

The New Criterion

November 2012

A monthly review *edited by Roger Kimball*

Notes & Comments, 1

Loss & gain, or the fate of the book *by Anthony Daniels*, 4

An old-fashioned picaro *by Pat Rogers*, 10

Mining the ash heap *by Alexandra Mullen*, 14

Chekhov's enlightenment *by Gary Saul Morson*, 20

New poems *by Dick Allen, Jeffrey Harrison*

& J. Allyn Rosser, 28

Fiction chronicle *by Stefan Beck*, 31; **Theater** *by Kevin D. Williamson*, 37;

Art *by Karen Wilkin, Leann Davis Alspaugh, Christie Davies, Mario Naves,*

& James Panero, 42; **Music** *by Jay Nordlinger*, 55; **The media** *by James Bow-*

man, 60; **Books:** *Charles R. Kesler I am the change reviewed by James Piereson*, 65;

Roberto Calasso La folie Baudelaire reviewed by Jeffrey Meyers, 69; *Seán Lawlor & John*

Pilling, editors The collected poems of Samuel Beckett reviewed by Paul Dean, 71;

Nathan Harden Sex & God at Yale reviewed by Emily Esfahani Smith, 73; *R. Emmett*

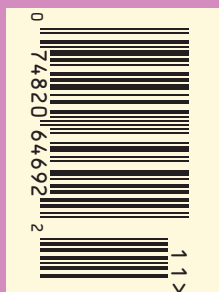
Tyrrell, Jr. The death of Liberalism reviewed by Andrew Roberts, 75; *David Horowitz*

Radicals reviewed by Mark Bauerlein, 76; *J. G. Ballard Miracles of life reviewed by*

Brian P. Kelly, 78; **Notebook:** *The Widmer uncertainty principle by Tess Lewis*,

81; *Eugene D. Genovese, 1930–2012 by Robert L. Paquette*, 85

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The New Criterion *November 2012*

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Editors' Note: This month's essay by Anthony Daniels is the first installment of a series on the challenges posed by the digital revolution to the world of culture. We are delighted to acknowledge that the Hertog/Simon Fund for Policy Analysis provided critical support for this series.

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Notes & Comments: November 2012

John Silber, 1926–2012

When John Silber died, age eighty-six, at the end of September, he was at work on an essay for *The New Criterion*. I was very much looking forward to the piece. It was to be a review of Martin Duberman's new biography of the left-wing historian Howard Zinn (1922–2010), the author of the anti-American bestseller *A People's History of the United States*. John had often crossed swords with Zinn at Boston University, where Zinn was a professor and where John reigned as President from 1971 to 1996 and then as Chancellor until 2003. Duberman's biography is certain to be an exercise in hagiography, probably of the fawning variety, and John's anatomy of the book and its subject promised to be a piquant addition to his library of salubrious polemic.

I deeply regret that John did not complete the review, but I was not surprised. I had spoken to him just a couple of weeks before his death. He was as cogent and cheerful as ever but was clearly fighting a formidable battery of ailments. I was abroad when the news came that he had died. I returned a few days later to find a brief letter from him informing me that his illness was terminal and thanking me for our friendship. It was written two days before his death.

If we lay aside our customary editorial voice in these notes, it is because John was such a close personal friend. I had first met John some time in the late 1980s, but it was not until after I published my book *Tempered Radicals* in 1990 that we became friends and ideological allies. A look at my files shows that I have well over

one hundred letters from John—only occasionally in the last couple of years did he resort to email—and there are nearly as many from me to him. I mention this because it highlights one of John's signal characteristics: his intellectual and personal responsiveness. Some of his letters are brief notes bringing an article or author or event to my attention. Many are responses, often quite detailed, to something I'd written. There was, I am grateful to report, a certain quantum of praise. There was also, I am even more grateful to report, plenty of criticism. John was one of the contributors to our series on "The Betrayal of Liberalism" in the late 1990s. His essay was about what he regarded as the "core of liberalism"—more about the term "liberalism" in a moment—and he began by making the point that true liberalism cherishes candid criticism because such corrections are aids to enlightenment. "Socrates," John wrote, "taught us to prize those persons of knowledge, candor, and good will who challenge our views, and to be especially grateful when we are shown to be mistaken. For then we exchange a false opinion for a truer one."

This is a point that will be familiar not only to readers of Plato but also to readers of John Stuart Mill. John understood Mill's limitations. We were at one in our admiration for James Fitzjames Stephen's *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity*, a devastating attack on what we might call Mill's libertarianism. ("Complete moral tolerance," Stephen wrote in that book, "is possible only when men have become completely indifferent to each other—that is to say,

when society is at an end.”) When I published my book *Experiments Against Reality* in 2000, John wrote me not one but two long letters. One dilated on things he liked about the book. The other was full of pointed criticisms of my treatment of Mill. He wrote two letters, he explained, because he did not want his criticisms to obscure his praise. (He didn’t have to add that he also wanted to be sure that his commendation did not obscure his criticisms.)

It must have taken hours for John to compose those two letters. Yet that was the proverbial tip of the iceberg. I was hardly the only recipient of such generous intellectual attention. Some years ago, I had occasion to see some of the assessments he wrote for BU faculty who were up for promotion or tenure. They were extraordinary for their penetration, detail, and breadth. John did not weigh in on faculty in the sciences, but in history, philosophy, literature, and kindred subjects in the humanities, he ranged in a masterly fashion.

These assessments, I should emphasize, were written by John in his capacity as president of the university. How many other presidents would have taken the time, or would have commanded the intellectual equipment, to provide such assessments? Many of the tributes John received during his lifetime, and all of the obituaries that followed his death, rightly emphasized his economic triumphs at BU. When he took office in 1971, the university was running a deficit of \$8.8 million on an annual budget of \$71 million. John reduced the deficit during his first year and thereafter not only balanced the budget every year but also generated several hundreds of millions in surplus, which he invested in faculty and infrastructure and other resources. He increased grant revenue from \$11 million in 1971 to more than \$300 million. On his watch, the endowment increased from \$18.8 million to \$700 million. When he left BU in 2003, its annual budget was \$2.5 billion and the university was in the black. Those numbers are worth bearing in mind when encountering the news—it is always presented with disapproval—that John was for many years “the highest paid”

university president. As he liked to point out, he would have been ashamed had it been otherwise. He had taken a second-rate commuter school and transformed it into a world-class research institution whose faculty boasted a clutch of Nobel laureates and whose admissions were almost as selective as the Ivies. He had earned the money.

Most of the obituaries of John acknowledge these triumphs, but they do so in a grudging context. *The New York Times*, for example, aside from misstating the facts of his severance package (the \$6.1 million John received was deferred compensation he had saved over the years, not a gift from the university) presents him primarily as a contentious figure who, however gifted, was primarily a “divisive” leader. “He survived,” the *Times* noted, “sit-ins, street protests, strikes, mass resignations, death threats, a suspicious fire that destroyed his home, a Civil Liberties Union lawsuit, federal and state investigations touching on his financial dealings, and critics who called him a tyrant and worse.”

All of this is true. But to be properly appreciated, it needs to be put alongside another salient fact: John’s extraordinary intellectual leadership. His success at BU was not just a matter of raising money, or hiring distinguished faculty (and sacking the slackers), or attracting students with higher SAT scores. Nor was it primarily a matter of facing down antinomian elements represented by leftists like Howard Zinn, though there is no doubt that John excelled at, indeed relished, confronting his opponents. (Item: When Larry Summers, then-president of a neighboring university near Boston, came a cropper after confronting a lazy but once-famous black professor, and the professor decamped to Princeton, John quipped that, had it happened at BU, he would have provided one-way limo service for the professor, “thus simultaneously improving two institutions.”)

No, in the end what set John Silber apart in the sorry world of American academia was a combination of two things: courage, on the one hand, and a passionate commitment to the life of the mind, on the other. Searching for a single word that might compass these qualities, I thought of “fierce.” John was a fierce

intellectual combatant, who thought nothing of striding into a crowded auditorium of angry students or faculty to face them down with reasoned arguments. But he was also a fierce partisan of intellectual achievement, beginning with his own work as a scholar of Kant (among many other passions) and filtering down to his embrace of excellence wherever and in whom ever he found it. Titles did not impress him. Accomplishment did. Unlike nearly all college and university presidents today—really, can you think of more than a handful of exceptions?—John was an intellectual leader as well as a competent manager. He didn't just go to the academic bourse to bid on big names: he pursued his own vision of what the university, as a home for the life of the mind, should be. That vision was rooted in a tradition going back to the Bible and the Greeks and was based on a profound understanding of human nature as both flawed and aspiring. Realizing that vision was John's real achievement at Boston University. It is sad to see how that institution has rapidly slipped back into the ranks of mediocrity and political correctness. John forged a great university out of a commuter college; I've been told that his successor said he hopes that by the time he leaves the presidency everyone will know him and his wife by their first names. It's a sort of distinction.

In many of John's obituaries, much was made of the connection between his having been born with a withered arm and his combativeness. The *Times*, for example, reported that he used the stump as a "weapon against bullies." Maybe so. John certainly didn't repine or indulge in self-pity. He taught himself to draw and sculpt (I've seen an impressive bas-relief he created of his friend Elie Wiesel) and he could play the trumpet with one hand. But he had learned there were limits. When he was a child in Texas, John decided he wanted to be a large-animal veterinarian when he grew. His father had to explain that, while John could do many things, handling large animals with one arm was not going to be one of them. John chuckled at himself when he recalled that story.

Behind John's fierceness was a large appetite for life. He and his wife, Kathryn, had eight

children and innumerable (the *Times* says twenty-six) grandchildren. One Christmas, the Silbers's holiday card was a panoramic shot of the entire clan: it looked like a picture of a small village. John was marvelous with children. When he discovered that my young son entertained a passion for Lord Nelson, John helped him conduct a battle with warships they made from hollowed out walnut shells with toothpicks for rigging and bits of paper for the sails.

