same direction, their prose breaking with the Victorian genteel tradition and using the vocabulary and rhythms of living speech, anticipating Hemingway and many other important writers to follow. Both London and Crane, moreover, called for urgent social reform as slums grew worse in the country's major urban areas.

Despite the warm early reception of London's work, it is Stephen Crane's *Red Badge of Courage* (1885), which described the experience of a federal soldier in a battle resembling Chancellorsville, that has become a fixture in the canon of American literature. Its direct, descriptive style, however, has much in common with London's prose. *The Red Badge of Courage* begins:

> The cold passed reluctantly from the earth, and the retiring fogs revealed an army stretched out on the hills, resting. As the landscape changed from brown to green, the army awakened, and began to tremble with eagerness at the noise of rumors. It cast its eyes upon the roads, which were growing from long troughs of liquid mud to proper thoroughfares. A river, amber tinted in the shadow of its banks, purled at the army's feet.

The disciplined prose of Jack London's passage from *The Sea-Wolf* (1904) makes for an excellent comparison:

> Not but that I was afloat in a safe craft, for the *Martinez* was a new ferry steamer, making her fourth or fifth trip on the run between Sauselito and San. The danger lay in the heavy fog which blanketed the bay, and of which as a landsman I had little apprehension. . . . A fresh breeze was blowing, and for a time I was alone in the moist obscurity—yet not alone, for I was dimly conscious of the presence of the pilot, and of what I took to be the captain, in the glass house above my head.

Why does London's body of work receive less attention?

Although a great deal has been written about London, we have lacked a first-rate modern biography to give a complete picture of his achievement. James L. Haley has now provided one in *Wolf: The Lives of Jack London*. The difficulty facing Mr. Haley as a biographer is suggested by the following summary of the complex life—or lives—of Jack London. In a well organized, lucid exposition, Mr. Haley has produced a compelling account of his resistant subject.

He grew up in unpromising circumstances. Born in San Francisco on January 12, 1876, he was the illegitimate son of a free-loving Spiritualist named Flora Wellman who held séances and communicated with the dead. There is no evidence that she was ever married to the man presumed to be his father, William Chaney, a journalist, lawyer, and astrologer who, in fact, maintained that Flora had become pregnant while having an affair with a man named Lee Smith. Chaney was abusive toward Flora and, when she became pregnant, demanded that she have an abortion. She refused, but attempted suicide with laudanum and also a handgun that misfired.

Her situation stabilized somewhat when she married John Griffith London, a partially disabled Civil War veteran, who became young John Griffith London's stepfather (he changed his name to Jack as an adolescent). The family settled in Oakland, where John completed grade school. In 1885, encouraged by a friendly librarian, Ina Coolbrith, who was later be named poet laureate of California, he read Ouida's long Victorian novel *Signa*, an experience that awakened literary ambition. In 1896, he joined the Socialist Labor Party and spoke energetically in public for reform. His growing concern for the poor would be reflected in such works as *The War of the Classes* (1906) and *The Iron Heel* (1908), a dystopian novel that foresees an oligarchic tyranny in the United States.

In 1897, at age twenty-one, London completed a semester at the University of California (Berkeley), but soon left because he lacked tuition. Seeing a chance for financial independence, he joined the gold rush to the Klondike, as hundreds of others like him surged north into Canada. Newspaper headlines heralded great promise:

> GOLD! GOLD!
> SIXTY-EIGHT RICH MEN ON THE PORTLAND.
> STACKS OF YELLOW METAL!

News of the Klondike had already reached Seattle when the ship docked, and she was met by a crowd of 5,000 who watched more than a million dollars in gold come off the ship. The expedition proved dangerous and

futile: winter in the Klondike was deadly, and a "Klondike plague," the prospectors' term for scurvy, bleeding gums, loose teeth, and flaccid skin brought on by a limited diet of bacon, bread, and beans, took its toll. London made his way out as a coal stoker on a ship that took him south to Port Townsend, Washington; from there his eight day's wages secured him a steerage berth to San Francisco. The gold dust he managed to bring back was worth all of $4.50. Empty-handed, he did not leave the frozen north of the vast arctic without making one new resolution; he had sworn to himself to become a writer, no matter what it took.