All of this was not only part of John's fierceness. It was also part of his liberalism. John didn't like it that I used the term as a synonym for "left-wing." I saw what he meant. "Liberal" in the old sense, what is sometimes referred to as "classical liberalism," shares nothing but a name with what goes under that rubric today. Indeed, it is an irony of language that a word that suggests freedom and liberty should have come to describe phenomena that are so inveterately illiberal. Speech codes. Quotas. The whole machinery of political correctness. These are the engines of what goes under the name liberalism today. How different it is from the robust liberalism of an earlier time. Color-blind justice. Advancement according to merit. The ideal of disinterested inquiry: These were cardinal virtues of classical liberalism, long since abandoned.

John would not have disagreed. But he clung to the true meaning of liberalism, a meaning he gleaned from parental tutelage, Sunday school, and his early theological studies. He had, he explained, in that essay on "the core of liberalism" that I mentioned earlier, been a liberal ever since he was ten years old and stood up for an elderly black woman on the bus. He was shouted at by angry passengers who herded the woman to the back of the bus. "Looking back on this event," he wrote, "I think it was the first indication that I was a liberal." I am not sure whether, given all it has suffered, the word "liberal" can be salvaged for the noble purposes it was created to name. But I have no doubt that those purposes persist. I have seen them resplendently embodied in John Silber. *Requiescat in pace.*

—Roger Kimball

The digital challenge: I

Loss & gain, or the fate of the book

by Anthony Daniels

Editors' Note: This essay by Anthony Daniels is the first installment of a series on the challenges posed by the digital revolution to the world of culture. We are delighted to acknowledge that the Hertog/Simon Fund for Policy Analysis provided critical support for this series.

Finding myself for three or four months at a loose end on the island of Jersey, a tax haven in the English Channel, I decided to go into the archives and write a short book about three murders that took place there in as many months between December 1845 and February 1846, including that of the only policemen ever to have been done to death on the island, George Le Cronier. He was stabbed by the keeper of a brothel known as Mulberry Cottage, Madame Le Gendre, who, a true professional, struck upwards rather than downwards with her specially sharpened knife, exclaiming expressively as she did so, "Là!" Le Cronier staggered outside and said to his fellow policeman, Henri-Manuel Luce, "Oh mon garçon, je suis stabbé!" (the language of most people of the natives of the island at that time being a patois). He died a day later, and Madame Le Gendre was transported to Van Diemen's Land for life, outraging the righteous residents of Jersey with the elegance of her dress as she left the island, never to return.

Among the books I consulted in my researches in the library of the Société jersiaise was *La lyre exilée*, a book of poems published in 1847 by a French exile to the island, L. D.

Hurel. All that I was able to find out about him (Hurel was a pseudonym) was that he arrived several years before the most famous French exile to Jersey, Victor Hugo; the reasons for his exile are unknown.

La lyre exilée contained a funeral ode to Le Cronier, as well as an ode to the abolition of the death penalty. Hurel published the former ode separately just after the murder, when feelings ran high on the island; according to the author, it sold out in two editions of two thousand copies each, which means that one in twelve of the population bought it.

Having left the island, and now writing the book, I discovered that my notes from *La lyre exilée* were incomplete and I needed to consult it again. Where could I go to do so? Books don't come much more obscure: there were only twelve copies known in the world. (It is what the sellers of antiquarian books call very scarce, without ever letting on that people who are interested in it are scarcer still.) To return to Jersey was out of the question; then I discovered to my surprise, and initial pleasure, that the book had been digitized. I could consult it without leaving my study, without even shifting in my chair. I was briefly reconciled with and to the modern world.

Soon, however, my pleasure gave way to a melancholy, an unease, and even a slight bitterness. If a book as obscure as *La lyre exilée* were available online, did it not herald the extinction of the book itself, an article rendered redundant like the goose quills of old or fine sand to dry ink on paper?

If so, why should such an eventuality cause me to grieve? After all, I had felt no particular sorrow at the disappearance of the typewriter. (A film with a scene in a typing pool now strikes us as irresistibly comic, as if all those typists were simpletons or country bumpkins.) Nevertheless, I grew uneasy, like a man who had spent all his life on arcane alchemical studies only to realize towards the end, when it is too late to take up anything else, that scientific chemistry had rendered all his endeavors nugatory: that he had, in fact, devoted his earthly existence to the search for a chimera and frittered his time away on a child's illusion.

For books, whose disappearance the digitization of *La lyre exiléé* seemed to presage, have played an immense part in my life. It would be vain to suggest that I valued them only for their content, as a rationalist might say that one ought; I valued them as physical objects and have accumulated thousands of them. I am not a bibliophile in the true sense, that is to say someone who finds excitement in a misprint on page 278 which proves that the book, which he might or might not ever read, is a true first edition. Nor am I a bibliomaniac in the true sense, the kind of person who will eventually be found lying dead under a pile of books that he has incontinently or indiscriminately collected because of some psychological compulsion to accumulate. No, I am something in between the two (as a physician put it when I was a student, as he tried to explain to a patient that he had myeloma, which was neither cancer nor leukaemia, "but something in between the two.") I prefer a good edition, physically as well as literarily speaking, to a bad one; I buy more books than I read, though always with the intention of reading them; I am not an aficionado of rarity for rarity's sake, though I have some rare things, upon which the eye of the avaricious bookseller called in by my relict will immediately alight as he offers her *yardage*, \$5 a yard of books.

For the moment, however, I derive a certain comfort from looking over, and being surrounded by, my laden shelves. They are

my refuge from a world that I have found difficult to negotiate; if it had not been for the necessity of earning my living in a more practical way, I could easily, and perhaps happily, have turned into a complete book-worm, or one of those creatures like the silverfish and the small, fragile, scaly moths that spend their entire lives among obscure and seldom disturbed volumes. I would have not read to live, but lived to read.

The shelves are an elaborate hieroglyph of my life that only I can read, and that will be destroyed after my death. Never having been a scholar of anything in particular, my life has been a succession of obsessions; as some murderers return to their crimes and become *serial* killers, I am a man of serial monomanias, each lasting a few months at most, and my books reflect this. A friend of mine, looking over them, said that anyone trying to discern from my books who I was or what I did would fail; for what has the history of Haiti to do with poisoning by arsenic, or the history of thought in nineteenth-century Russia with that of premature burial, plague, cholera, and the anti-vaccination agitation? Surprising numbers of books on all these matters are to be found on my shelves; and if I needed any reassurance of my own individuality, as the increasing number of people having themselves tattooed or pierced seemingly do, these shelves would supply it.

So important are books to me that when I go into someone's house, I find myself drawn to the bookshelves, if any; I try to resist, but in the end succumb to the temptation. If all flesh is grass, all mind is books: at any rate, such is my prejudice, though I know it is not strictly true. What is absent from the shelves is as important, of course, as the silence of the dog that did not bark in the night.

My library, for the moment so solid and reliable, will dissolve after my death as surely as will my body. Some people claim that the knowledge that the atoms and molecules of which they are composed will survive to be absorbed into the wider world consoles them for the prospect of their death; and I, too, derived, until recently, some consolation from the fact that I am not really the owner of my

books, but only the temporary guardian of them until they are passed on to the guardianship of someone else. It is true that when, in earlier years, I bought a book a quarter of a millennium old I looked at the names of the previous owners inscribed on its cover or title page and thought, "Now, at last, the book has found its true owner, its final resting place—me," and pitied the previous owners for their failure to understand this, and for their ignorance of the book's final destiny. But now I am more inclined to recall that I have owned the book for thirty years; in another thirty years it will be owned, or looked after, by someone else of whose identity I know nothing, and he will suffer from precisely my delusion and that of all previous owners. (Not that this prevents me from acquiring yet more books; and the Rev. Thomas Dibdin, author of *Bibliomania: The Causes and Cure of this Fatal Disease*, describes how a bibliomaniac who was already possessed of 50,000 books sent out for more volumes from a bookseller's catalogue on his very deathbed, indeed at the very hour of his death. Was his death a happy or a sad one? Do we envy him his continued passion or smile at his sorry delusion? At any rate, his library was sold immediately afterwards at auction for far less than he had paid for it. *Bibliomania*, incidentally, underwent what was probably the largest and fastest expansion between first and second editions in the history of publishing; appearing first in 1807, it was 94 pages long; by the second edition, two years later, it had expanded to 786 pages, the expansion in itself a metonym for the bibliomaniac's problem. A century and a quarter later, Holbrook Jackson's *Anatomy of Bibliomania*, a wonderful and astonishingly erudite compendium of booklore, composed on the model of Burton's *Anatomy*, was even longer. Also incidentally, bibliomania is another section in my library, a kind of meta-library, if you will.)

But the consolation that my library will dissolve into its constituent parts in the great world of second-hand books is not as great as it was even a few years ago. Second-hand booksellers are closing their shops and transferring their businesses online because 90 percent of

their sales come from the Internet and 90 percent of their overheads come from their shops. It is a very simple business decision.

A bookseller, from whom I had been buying for nearly forty years, and with whom I had grown old, told me, shortly before he closed down his shop, that the nature of customers had changed over the years. True browsers like me, who were content to spend two or three hours among the dust to find something of whose existence they previously had had no inkling, but which, by a process of elective affinity, aroused their interest and even sparked a passion, were few and were old. In so far as young people came into his shop at all, they came to enquire whether he had such and such a book, usually required reading for some course or other; and if he had not, they left immediately, having no further interest in his stock. Their need for the book in question must have been urgent, since it was available online for delivery next day; they must have been late with an assignment. So if youth were the future, the future, at least for second-hand booksellers with shops, was bleak.