After repeated rejections, he received a letter from *Overland Monthly* accepting a short story, "To the Man on the Trail," based on his experiences in the Yukon. Though he received only $5 for the story, appearing in a journal that had published Mark Twain and Bret Harte was promising. Following this first story, *The Overland Monthly* published "The White Silence" and "The Son of the Wolf," and five more in the course of a year. Success came when the *Overland* stories were published in book form as *The Son of the Wolf* by Houghton Mifflin in 1900. The volume received enthusiastic reviews: *The New York Times*'s verdict was that the "stories are realism, without the usual falsity of realism" and the notice in the *Kansas City Star* claimed, "It is to be doubted if Kipling ever wrote a better story than 'The Son of the Wolf.'"

In the summer of 1902, London traveled to England on the HMS *Majestic*, appalled at the luxury on the great ocean-liner, which would return packed with refugees seeking a better life in America. For six weeks he undertook an investigation into social conditions in the East End of London, resulting in *The People of the Abyss*. The same year also saw the publication of his first novel, *A Daughter of the Snows*. In 1903, *The Call of the Wild*, about a dog named Buck, was published by Macmillan and became a bestseller. In the Afterward to Macmillan's 1964 reissue of the novel, Clifton Fadiman commented:

> Perhaps you know a better one, but to me this is the most powerful dog story ever written. . . .

> Into the unforgettable beast Buck, one hundred and forty pounds of cunning and savagery, he put everything he most deeply felt about the animal instincts that lurk, not only in dogs, but in all of us human beings.

I can't say I like this terrifying book, because I don't share London's worship of force. But I admit that, once started, I couldn't stop till I had finished it. The wolf theme returns in *The Sea-Wolf*, an important moment in the trajectory of London's career as an author. He had little formal education and had risked death in the Yukon. But, on the opening page of *The Sea-Wolf*, we see Jack London's style at last capable of sustaining a major work.

London's literary successes were accompanied by an increasing interest in political activism. Early in 1904, he joined C. T. Kelly's Army of the unemployed, an ally of Jacob Coxey's Army, which planned to march across the country to Washington, D.C. to demand relief for the unemployed workers. London left the hapless throng in Hannibal, Missouri, and was arrested for vagrancy in Niagara Falls. Convicted, he spent thirty days in the Erie County Penitentiary. In 1906, London lectured at a slew of American universities on political topics and also brought out the related *War of the Classes*, as well as *The Fish Patrol* and a novel titled *The Game*. Not one to shy away from a bustling schedule, it was also the year he began construction on his forty-five-foot yacht *Snark*. *White Fang*, *Scorn of Women*, and *Moon Face and Other Stories* were published.

In 1907, Jack and his wife Charmian set out from San Francisco in the *Snark* for a sail through the South Seas, visiting Tahiti. *Before Adam*, *Love of Life*, and *On the Road* were published. In 1908, they sailed on the *Snark* to the Samoan Islands, Fiji, and then Australia at the end of the year. *The Iron Heel* was published. Back in America, Jack recuperated from the various illnesses he had contracted on the voyage and, in October 1909, published *Martin Eden*. He and his wife Charmian established themselves on their ranch. *Revolution* and *Lost Face* were published. In 1911, they sailed in San Francisco Bay and then rode on horseback through northern California and Oregon. *South Sea Tales*, *The Cruise of the Snark*, *Adventure*, *When God Laughs*, and *Burning Daylight* came out.

In 1912, Jack and his wife headed east and vacationed in New York, and then sailed out of Baltimore on the *Dirigo*, a four-masted barque, for a journey around the Horn that reached Seattle by late July. Returning to their California Beauty Ranch in August, London began writing *John Barleycorn* about the trip. Three more books, *A Son of the Sun*, *Smoke Bellew*, and *The House of Pride* were published; London was now earning $70,000 a year. In 1914, he went to Mexico to cover the Revolution for *Colliers's Weekly* but this job was interrupted by an attack of dysentery. In 1915, his continuing publication included *The Mutiny of the Elsinore* and *The Strength of the Strong*. The following year he traveled to Hawaii, and wrote *The Scarlet Plague* and *The Star Rover*.

In 1916, London's health took a downward slide. He suffered from chronic uremia, which was potentially fatal, as well as painful kidney stones and rheumatism. According to Haley, he may have been taking salvarsen, a dangerous arsenic-based treatment for venereal disease. On November 22, 1916, he administered a morphine injection to himself from which he failed to awaken, despite an injection of atropine by a physician. Haley doubts that it was suicide—he suggests London's death was the result, rather, of declining health and amateurish self-medication.

Haley's biography is a welcome and necessary study of Jack London's life and times. Much of London's writing, however, was journalism, and the critical job that remains is to establish a selection of the works which have lasting value as literature.

Notebook

Harvard meets the man from Boggabilla

by Roger Sandall

All you see is a smudge (a white smudge if that makes sense) but the whole crowd knows what it means. The player is out "leg before wicket," the match is lost, and it's time to pack up and go home. This is Hot Spot, a new high-tech way of gathering more and better information for sporting decisions in the game of cricket. Cameras sense and measure the heat that comes from the thumps and bangs of play, and the spot is white because the computerized infrared image left by the ball is negative, white on a black or gray ground.

Time was when cricket umpiring relied on the human eye. Umpires standing at each end of a cricket pitch, twenty-two yards long, had to guess whether the ball had actually struck the bat, or the stumps, or the batsman's leg, before giving a decision "out" or "not out." Some seemed to have worse eyes and ears than others and mistakes were made. This didn't matter when the game was synonymous with the decorum of leisurely afternoon play on an English village green. But that was long ago. At international cricket matches today, one hundred thousand fans produce constant uproar, and calls are a matter of life and death—though some say it's more important than that.

Adjudication has assumed diplomatic importance: the very latest science is employed, a billion vicarious spectators on the Indian subcontinent hang breathlessly upon news about the score, and it's hardly surprising that the four fallible eyes of the all-too-human umpires are now backed up by infrared cameras—with a third off-field umpire checking what the cameras show. The advent of all this technology has not been without debate. But most fans, I think, would agree that even the decisions of diligent umpires are affected by their states of mind, while infrared photography provides the greater objectivity that international sport now requires. It's as simple as that.

Or maybe not. Seeking more information I went on the web and, within seconds, had found just the book I needed—*Objectivity* by Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison.[1] Daston is a distinguished American thinker whose work (I quote from Wikipedia) "has long defined the cutting edge of research into the history of science." Galison is the Pellegrino University Professor in History of Science and Physics at Harvard. He has made one film on the hydrogen bomb for the History Channel and another, shown at the 2008 Sundance Festival, criticizing government secrecy.

Well, talk about luck! There's hardly a name since the dawn of systematic human thought that goes unmentioned in their treatise, from Plato to Bruno Latour. But the funny thing is, the more you read of its 501 pages the more curious their project appears. Objectivity turns out to be a Bad Thing on the whole, while subjectivity is generally a Good Thing. What Daston and Galison call "mechanical

1 *Objectivity*, by Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison; Zone Books, 500 pages, $38.95.

objectivity" rudely arrived with photography in the nineteenth century, and it makes both authors deeply unhappy. Among other things, they say, mechanical objectivity led to regrettable changes in the "scientific self."

Anyway I marked a number of passages and sent them off to a pal of mine in Boggabilla. He knows his cricket, and better still he knows the difference between fact and fiction. This is what he sent back:

HARVARD MAN: It is one of the main messages of this book that epistemology and ethos are intertwined: mechanical objectivity, for example, is a way of being as well as a way of knowing. Specific forms of image-making sculpt and steady particular, historical forms of the scientific self.

BOGGABILLA MAN: I think I know what he means. Doug Smith's way of being was cranky at the best of times—and if a photo-finish showed the wrong horse's nose in front you'd see his epistemology unravel and he'd lose his ethos entirely. Especially with fifty bucks on the nag behind.

HM: There is a history of what one might call the nosology and etiology of error, upon which diagnosis and therapy depend. Subjectivity is not the same kind of epistemological ailment as the infirmities of the senses or the imposition of authority feared by earlier philosophers.

BM: Well you might call it nosology—but why? Wally Jones was deaf, and the best therapy any of us found for this umpire was shouting. Objectively speaking it was a useful diagnostic procedure. . . . Even philosophers should know there are times when authority must be imposed.

HM: In all cases it is fear that drives epistemology, including the definition of what counts as an epistemic vice or virtue. Conversely, science pursued without acute anxiety over the bare existence of its chosen objects and effects will be correspondingly free of epistemological preoccupations.

BM: How true! Out there in the middle of the cricket field facing a bowler it's fear, fear, fear and stress, stress, stress. There's anxiety to burn. That's why infrared smudges are not just epistemologically but medically virtuous. Again and again they've saved batsmen from heart attack.

HM: Current usage allows a too easy slide among senses of objectivity that are by turn ontological, epistemological, methodological, and moral.