This was a genuine cultural change, my bookseller said, and not just the complaint of a man who had grown old without seeing the time pass. When he started out in the trade, young people browsed in the way that only the old now did; and so he had been overtaken by a change that owed nothing to him, as wheelwrights, coopers, or blacksmiths had once been overtaken.

So who will take my books after my death? Into what wider world will they be absorbed?

Other booksellers have told me stories that I did not find reassuring—though booksellers say of each other's stories that they are unreliable, for as a profession they are like anglers, with tales of Gutenbergs and Caxtons and Elzevirs and Vesaliuses and First Folios that got away (book-buyers are no different, of course, and I too have my stories of books that I almost bought but for some reason failed to do so).

These stories were of the wholesale abandonment or destruction of rare and valuable

books by public institutions, even of those books willed by individuals to those public institutions. It was not as if librarians were merely ambivalent or negligent of the books in their charge, but as if they actually *hated* them, as workers in chocolate factories come to hate chocolate. One bookseller in Wales told me that he found seventeenth- and eighteenth-century books dumped in a skip outside a supposed institution of learning. Another found the librarians of a county library walking over the sixteenth-century books that they had pulled from the shelves preparatory to throwing them away in order to make space for more computer terminals. The process is called *deacquisitioning*, a truly Orwellian term, as if demolition or bombing were called *debuilding*; and one of the justifications for the process is that records show that the *deacquisitioned* items have not been consulted for years, for decades. A library is no longer a repository of all that has been thought or written but a department store where the readers determine by their borrowing habits what stock should be held. If they want Dan Brown rather than the *Summa Theologica*, then that is what libraries should carry. The customer is king.

Another justification for *deacquisitioning* is the need for space, not only for computer terminals, but also for books themselves. Despite lamentations over the decline in reading as a habit among the young, more books than ever continue to be published in every conceivable field. A library containing every book published in Great Britain in just a single year would now be larger than the largest library in the world a few centuries ago; except for institutions such as the Library of Congress, the British Library, and the Bibliothèque nationale, very severe and even ruthless selection is obviously necessary. But I do not think this fully explains the ancient books in the skip, which after all could have been sold, any more than the need for living space explains the mania for the demolition of old buildings.

Be all this as it may, it is indisputable that the half-millennial hegemony of the printed page in intellectual life is now coming to an

end. Newspaper circulations, for example, are in precipitous decline everywhere in the developed world; in so far as they survive it is because those who grew up reading them still like the physical object between their hands. Nothing is so weak as the force of habit when the habits of succeeding generations change.

Repeated surveys show that children spend less time reading than did previous generations. They instead devote many hours of their waking lives to electronic screens of one kind or another: not long ago some American researchers presented their results at a conference I attended that showed that American children now spend seven hours a day, *on average*, in front of a screen, whether it be television, computer, or telephone. They asked children at randomly generated times to use the video facility of their phones to film what they were doing at the time; and this showed that many of the children had several screens around them illuminated at the same time. Would this minestrone of simultaneous electronic stimulation permanently affect their ability or willingness to concentrate on one thing, to the detriment of real intellectual attainment? The researchers did not know the answer to this; certainly, those who spent more time in front of screens did worse academically, though whether this was cause or effect they were unable to say. A child who spends sixteen hours in front of screens is unlikely to differ from a child who spends only an hour in front of them only in this respect.

People of the book, such as I, not only believe that the replacement of the page by the screen will alter human character, thin it out, empty it of depth, but secretly *hope* this happens. A deterioration in human character consequent upon the demise of the book will be, for the inveterate reader, an *apologia pro vita sua*. For we who have spent so much of our lives with, and even for books secretly derived a sense of moral superiority from having done so. This is obvious from the fact that no one says “Young people nowadays do not read” in a tone other than of lament or, more usually, moral condemna-

tion. A person who does not read—and for us reading means books—is a mental barbarian, a man who, wittingly or unwittingly, confines himself to his own experience, necessarily an infinitesimal proportion of all possible experiences. He is not only a barbarian, but an egotist.

We who pride ourselves in reading much and widely forget that the printed page serves us in a similar fashion as the drug serves an addict. After a short time away from it we grow agitated and begin to pine, by which time anything will do: a bus timetable, a telephone directory, an operating manual for a washing machine. “They say that life’s the thing,” said Logan Pearsall Smith, a *littérateur* of distinction but now almost forgotten, “but I prefer reading.” For how many of us—avid readers, that is—has the printed page been a means of avoidance of the sheer messiness, the intractability, of life, to no other purpose than the avoidance itself? It is for us what the *telenovela* is for the inhabitant of the Latin American barrio, a distraction and a consolation. We gorge on the printed page to distract ourselves from ourselves: the great business of Doctor Johnson’s life, according to Boswell and Johnson himself. Or we read to establish a sense of superiority, or at least to ward off a sense of inferiority: “What, you haven’t read *Ulysses*?”

Once, staying overnight at an airport hotel in Los Angeles, I found myself without a book. How this happened I can no longer recall; it was most unusual, for by far the most useful lesson that life has taught me, and one that I almost always heed, is never to go anywhere without a book. (In Africa, I have found that reading a book is an excellent way of overcoming officials’ obstructionism. They obstruct in order to extract a bribe to remove the obstruction; but once they see you settled down for the long term, as it were, with a fat book, *Moby-Dick*, say, they eventually recognize defeat. Indeed, I owe it to African officialdom that I have read *Moby-Dick*; I might otherwise never have got through it.)

Reduced in my Los Angeles room to a choice between television and the yellow

pages—no doubt now also on the verge of extinction—I chose the yellow pages, and there discovered just how unusual my obsession with books was. I looked up bookstores, and found no more than half a page. Teeth-whitening dentists, on the other hand, who promised a completely renewed existence to their clients, a confident smile being the secret of success, and success of happiness, took up more than twenty pages. Not poets, then, but teeth-whitening dentists, are now the unacknowledged legislators of the world.

An intellectual might be defined as someone who elaborates justifications for his own tastes and preferences, as metaphysics was once defined as the finding of bad reasons for what we all believe on instinct. And so the reader of books soon finds reasons for the supposed superiority of the printed page over the screen of the electronic device: for nothing stimulates the brain quite like the need for rationalization. The dullest of minds, I have found, works at the speed of light when a rationalization is needed.

The page of a book is aesthetically pleasing as a screen is not: except that many pages of many books are not aesthetically pleasing. It is easier to retrace one’s steps in a book than on a screen: but only for those who are not as technologically adept as the young now are. It is easier to annotate a page of a book than a page of a screen: but the same objection applies. It is easier to concentrate long and seriously on a book than on a screen: but there is no intrinsic reason to the medium why this should be so, any more than there is, *pace* the late Neil Postman, why television should be given over to vulgarity and trivia. We bibliophiles are reduced to finding bad reasons for what we believe on instinct.

I asked one of my publishers (a man in a small way of business, as all my publishers are) whether he thought the book would survive. He, after all, was more interested in the question than most, and self-interest—among businessmen, not among academics—is a powerful stimulus to the search for truth. He said that he thought that it would, though

such genres as pulp fiction and airport novels would soon be entirely digitized. Books of greater or exceptional content, or with high aesthetic value, would continue to be published. I immediately felt relieved, and told him that in these matters he was my guru: his prognostications assumed in my mind the status of fact. But he warned me against placing my faith in him, for most of his predictions had turned out to be exactly the opposite of what happened. “Then you shall be my *urug*, my mirror-image guru,” I said.

I saw at once that the concept of an *urug* was a useful one, for many are the experts in various fields—economics, for example—who are valuable as guides to reality, provided that you take them as *urugs* and not as gurus. The problem lies in deciding which is which.

Whether the book survives or not, I am firmly of the opinion that it *ought* to survive, and nothing will convince me otherwise. The heart has its beliefs that evidence knows not of. For me, to browse in a bookshop, especially a second-hand one, will forever be superior to browsing on the internet precisely because chance plays a much larger part in it. There are few greater delights than entirely by chance to come across something not only fascinating in itself, but that establishes a quite unexpected connection with something else. The imagination is stimulated in a way that the more logical connections of the Internet cannot match; the Internet will make people literal-minded.

There are stages on a trade’s road to extinction, and the second-hand book trade is no exception. It is now overwhelmingly conducted online, and small towns of my acquaintance that used to have several such bookshops now have none. The *métier* of the book-searcher is no longer in existence, and the immense arcane knowledge that book-searchers once had is now quite useless. Instead there are sites that claim to have 100,000,000 volumes for sale, and this, of course, is an inestimable boon to those who need, or want, a certain book urgently. At the touch of a few keys, a book that once would have taken a lifetime to find will be delivered to your door tomorrow or the next day.

But every gain is also a loss. The pleasure of a book delivered in this fashion (though it exists, of course) is not as great, not as intense, as that of one found by chance, unexpectedly. Perhaps there is a wider lesson here: you cannot have it all, you cannot reconcile all possible sources of pleasure. You cannot have the joys of serendipity and those of the convenience of immediate access to everything. Furthermore, it seems that you cannot choose between them as technology advances. To adapt Marx’s dictum about history slightly, Man makes his own pleasures, but not just as he pleases. To refuse to use the new technology in the hope of preserving old pleasures will not work because to do so would be no more authentic or honest than Marie Antoinette playing shepherdess. The regret is genuine; the refusal is not.

An old-fashioned picaro

by Pat Rogers

One upon a time, and a very good time it was in many ways, people with a broad education in the humanities would routinely encounter novels like *Roderick Random*.¹ All round the world, students taking courses on Brit Lit had little chance of avoiding Tobias Smollett, unless they managed to track down some alternative option that allowed them to go off piste into a subject like Old Norse. He figured among the early masters of English fiction (women didn't get a look in, prior to Fanny Burney and Jane Austen). But today the syllabus of a literature program may well include film noir, graphic novels, rap or vampire videos—in most schools it would be easier to get specialist instruction on fans' responses to Buffy the Vampire Slayer than on the work of, say, George Meredith. This is particularly bad luck for Smollett, who was in fact more popular among lit majors (or so it was reported) than any of the other founding fathers of the novel. But he has few liberal credentials, and he has been expelled from the canon along with some greater writers. Of all those dead white males who once arrogated eighteenth-century literature to themselves, he is now close to the deadest, since he was always the most obviously "male" in his outlook and approach to writing.

Why did he rank so highly with those coming to the period for the first time? One

¹ *The Adventures of Roderick Random*, by Tobias Smollett, edited by James G. Basker; University of Georgia Press, 640 pages, \$89.95.

reason lies in the very circumstance that has ensured his swift dislodgment from the historical pantheon: he wasn't much of a technical innovator. Unlike Richardson, he did not divert the focus of his works to the inner life of characters, especially women. Unlike Fielding, he did not engineer meticulously organized plots, or set up elaborate mock-heroic allusions to the classics. Unlike Sterne, he did not subvert conventional expectations of narrative, twisting the time sequence and proceeding through rapid shifts in mood and linguistic register. Rather, Smollett stuck to traditional patterns of storytelling, with an uncomplicated first-person narrator in the case of early books like *Roderick Random*, and a healthy dose of sex and violence. This made him an easier read for absolute beginners. It used to be said that teenagers demanded three things of a movie: nudity, damage to property, and flouting of authority—all supplied by *Random*, together with toilet humor. That list of requirements may have applied more to boys than girls, but then Smollett never ran any risk of being coopted into chick lit. Sometimes, indeed, he is regarded as a misogynistic writer—but we shall come back to that.

All these attributes of a book by Smollett can be sampled in his first novel. *Roderick Random* (1748) appears as the latest volume in the excellent Georgia edition of his works, which has manfully kept going since the 1980s—a fine achievement for

this relatively small press in an epoch when academic publishers have had to face an unparalleled stress test. *Random* was the work of a young man—no more than twenty-six, though he had already seen plenty of the world, including warfare in the Caribbean region after medical training in Glasgow and a fruitless spell trying to enter the London literary world. His life took a restless course, and energy is the first quality most readers notice in the novel—a proliferation of action and a remarkable verbal exuberance. The tale may not qualify as picaresque in the strictest definition, but for practical purposes that's what it is. And the narrative resembles the nature of the picaro at its heart (Roderick is the only character half-way developed): it is wild, undisciplined, excessive, wandering, inconsistent, full of itself. Since picaresque generally tells the story of a juvenile delinquent, the narrative is laced with various modes of criminality on the hero's part and, unlike Tom Jones for instance, he is never troubled by scruples.

He also undergoes almost every form of chastisement imaginable, as the victim of several assaults—getting mugged in the street more than once. Beyond this he is pressganged into the navy, seized by smugglers, cheated at cards, cast adrift on shore when his ship runs aground, fondled by a homosexual lord, accused of being a spy, sent to the debtor's prison, and a lot more. He catches yellow fever, that recurring scourge of the tropics during this period, and he is forced to fight two duels. A third is narrowly averted, after which Roderick thrusts his opponent's sword into "something (it was not a tansy) that lay smoaking on the plain," this time a Smollettian circumlocution for cow-dung that he would not always choose to employ. Any stray pisspot is liable to be emptied on his person. When he wishes to turn playwright, he is harshly rebuffed by the manager Marmozet, a name that conceals the identity of the great David Garrick—one of many celebrities whom the quarrelsome Smollett contrived to antagonize in real life.

Almost all of Roderick's dealings with women turn out disastrously until near the

very end. He is tricked by a woman of the town, finds his fiancée in bed with a man, is taken up by a sluttish bluestocking, meets a gold-digger at a politician's levee, and embarks on an affair with a young beauty who is then revealed as "a wretched hag turned of seventy" who "ogled [him] with her dim eyes, quenched in rheum." A notorious bawd has him arrested along with his companions for retaliating after her girls rob one of the johns. At the theater he meets an apparently "very handsome creature, genteelly dressed," in reality a gin-sodden courtesan who screams at him to pay her coach-fare when he decamps. Another one-time flame relays scandalous aspersions about him to his current love. On the way to Bath he takes up with an heiress who suffers from severe bodily deformation. This is turned into a kind of joke, as usual: "I perceived that Miss had got more twists from nature than I had before observed, for she was bent sideways into the figure of an S; so that her progression very much resembled that of a crab." All the same, he is momentarily tempted by the size of her fortune. In the end he wins the hand of the virtuous Narcissa, thanks to the help of her servant Miss Williams, a fallen woman on whom he had had designs when she presented herself as a fine lady. This represents just a sample of the scrapes into which Roderick is led in pursuit less of sexual pleasure than of financial security and social advancement. Hard to find a feminist message there.

Of course, the picaresque hero must give as good as he gets. In *Random* he beats up several annoying people he has encountered, and he has a rival whom he's just assaulted left naked, then taken off into the custody of the local watch. The narrator makes no attempt to disguise his motives: "No body can doubt my gratification, when I had every day an opportunity of seeing my revenge protracted on the body of my adversary, by the ulcers of which I had been the cause; and indeed I had the satisfaction of having flead him alive, but another also which I had not foreseen." He also engages in a variety of sharp practices, such as forging a letter,

and ultimately a fraud on his tailor, when he sells off some fine clothes for which he never paid. It is this which leads him into the Marshalsea jail, the scene of his first acquaintance with the poets, and an obvious model for the prison scenes in *Pickwick Papers*—as is well known, Dickens regarded Smollett as one of his most important precursors. The hero reports these feats with a certain deadpan relish, and the author's narrative method is too unsophisticated for us to know whether we are supposed to approve of these retaliatory urges. The local comedy suffices, and we simply have to take such fun and games as the way the world goes.

This is certainly “the most elaborate scholarly edition of *Roderick Random* yet undertaken,” as the Preface a shade unnecessarily claims. For one thing, the textual editor, as usual for the series, is O. M. Brack, Jr., pretty much the best in the business, and the bibliographical content marks a great advance on anything we have had before. The annotation is full and accurate—maybe too full, as it's hard to imagine someone capable of plowing through almost 200,000 words of great verbal density who would stumble over some terms explained here, like Hymen, Elysium, “extasy,” Torrid Zone, and Golgotha. Modern scholarly decorum requires that every word in French be translated, down to “si, moi qui vous parle.” All the character's names are scrutinized for a drop of implication, as “Jack Rattle: the surname suggests empty noise: a vacuous character.” But this falls into line with the modern idea that it is better to underestimate rather than overestimate the knowledge and intelligence of your audience, so the procedure will have its defenders.

A long introduction by James Basker presupposes a slightly higher level of response, and serves its purposes all the better for this. The treatment is effective on most aspects of the book, including its biographical background, its literary genesis and its influences. Three points raised here call for discussion. First, Basker reprints as an appendix Smollett's account of a failed military expedition on Carthage in 1741, at which the author

was present and which figures early on in the novel. The narrative was published in 1756, but Basker claims to have established that it was written as early as 1744. In sum, the evidence would lead his case to prevail in a civil suit, on the clear balance of probabilities, but I don't think it reaches the standard of proof beyond a reasonable doubt that would be needed in a criminal trial.

Second, the editor seeks to placate a missing audience when he argues that “For all its male-centeredness, *Roderick Random* is surprisingly attentive to the condition of women.” The main reason adduced is the fact that women “are often granted a degree of sexual agency.” This is true, but as the earlier summary indicates, they generally use this freedom as a license for deception or extortion. Basker concludes that “Smollett is not Austen, but there is here an intuitive understanding of the ways that women are subjugated in his world and the kinds of injustice and suffering that they endure as a result.” Others might take the view that most of the women are as unjust and exploitative as the men, and that they exist as rough caricatures rather than sympathetic studies of the female condition. Similarly, when Roderick finally achieves prosperity after a slaving trip from Guinea to Buenos Aires, and writes, “Our ship being freed from the disagreeable lading of Negroes, to whom I had indeed been a miserable slave” (as ship's surgeon), the note reads, “Roderick's ironic (and tasteless) play on the word ‘slave’ and his pronounced aversion to the actual conditions of the trade again signal his, and perhaps Smollett's, uneasiness about the ethics of traffic in slaves.” Perhaps. Basker knows more about slavery in eighteenth-century literature than anyone, but some will miss any sense of irony here, since the author has never convincingly distanced himself from the narrator.

Last, Basker asserts that the novel “daringly expanded the possibilities of fiction,” not just for writers such as Dickens and Melville, but also for twentieth-century writers. He cites names such as Conan Doyle, Faulkner, Orwell, Elizabeth Bowen, Anthony Burgess, Vonnegut, and John Barth. Some of

these made approving noises once or twice, but display no influence of any substance in their own work. Barth especially did find in Smollett a useful stalking horse, but even he reworked his model towards satiric and debunking ends. As for Orwell, he is selectively quoted, and actually gave a mixed verdict. He wrote that “Inevitably a great deal that [Smollett] wrote is no longer worth reading, even including, perhaps, his most-praised book, *Humphrey Clinker*,” and though he praised *Random* highly, he called Smollett “a writer of long, formless tales full of farcical and improbable adventures,” not what modern academic defenders of the novels tend to assert. Perversely, Orwell’s essay on “Scotland’s Best Novelist” omits all mention of a vastly more influential figure in the history of the novel, Walter Scott.