BM: Yair, maybe, but not in cricket. Any player will tell you they're all of a piece and the easier the slide the better. Take Hot Spot for example. Infrared imagery shows us what is, tells us what we know, and suggests how to proceed. Morally, you'd have to say the results are all good.

HM: Today the scientific image has frankly and explicitly surrendered any residual claim to being a version of "seeing" in a classical sense . . . the ideal of fidelity has been discarded . . . as it begins to shed its representational aspect altogether.

BM: Gotta be joking! Haven't seen a white flag myself. Not in cricket. Just the opposite in fact. Don't they watch sport at Harvard? All those instant replays help you see the action more . . . how can I put it?—*objectively*. That's how things look in Boggabilla.

For all its philosophical trappings and portentous language, the argument of *Objectivity* is elementary. Starting, say, with Dürer's rhinoceros, images of animals, plants, clouds, and other features of the natural world have steadily evolved over the years. So have our ideas about what they show. So have the uses science has made of such pictures. According to the authors—and this is reasonable—scientific drawings before the nineteenth century were governed by the ideal of "truth to nature." Then, in the nineteenth century, along came photography with its more severe representational standards. Today something else has appeared that Daston and Galison have great trouble describing, —"trained judgment" is one formulation—although there's a lot of talk about nanotechnology with subtly derisive allusions to its commercial use. The word "collective" is

thrown in here and there for those who like their warm and fuzzies.

Now, it is fairly obvious that scientists have used images in various ways for various purposes—analytic, experimental, and didactic. Monday's anatomy lecturer might find an undoctored photograph suitable, while Tuesday's might find an artistically colored version of the same image more to his purpose. But these straightforward practical choices assume enormous importance for Daston and Galison. They write of the "vaunted objectivity" of photography, uncover a dark significance under every bush, and, with winks and nudges, smile at the "icy impersonality" demanded by what they call the "scientific self."

The Australian philosopher David Stove once described the characteristic tone of works like this as combining "flippancy and menace." What is mainly menaced by these authors is common sense—but flippancy abounds. Those who take scientific objectivity seriously are met with a continual fusillade of adjectival smirks and adverbial sneers. Scientists are mocked for their "near-fanatical efforts" to minimize unwanted effects. We are told that researchers unsatisfied by pencil drawings, and who look to cameras for help, discover "the ethical-epistemic consolations of the mechanical image." The distinguished British mathematician and engineer Charles Babbage is described not simply as recommending mechanical records: he "rhapsodizes" about them.

Of course men who spend their lives studying snowflakes are self-evidently absurd. *Objectivity* portrays them as "an illustrious lineage," obsessed with trivia, while variations on the word "assiduous" insinuate a misplaced concern for facts and truth. The very category of photographic images on which the book's aspersions fall most heavily is pejoratively defined as "mechanical," using the word as it has often been used in the past—the "rude mechanicals" of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; Swift's facetious teletransportation in the *Mechanical Operation of the Spirit*; Hazlitt's remark during his comments on Chaucer that "versification is a thing in a great degree mechanical." Backtracking and bet-hedging deepen the obfuscation: "To show that objectivity is neither an inevitable nor an eternal part of science passes no verdict on its validity." How's that again?

I should perhaps add that readers willing to endure the lumbering irony of the authors' prose may find the book not entirely without interest. Among its pages, one glimpses a gladiolus from the *Hortus Cliffortianus* of Linnaeus, and something from Audubon, while elsewhere an illustration shows the famous French physiologist Claude Bernard at work. Also included is a plate of two emus from *Voyages de découvertes aux Terres Australes* (1807–16) by the French naturalist François Péron. The original plate gives the whereabouts of these ostrich-like birds as "Nouvelle-Hollande," the name for Australia bestowed by the seventeenth-century Dutch navigator Abel Tasman, and the one that Péron preferred. Somewhat impulsively Daston and Galison have translated "Nouvelle-Hollande" as "New Zealand." Historically, there were as many emus in New Zealand as elephants in Kent—subjectively, objectively, whatever. Just an editorial slip I suppose.

It's hard to know what to do about grown men and women at the highest levels of academic life who seriously believe that the ideal of fidelity in scientific representation has been discarded, or that modern technical imaging has surrendered any claim to be a truthful record of events, even when billions of sports fans all over the world know otherwise. It is fairly obvious that the authors' "way of being," not to mention their "way of knowing," needs therapy: perhaps a visit to Boggabilla would help. Plus a sharp knock on the sconce with a cricket ball, faithfully rendered in ghostly black and white, showing exactly where the enlightening blow was struck.