The point is worth laboring, since Basker uses the authors that he cites to support an earlier judgment: “In 1814 William Hazlitt, in one of his most prescient comments, said that in contrast with *Tom Jones*, *Roderick Random* had ‘a much more modern air with it.’ The twentieth century would bear him out.” Well, possibly: but to make a proper comparison we need to set it alongside of Basker’s list of the many creative writers from Coleridge to Kingsley Amis who have spoken in equally glowing terms of Fielding. (And Dickens christened his most promising son Henry Fielding, as well as others named for Bulwer Lytton, Alfred Tennyson, Walter Landor and Sydney Smith—but none was called Tobias Smollett.) Even Ford Madox

Ford, who harbored a strong distaste for *Tom Jones*, acknowledged its centrality to the art of fiction in English. As did Virginia Woolf, with her dry comment in an essay on modern fiction, sending up unspoken assumptions about progress within the novel: “With their simple tools and primitive materials, it might be said, Fielding did well and Jane Austen even better, but compare their opportunities with ours!”

One reason that students often prefer Smollett lies in his unwillingness to impose anything resembling a distinct form on his material—characters like the Welsh pharmacist Morgan are brought back in the manner of Bob Newhart’s neighbors Larry, Darryl, and Darryl to reprise their amusing catchphrases, but they don’t supply any larger coherence, as does the lawyer Dowling when he flips in and out of the plot in *Tom Jones*. Such formlessness is easily taken for brave resistance to convention. It takes time to discover the purpose of Fielding’s symmetries and repetitions in setting up the providential drama shadowing the external action, just as it requires patience to trace the buried connections spread across the interminable spaces of *Clarissa* and readerly skill to tease out the wonderful interanimation of separate threads in *Tristram Shandy*. Smollett was a major talent who appealed to generations of readers and writers, and *Roderick Random* is up to the very best he ever produced. He doesn’t need investing with a bogus and special “modernity” to regain, or retain, his audience at the present day.

Mining the ash heap

by Alexandra Mullen

*Be no longer a chaos, but a world, or even worldkin.
Produce! Produce! Were it but the pitifullest infinitesimal
fraction of a product, produce it in God's name!
'Tis the utmost thou hast in thee: out with it, then.*

—Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus* (1834)

Get leave to work

*In this world,—'tis the best you get at all;
For God, in cursing, gives us better gifts
Than men in benediction.*

—Elizabeth Barrett Browning,
Aurora Leigh (1856)

*There is a cant abroad at the present day, that there is
a special pleasure in industry, and hence we are taught
to regard all those who object to work as appertaining
to the class of natural vagabonds; but where is the
man among us that loves labour?*

—Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and
the London Poor* (1861–62)

In 1851 Queen Victoria opened the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations. The Crystal Palace (as it came to be dubbed) housed 13,000 exhibitors—an amazing collection of human labor and ingenuity. But readers of a local London paper already had a good sense of the extraordinary variety of human labor right in their own backyard. Beginning in 1849, the *Morning Chronicle* published two or three installments a week from their metropolitan correspondent Henry Mayhew in which he presented his reports on “the industry, the want, and

the vice of the great Metropolis,” “from the lips of the people themselves,” “in their own ‘unvarnished’ language.” Mayhew walked among the London streetfolk, interviewing them, at least initially, with a kind of questionnaire and a shorthand reporter. Occasionally a photographer accompanied him; the daguerreotypes were turned into woodcuts that accompanied the articles. Throughout 1851 and 1852 Mayhew published further weekly installments on his own. When he finally collected them, they made up four fat, closely printed, double-columned volumes.

Almost as remarkable as Mayhew’s labor in collecting and writing *London Labour and the London Poor* is the pleasure his contemporaries had in reading it. Everybody seemed to follow his columns, even the street people he depicted. A gingerbread seller told Mayhew that he recognized a description of his old partner from twenty years back when they’d sold mincemeat pastries in the shape of pigs with currant eyes. But Mayhew particularly fascinated the novelists. Thackeray commented that he drew “a picture of human life so wonderful, so awful, so piteous and pathetic, so exciting and terrible, that readers of romances own they never read anything like it.” And as for Mayhew’s exact contemporary and friend Charles Dickens—well, as John D. Rosenberg notes, “To pass from Mayhew’s case-histories to Dickens’s inventions is merely to cross sides of the same street.”

It’s hard to resist the voices we hear so directly through Mayhew. Take the man I mentioned

above who has been making and selling gingerbread “nuts” after a financial misadventure:

Other great houses in the City were found that way, *they* made it all right; paid something, as I’ve heard, and sacked the profits. Well; when *I* was called on, it wasn’t, I assure you, sir—ha, ha, ha!—at all convenient for a servant—and I was only that—to pay the fifteen hundred and odd; so I served 12 months and 2 days in prison for it. I’d saved a little money, and wasn’t so uncomfortable in prison. I could get a dinner, and give a dinner. When I came out, I took to the nuts. It was lucky for me that I had a trade to turn to; for, even if I could have shown I wasn’t at all to blame about the Exchequer, I could never have got another situation—never. So the streets saved me: my nuts was my bread.

A seller of a newish treat, ice cream:

I don’t think they’ll ever take greatly in the streets, but there’s no saying. Lord! how I’ve seen the people splutter when they’ve tasted them for the first time. . . . I knew one smart servant maid, treated to an ice by her young man—they seemed as if they was keeping company—and he soon was stamping, with the ice among his teeth, but she knew how to take them, put the spoon right into the middle of her mouth, and when she’d had a clean swallow she says: “O, Joseph, why didn’t you ask *me* to tell you how to eat your ice?” The conceit of sarvant gals is ridiculous.

A ham sandwich-seller:

Once, a gent kicked my basket into the dirt, and he was going off—for it was late—but some people by began to make remarks about using a poor fellow that way, so he paid for all, after he had them counted. I am *so* sick of this life, sir. I *do* dread the winter so. I’ve stood up to the ankles in snow till after midnight, and till I’ve wished I was snow myself, and could melt like and have an end. . . . Time’s very heavy on my hands, sometimes, and that’s where you feel it. I read a bit if I can get anything to read, for I was at St Clement’s school; or I walk out to look for a job. On summer-days I sell a trotter or two. But mine’s a wretched life, and so is

most ham sandwich-men. I’ve no enjoyment of my youth and no comfort.

These snippets are taken from what Mayhew, taking himself out of the conversation, presents as long monologues; shorter vignettes are equally powerful, such as the blind hurdy-gurdy woman Sarah riding in a cab for the first time. Mayhew’s got a great eye for the odd detail, such as a candy-seller who wraps his sweeties in old Acts of Parliament. He grabs onto peculiar facts, like the profit to be made from different parts of a dead horse, which include not just hooves for combs or tendons for glue, but also blood for sugar refiners and the maggots for giving a “‘high’ flavor to pheasants.” The facts he learns are often so bizarre that he is led into imaginative speculation. When he learns that some people make money by picking up cigar-ends (by his reckoning “nearly a ton of refuse tobacco collected annually”), he wonders, Who *buys* old cigar-ends anyway? “It is supposed that they are resold to some of the large manufacturers of cigars, and go to form the component part of a new stock of the ‘best Havannahs’; or, in other words, they are worked up again to be again cast away, and again collected by the finders, and so on perhaps, till the millennium comes.”

Mayhew’s keen sympathy for the travails of the poor perhaps came naturally to him, for although he had talent and he could work hard, he found it difficult to settle on any single enterprise.

We are all innately erratic—prone to wander both in thought and action; and it is only by vigorous effort . . . that we can keep ourselves to the steady prosecution of the object, to the repeated performance of the same acts, or even to continuous attention to the same subject.

Mayhew was born in 1812, the fourth of seven sons (there were also ten daughters) of a respectable solicitor in London. Their father was strict: “While living at home, if any son returned home after midnight, he would find the house locked. His father would toss a shilling from an upper window, telling the

offender to ‘go and get yourself a bed somewhere else.’” Mayhew attended the historically prestigious Westminster School, but he ran away from school at fifteen “under some sense of ill-usage”—he’d been caught reading his Greek grammar during chapel and refused to face the punishment of flogging. He served for a year or so as a midshipman on an India run. On his return, he proved an incompetent assistant in his father’s legal practice. Michael Faraday was a friend of the family, and during the 1830s young Henry thought he too might become a chemist—he did, at any rate, conduct a number of experiments including one trying to make artificial diamonds that nearly blew up his brother’s house.

As an adult, Mayhew was in and out of debt and even declared bankruptcy; he was apparently unable or uninterested in holding a job for more than a year or two. Contemporaries commented upon his indolence, his bursts of energy, his charm. Whatever his experience, though, he was quick to turn it into sellable literary material whether in fugitive journalism for Fleet Street or in comic novels and plays co-written with a brother. Out of the miscellany of writing jobs to which he turned his hand, he emerged in 1841 as one of the founders of *Punch*, only to be kicked out of his position as editor after less than a year. Such was his life until his mid-thirties. But then, what had looked to be a makeshift, if jovial, life turned out to be an apprenticeship that perfectly fitted him to be the author of *London Labour and the London Poor*. King Cholera was the catalyst.

Asiatic Cholera first arrived at the port of London in 1831 where it found a perfect environment. The population of London had almost doubled since the beginning of the century and the problem worsened more sharply beginning in 1845 when huge numbers of Irish displaced by the potato famine came to London. The Thames had become an open sewer, and, still unbeknownst to the inhabitants, cholera is a waterborne bacteria found in feces. In three months during the summer of 1849, 13,000 Londoners died, 432 of them on just one day in early September. The Whiggish and evangelical *Morning Chronicle* asked Mayhew to report. And Mayhew, based

in the capital of what was arguably the most advanced city in the world, went to “the very capital of cholera . . . the Venice of drains.” This was Jacob’s Island, the squalid London neighborhood where Bill Sikes goes to earth after murdering Nancy in *Oliver Twist* (1838).

After this assignment, Mayhew was newly impassioned. With the same energy as those other fearlessly energetic Victorian tabulators, engineers, and reformers, Mayhew set out to bring his sharp attention to Work—as his subtitle declares, “those that *will* work, those that *cannot* work, and those that *will not* work.” (By Volume IV he adds another class: “those that need not work.” But this is merely a logical afterthought—he’s not really interested in them, and as far as I know he never interviewed any landlords, shareholders, pensioners, sinecurists, sleeping partners, or protégés.) He rolled up his sleeves and tried to get organized.

Those who obtain their living in the streets of the metropolis are a very large and varied class; indeed the means resorted to in order to “pick up a crust,” as the people call it, in the public thoroughfares (and such in many instances it *literally* is,) are so multifarious that the mind is long baffled in its attempts to reduce them to scientific order or classification.

Mayhew began with the largest—or at any rate the most visible—of London laborers, the costermongers, that is, the people who you’d see hawking their wares on respectable streets. So he categorizes them by what they sell: fish, fruit and vegetables, game, poultry, rabbits, butter, cheese, eggs, trees, shrubs, flowers, roots, seeds, branches, green stuff, eatables and drinkables, literature and the fine arts, and manufactured articles. But wait—some street sellers remained stationary, at a designated location every day, and some moved about. Would that be a better way to classify them? Some were women, some were children, or Irish . . . Mayhew regrouped, came up with more categories, and went out to collect more stories and data. By the beginning of Volume IV, despising the government’s mingy categories of labor, he has devised his

own Classification of the Workers and Non-Workers of Great Britain that includes both himself (reporters are I.B.3.p) and the Sovereign (IV.B.1.a). It is sixteen pages long and so comprehensive that on one occasion his growing subheads require him to draw on the Greek alphabet (II.B.5.b.α includes Cabmen, Donkey-boys, Goat-carriage boys, Sedan and Bath Chair Men, and Guides).

Mayhew was faced with people who sold eels or second-hand nutmeg-graters or engravings displayed inside umbrellas (pictures of kittens sold particularly well) or conundrums or views through a microscope or themselves. Is Mayhew just running around in circles when he divides “cheap workmen” into these three classes?

1. The unskillful.
2. The untrustworthy.
3. The inexpensive.

But no matter how idiosyncratic or super-specific the lines he drew, “Many classes of labour are necessarily uncertain or fitful in their character” due to seasonal work or industrial innovation or economic fluctuations. People might perform several different kinds of labor. The legless nutmeg-grinder vendor sells any other items he can; the street microscope exhibitor has a weekday job; one informant has been a cottonspinner, a navy, a soldier, and a prisoner, before falling out of the world of work altogether to become a vagrant. (More about vagrants in a bit.) By the time Mayhew gets around to his third volume, he’s throwing his hands in the air:

I would rather have pursued some more systematic plan in my inquiries; but in the present state of ignorance as to the general occupation of the poor, system is impossible. I am unable to generalize, not being acquainted with the particulars; for each day’s investigation brings me incidentally into contact with a means of living utterly unknown among the well-fed portion of society.

Ah, the “well-fed portion of society.” A large part of Mayhew’s problem is that work

seems to be everywhere he looks no matter how small the task, like a man who makes the eyes of dolls. But as he works his way down the scale to, say, homeless children, another problem comes in identifying work that might not look like work to middle-class eyes at all. What at first glance looks like kids larking about on the banks of the Thames turns out on closer inspection to be “mudlarks”—mostly little boys and girls and old women—scavenging knee-deep in the slime at low tide for junk to resell: “coal, bits of old-iron, rope, bones, and copper nails that drop from ships.” Mayhew identifies a number of similar occupations: people who gather and sell rags, bottles, glass, waste paper, used tea leaves, dogs’ dung.

Mayhew spends a lot of energy getting his largely well-fed audience to understand the value of these incremental pieces of work. Take, for example, the people who trade in waste paper. He converts the waste paper to a unit middle-class readers are likely to understand—½ oz letters: “It would supply material, as respects weight, for *forty-four millions, seven hundred and twenty-eight thousand, four hundred and thirty* letters on business, love, or friendship.” He reckons, “The gross total . . . we may firmly put . . . at a million and a half of pound sterling!” That’s a lot of business, love, and friendship. With indignant italics, Mayhew points out that these workers on the margins, in gutters, sewers, alleys, chimneys, and garbage heaps, contribute their mite to the British economy: “They are classed as unauthorized or illegal and intrusive traders, though they *‘turn over’ millions in a year.*”

Part of Mayhew’s purpose in making this “defense of the poor” is to persuade the “well-fed portions of society” that the streetfolk provide economic value; often (although he eschews the “sheer sentimentality” of allowing feelings rather than judgment to form opinions) he pleads for them on the high ground of human sympathy; sometimes, as he addresses the well-fed, he aims lower: “if we knew but the whole of the facts concerning them, and their suffering and feelings, our very fears alone for the safety of the state would be sufficient to make us do something

in their behalf.” The threat of the mob is not an idle appeal just a few years after the political convulsions of 1848.

By the end of the third volume, Mayhew would seem at long last to be approaching closure, the bottom class of those who *will not* work and who slide into the criminal classes: vagrants. The class of vagrant raises a new moral dimension. Mayhew fears vagrants are such both by “disposition and principle”—and thus their degraded condition is a function of both nature *and* will.

Here is Mayhew’s stab at defining “vagrant.”

A vagrant . . . is an individual applying himself continuously to no one thing, nor pursuing any one aim for any length of time, but wandering from this subject to that, as well as from one place to another, because in him no industrial habits have been formed, nor any principle or purpose impressed upon his nature.

This is raw, unconstructed, unredeemed human nature, and it’s not a pretty sight. But how to distinguish a parasitic vagrant from an honest working man who is traveling to seek new employment? In this matter, classification can have serious real-world consequences. As Mayhew points out, “To refuse asylum to the vagrant is to shut out the traveller; so hard is it to tell the one from the other.” For although they might look identical, vagrants “are the very opposite to the industrious classes, with whom they are too often confounded.” But their misleading appearance is not the worst problem; even this theoretic dividing line between traveler and vagrant can become blurred or, worse, erased completely if the acquired habits of work slip away: “Another class of vagrants consists of those who having been thrown out of employment, have travelled through the country, seeking work without avail. . . . The industrious workman has become changed into the habitual beggar.” Culture can too easily fall back into nature.

Mayhew declares himself “anxious” that his well-fed audience “should see that the working class is as respectable and worthy as

the vagrants are degraded and vicious.” But he seems anxious on his own account as well.

What did Mayhew’s work look like to other people? He worked on the streets of London gathering odd nuggets of information just as the mudlarks or purefinders gather lumps of coal or dung. Few people were as aware as he just how little such scavenging, piecemeal work, however incrementally useful, was valued or even recognized. There had been a number of philanthropic do-gooders and parliamentary fact-gatherers interviewing the poor, but there was really no precedent for the occupation of going around asking questions for the advancement of some kind of not very clear knowledge. Was Mayhew an intellectual vagrant?

One of the more than peripheral interests in reading *London Labour and the London Poor* is watching Mayhew searching for a model for what he was doing, trying to fit his own work into respectably preset categories. To start with, he compares himself to an explorer like James Bruce tracing the source of the Nile, a “traveller in the undiscovered country of the poor.” Only one page later, he compares himself to the early ethnologist James Prichard, the author of *The Natural History of Man* (1843)—after all, they both studied “the wanderers and the settlers—the vagabond and the citizen—the nomadic and the civilized tribes.” Sometimes he is eager to impress others with his rigor: “I made up my mind to deal with human nature as a natural philosopher or a chemist deals with any material object.” (At such times, he might briefly adopt technical-sounding language, alluding to “the physics and economy of vice,” or defining the “allobism” of the streetfolk, dividing them into the “energetic” and the “an-ergetic.”)

It certainly looks like he’s flailing about for a respectable category in which to place his own work. But in a speech he gave to about fifty ticket-of-leave men (basically parolees) that he later included in Volume III of *London Labour and the London Poor*, on what would be page 1,427, he reaches a conclusion about his role.

When I first went among you, it was not very easy for me to make you comprehend the pur-

pose I had in view. You at first fancied that I was a Government spy, or a person in some way connected with the police. I am none of these, nor am I a clergyman wishing to convert you to his particular creed, nor a teetotaler anxious to prove the source of all evil to be overindulgence in intoxicating drink; but I am simply a literary man, desirous of letting the rich know something more about the poor. (Applause.) Some persons study the stars, others study the animal kingdom, others again direct their researches into the properties of stones, devoting their whole lives to these particular vocations. I am the first who has endeavored to study a class of my fellow-creatures whom Providence has not placed in so fortunate a position as myself, my desire being to bring the extremes of society together—the poor to the rich, and the rich to the poor. (Applause.)

Mayhew has earned the honest applause of ex-convicts looking for work, not least because he'd persuaded the police to stay away from the meeting.

In an age that genuflected to the idea of work—and there are worse gods—Mayhew graphically showed that work can be irksome, humiliating, painful, dangerous, coarsening, soul-destroying drudgery. And he could do it with some authority because his readers can see him struggling as hard and sometimes as fruitlessly as the workers he labored to describe. Free from cant, *London Labour and the London Poor* was, in great part, a remarkable labor of love.

Mayhew's early habits of losing interest in one project and moving on to another continued. The scholar James Bennett points out Mayhew "abandoned some works unfinished—*Low Wages* in mid-sentence, *Criminal Prisons* on page 498." He wrote and wrote and wrote, including biographies of famous figures as young men (Davy, Franklin, and Luther), and, after trips to Germany, *The Upper Rhine and its Picturesque Scenery* and *German Life and Manners as Seen in Saxony at the Present Day*; he acted with Dickens and wrote a flop with his son. As Mayhew later said of himself: "I had been everywhere—seen everything which

maybe a gentleman should not." He died in 1887, not much regarded. When Dover first reprinted all four volumes in the interesting year 1968, W. H. Auden, a writer not much given to exaggeration, wrote in his review, "I am inclined to think that, if I had to write down the names of the ten greatest Victorian Englishmen, Henry Mayhew would head the list."

One quality *London Labour and the London Poor* shares with the novels of his contemporaries is being very long. As Christopher Herbert notes, "The salient stylistic features of *London Labour* are its mind-boggling profusion and density of ethnographic detail and its resultant sense of uncontrollable expansiveness, features which both give this text its gigantic power and at the same time, paradoxically, render it next to unreadable." A very readable selection with a wide-ranging and deeply knowledgeable introduction by Robert Douglas-Fairhurst has recently been published.¹ But is being "readable" really true to the experience of reading Mayhew? Troubling to our consciences might be John D. Rosenberg's observation in his introduction to the Dover edition that portions of it might "provide the reader with a gallery of picturesque portraits but tear from the fabric of the work the larger social background that gives it coherence and authority." The new Oxford edition is only about one-tenth of the original. Thus we risk becoming mere touristic vagrants, gawking at one curiosity before moving on to the next. But Mayhew's willingness to risk being thought a vagrant turned out to be the quality that revealed his genius. We could do worse as we dip into it than take the ever curious, ever earnest, and ever distractible Mayhew himself as our model, observing and analyzing, marveling and doubting, connecting dots and making wild surmises.

1 *London Labour and the London Poor: A Selected Edition*, by Henry Mayhew, edited by Robert Douglas-Fairhurst; Oxford University Press, 472 pages, \$24.95. The complete four volumes are out of print but are available online.

Chekhov's enlightenment

by Gary Saul Morson

Chekhov's contemporaries wondered: What sort of Russian writer was he? He had no solution to the ultimate questions. With no "general idea" to teach, wasn't he more like a talented Frenchman or Englishman born in the wrong place?

No country ever has valued literature more highly than Russia. When Tolstoy published *Anna Karenina*, Dostoevsky enthused that at last the existence of the Russian people had been justified! Can anyone imagine an English critic thinking England's right to exist was in question or discovering it in *Bleak House*?

Nations, it seemed, live in order to produce great literature, and literature exists to reveal great truths. Science, philosophy, and the other arts are all very well, but nothing rivals poetry and fiction. For Russians, literature played the same role as Scripture did for the ancient Hebrews when it was still possible to add books to the Bible.

Boris Pasternak proclaimed: "a book is a squarish chunk of hot, smoking conscience—and nothing else!" The radical writer Nicholas Chernyshevsky explained that, whereas European countries have developed an intellectual "division of labor," Russia concentrates its energies on literature:

For that reason . . . literature plays a greater role in our intellectual life than French, German, and English literature play in the intellectual life of their respective countries, and it bears greater responsibilities. . . . Russian literature has the direct duty of taking an interest

in the subject matter that has elsewhere passed into the special competence of other fields of intellectual activity.

How many people can name a Russian philosopher, economist, or sociologist? The reason it is hard is that talented Russians with something to say wrote novels or, at least, literary criticism. If you had an idea about psychology, you would write a book on Dostoevsky. Philosophers of sex commented on Tolstoy.

Even today, Russians treat great writers as soothsayers. Historians cite Tolstoy's rather fanciful portrait of General Kutuzov in *War and Peace* as if it were truer than any mere document. Above all, writers were expected to offer *enlightenment*, a word used with great reverence. Its opposite, *mrakobesie* (obscurantism, but literally "demon-darkness"), suggested pure evil. And then there was Chekhov, who was second only to Tolstoy among contemporaries, but had no special "tendency" or "idea." Tolstoy preached Tolstoyanism, but there has never been any "Chekhovism." Chekhov presented himself as a physician who made house calls and wrote hundreds of stories a year to pay the bills.

Chekhov was no aristocrat, as were Pushkin, Turgenev, and Tolstoy. He cultivated neither their refined manners nor the equally meticulous "anti-manners" of the radicals. Unlike Chernyshevsky and Stalin, he was neither a priest's son nor a seminarian,

the most typical origin for a radical. The son of a failed shopkeeper from a remote town, he was always unapologetically concerned with money, down to earth in his manners, and practical.

Chekhov never forgot that his grandfather had been a serf who had saved enough to buy his family's freedom, but he refused to carry a chip on his shoulder. He spoke of self-pity and the consciousness of victimhood in a tone verging on disgust. Those emotions belonged to the servile consciousness he wanted to rise above. Already a well-known writer in his late twenties, Chekhov confided to his publisher Alexey Suvorin:

What gently born writers have been endowed with by nature, self-made intellectuals buy at the price of their youth. Write me a story about a young man, the son of a serf, a former shopkeeper . . . offering thanks for every morsel of bread, often whipped . . . fond of . . . playing the hypocrite before God and people without any cause, except out of a recognition of his own insignificance—and then tell how that young man squeezes the slave out of himself drop by drop and how he wakes up one fine morning and feels that in his veins flows not the blood of a slave, but of a real human being.

Understandably enough, Chekhov developed an uncompromising work ethic. As his tales and plays illustrate, Russians tended to value carelessness, idleness, and deliberate waste of resources, while regarding thrift as something fit for Germans. Chekhov saw in such attitudes the reason for Russia's backwardness and self-righteous oppression of others. When he heard some Russians criticize the British exploitation of Hong Kong, he replied: "Yes, the English exploit the Chinese, the Sepoys, and the Hindus, but they do give them roads, aqueducts, museums, and Christianity; you exploit them too, but what do you give them?"

When Chekhov entered medical school, he spent his time studying, not engaging in politics. Believe it or not, the status "former student" was a badge of honor among intellectuals because it implied political ex-

pulsion, but Chekhov despised laziness disguised as moral superiority. No one ever had a keener nose for the fake.

What really set Chekhov apart from other intellectuals, including most today, were his openly petit-bourgeois values. I can think of no other great writer who so forthrightly defended middle-class virtues as a prerequisite for human dignity. Medicine suited him, not only because of his acute sensitivity to human suffering but also because of the high value it accorded to proper habits, respect for one's surroundings, and, most bourgeois of all, good hygiene.

Chekhov wound up supporting not only his parents but also his siblings and their families. He used to reproach his talented brothers for their slovenly habits, for their casual attitude about sex, for wasting their gifts, and then, to top it off, for claiming to be oppressed. His famous letter to his brother Nikolai seems directed to all those advanced people, then and since, who disparage the "bourgeois":

In my opinion people of culture must fulfill the following conditions:

1. They respect the human personality and are therefore forbearing, gentle, courteous, and compliant.
2. They are sympathetic not only to beggars and cats. Their heart aches for things they don't see with the naked eye.
3. They respect the property of others, and therefore pay their debts.
4. They are pure of heart and therefore fear lying like fire. They do not lie even in small matters.
5. . . . They don't play upon the heartstrings in order to excite pity . . . because all this is striving after cheap effect, and is false.
6. They don't occupy themselves with such imitation diamonds as acquaintances with celebrities.
7. If they have talent, they respect it.
8. They develop an aesthetic taste. They cannot bring themselves to look with unconcern at a crack in the wall with bedbugs in it, breathe foul air, walk across a floor that has been spat on. . . . They try as far as possible to restrain and ennoble the sexual instinct. . . . They don't

swill vodka . . . For they need to have *mens sana in corpore sano*.

It is not enough to have memorized a monologue from Faust. . . .

What you need is constant work, and will power.

Pay one's debts? Be courteous? Clean up after oneself? Aren't great writers supposed to disparage such trivialities?

In Chekhov's novella *The Duel*, the hero Laevsky, a cultured man with immense charm, misbehaves in all these false ways while considering himself "the destined victim of the age." Sometimes it is hard not to sympathize with the social Darwinist van Koren, who wants to improve humanity by killing Laevsky in a duel. And yet, strangely enough, Laevsky's brush with death, along with the discovery that his lover has been unfaithful, makes a new man of him. Even van Koren can hardly believe how devoted to hard work his enemy grows.

Surrendering his pose of intellectual superiority, Laevsky behaves more kindly to his neighbors, not just to "beggars and cats." He takes his life in hand, not because he has discovered some great truth like the heroes of other Russian novels, but because he realizes he never will. The novella ends: "Nobody knows the real truth," thought Laevsky, turning up the collar of his overcoat and thrusting his hands in his sleeves. . . . A light rain began to fall." It is as if his gestures acknowledge the perpetual inclemency and uncertainty of human life.

Was there ever a great writer to whom cleanliness meant so much? Chekhov's characters often begin to understand their mistaken choices when they experience revulsion at sheer filth. The heroine of "The Grasshopper" considers her husband a good, kind, and intelligent man, so much so that he bores her. Such a limited person, she reasons, cannot reasonably object to her infidelity with charismatic literary lions and artists. She at last doubts herself when she watches her lover eat:

Just then the servant woman came up to him holding a plate of cabbage soup carefully in

both hands, and Olga Ivanovna noticed that her thick thumbs were wet with the soup. And the dirty woman with her skirt drawn tight over her stomach, the cabbage soup, which Ryabovsky fell upon eagerly, the hut, this life which had at first seemed so delightful in its simplicity and artistic disorder, now struck her as appalling.

Who but Chekhov would have made an understanding of life turn on the perception of dirty fingers in some soup? The heroine barely recognizes the importance of her disgust, and her changed understanding depends on no dramatic action, but, in only a moment, what looked like "artistic disorder" has begun to turn her stomach.

Readers who expect revelations to follow dramatic events often miss the key moments in Chekhov stories. A small lie, a minor cruelty, or a forgotten kindness, often accompanied by a slovenly habit, may provoke unwelcome self-discovery. There is nothing like realizing that people see you not as glamorous or romantic, but in need of clean underwear.

The heroine of *The Duel* sees herself as an enchanting, fallen woman, like Anna Karenina, until her friend disabuses her. "Forgive me, my dear, but you are not clean in your person. When we met in the bathhouse, you made me shudder. . . . Your house is dreadful, simply dreadful! No one else in town has flies, but you can't get rid of them, your plates and saucers are black with them. . . . And one is embarrassed to go into your bedroom." The heroine replies, habitually but now shakily, "All that isn't worth bothering about. . . . If only I were happy, but I'm so unhappy!" Of course, her slovenliness, along with the slack behavior and thought connected to it, is the reason for her unhappiness.

In 1890, Chekhov traveled to the prison island of Sakhalin to write a sort of sociological survey. In *Sakhalin Island* he focuses not on the sadistic horrors already familiar from Dostoevsky's novel *The House of the Dead*, but on the dirt, grime, and stench which both prisoners and government officials

shrug off. We recognize Chekhov the doctor when he decides to “devote a few words to the latrines”:

As everyone knows, this accommodation is located in full sight of the overwhelming majority of Russian houses. . . . At monasteries, fairs, inns . . . they are absolutely disgusting. Disdain for privies has also been carried to Siberia by the Russians. . . . it is obvious that these latrines were the cause of nauseating stench and of diseases, and it is equally obvious that the prisoners and the prison administrators became easily reconciled to this.

In one settlement, he is lodged in a garret because of the cockroaches swarming below:

When I descended to get some tobacco . . . it seemed as though the walls and ceiling were covered with black crepe, which stirred as if blown by a wind. From the rapid and disorderly movements of portions of the crepe you could guess the composition of this boiling, seething mass. You could hear rustling and a loud whispering, as if the insects were hurrying off somewhere and carrying on a conversation.

Chekhov adds that although the people of Sakhalin attribute the roaches to the moss used for caulking, the source is really the people themselves.

Friends reproached Chekhov for such petty concerns. Whenever there was a diamond in the rough, Chekhov focused on the rough. Or as one woman asked about his story “The Mire,” why not ignore the “muck heap” and display the “pearl”? Chekhov replied that the aim of literature should be to depict “life as it actually is. . . . A man of letters must be as objective as a chemist . . . and realize that dung heaps play a very respectable role in a landscape.” One reason Chekhov’s landscapes and interiors feel uncommonly real is that you can smell them.

For the intelligentsia, “life as it actually is” was not enough. The point was to change the world, and to do so one needed the right philosophy and politics. Chekhov not only

did not share the requisite political views, he regarded any demand for intellectual conformity as another form of serfdom.

The intelligentsia demanded a particularly crude materialism. Thoroughly devoted to science, Chekhov nevertheless was repelled by the pseudo-scientific reduction of morality and creativity to brain activity. Today’s new atheists speak of “neuro-ethics” and “neuro-aesthetics;” their counterparts in Chekhov’s day quoted Molleschot’s dictum that the brain secretes thought the way the liver secretes bile. “It’s always good to think scientifically,” Chekhov replied skeptically. “The trouble is that thinking scientifically about art will inevitably end up degenerating into a search for the ‘cells’ or ‘centers’ in charge of creative ability, whereupon some dull-witted German will discover them somewhere in the temporal lobes.”

Chekhov also denied that science disproves free will and the individual personhood. On the contrary, respect for the person was a supreme value for Chekhov, and he believed in will power, not in spite of but precisely because of the hereditary and social pressures against which people struggle. To claim otherwise is not to practice hardheaded science but to excuse swinishness.

Though not religious, Chekhov often depicted religion at its best, which, for him, meant it could revivify a person’s sense of the world. Some have judged “The Student” as his most perfect tale, which describes a young, future clergyman lashed by a sudden cold wind that seemed as if it “had destroyed the order and harmony of things, that nature itself felt ill at ease, and that was why . . . everything was deserted and peculiarly gloomy.” As he shivers, he thinks that just such a wind must have blown in the time of Ivan the Terrible and that, then as now, “there had been just the same desperate poverty and hunger, the same . . . ignorance, misery, desolation. . . . all these had existed, did exist, and would exist and the lapse of a thousand years would make life no better.”

The hero finds himself at the fire of an old woman and her daughter. Since it is Good Friday, he begins to tell them the story of an-

other cold night, when Peter thrice denied Christ. For personal reasons never revealed, the old woman is deeply moved, “not because he could tell the story touchingly but because Peter was near to her, because her whole being was interested in what was passing in Peter’s soul.” Now joy seizes the student: “‘The past,’ he thought, ‘is linked with the present by an unbroken chain of events flowing one out of another.’ And it seemed to him that . . . when he touched one end of that chain the other quivered.” Everything visible in the world remains as it was, but his perception of it as a whole has altered. Chekhov often narrates how a small incident allows one to discern things unseen by “the naked eye.”

The intelligentsia, of course, deemed such thinking reactionary “demon-darkness.” Anyone who views Chekhov as a mild man incapable of sarcasm or intellectual combat should read his replies to their demands for propaganda. Attacked for not condemning the conservative in “The Name-Day Party,” he called his critics “pseudo-intellectuals . . . pale, untalented, wooden ignoramuses with nothing in their heads or hearts . . . sticking labels on their forehead.” Then there’s “the sort of faded, inert mediocrity who . . . picked up five or six of someone else’s ideas, stuffed and mounted them, and will keep mumbling them doggedly until he dies.”

Chekhov reacted with special hostility to people offering the “friendly advice” that he cease publishing in Suvorin’s conservative *New Times*. He describes one young lady, “a good, pure soul” who never read *New Times* and based her condemnation solely on the word of its enemies. Unfazed by this exposure, she simply “wiggled her fingers, and said, ‘In a word, I strongly advise you to leave it.’” Chekhov reflects:

Yes, our young ladies and political beaux are pure souls, but nine-tenths of their pure souls aren’t worth a damn. All their inactive sanctity and purity are based on hazy and naïve sympathies and antipathies to individuals and labels, not to facts. It’s easy to be pure when you hate

the Devil you don’t know and love the God you wouldn’t have brains enough to doubt.

For Chekhov, this is just lying, the sort one should “fear like fire.” He saw the intelligentsia’s “second censorship” as dangerous and feared that, someday, “under the banner of science, art, and oppressed free thinking in Russia, such toads and crocodiles will rule in ways not known even at the time of the Inquisition in Spain.” He had no way of knowing they would prove far worse.

A letter to his liberal publisher Alexey Pleshcheev, which contains Chekhov’s most famous rejection of “tendency,” has entered the Russian literary canon. The critic Kornei Chukovsky, who survived in the Soviet period by writing children’s literature, described it as “a gauntlet flung in the face of an entire age, a rebellion against everything it held sacred.”

It could have been written yesterday. “The people I am afraid of are those who look between the lines for tendentiousness,” Chekhov explained, whereas “I am neither liberal, nor conservative, nor gradualist, nor monk, nor indifferentist. I would like to be a free artist and nothing else.” Singling out two prominent leftist journalists as particularly odious, he offers his *credo*:

I hate lies and violence in all their forms. . . . Pharisaism, dull-wittedness, and tyranny reign not only in merchants’ homes and police stations. I see them in science, in literature, among the younger generation. . . . I look upon tags and labels as prejudices. My holy of holies is the human body, health, intelligence, talent, inspiration, love, and the most absolute freedom imaginable, freedom from violence and lies, no matter what form the latter two may take.

Chekhov was sure he hated political tendencies, but, for a few years, he wavered about philosophical ones. He flirted with Tolstoyanism, attracted not by its pacifism or puritanical morality, but by its compelling sense of the vanity of human effort. Although he soon outgrew this attraction, he still worried that he had no “general idea.” He consoled himself

that artists should precisely formulate questions, not advocate answers, but he suspected that was like a doctor satisfied with diagnosis.

From roughly 1887 to 1892, Chekhov fretted about this problem. Receiving an award from the Academy of Sciences in 1888, he lamented to Grigorovich, the writer who first recognized Chekhov's talent: "I still do not have a firm political, religious, and philosophical outlook: I change it monthly, and therefore I'm compelled to limit myself to the description of how heroes love, marry, produce children, die, and how they speak." It is not hard to detect layers of irony in this description of a "limit," and yet the self-criticism is also partly serious.

"Enemies" (1887) apparently initiates the search for a "general idea" worthy of narrative. It describes a doctor Kirillov, whose son has just died, comforting his grieving wife as his face displays "that subtle, almost elusive beauty of human sorrow." The wealthy Abogin arrives to beg the doctor to visit his dying wife, and the doctor, with extreme reluctance, at last recognizes he has no choice. When they finally arrive, it turns out Abogin's wife has feigned illness to get rid of her husband and escape with her lover. As Abogin cries and opens his heart to the doctor "with perfect sincerity," Kirillov notices the luxurious surroundings, the violoncello case that bespeaks higher cultural status, and reacts wrathfully. He shouts that he is the victim who deserves sympathy because a sacred moment has been ruined for nothing. "With that profound and somewhat cynical, ugly contempt only to be found in the eyes of sorrow and indigence" when confronted with "well-nourished comfort," Kirillov surrenders to righteous rage. Each man feels, justly, that he has been wronged by the other, and neither receives the understanding he deserves. We feel they could have chosen instead to empathize, but, as the author explains, "the egoism of the unhappy was conspicuous in both. The unhappy are egoistic, spiteful, unjust, cruel, and less capable of understanding each other than fools. Unhappiness does not bring people together but draws them apart."

Humanitarian notions to the contrary, unhappiness renders us cruel. Then what is real happiness, and how do we find it?

The story "Happiness" (1887) describes two shepherds talking to an overseer about fabulous treasure buried somewhere in the vast Russian steppe. We recognize the men's search for treasure as an allegory on the quest for true happiness.

The old shepherd and the overseer exchange stories about people actually discovering a treasure but not realizing it because some magic makes it invisible. "Your elbow is near, but you can't bite it. There is fortune, but there is not the wit to find it," remarks the overseer. Then, the old man asks, what good is such treasure? And why should it exist at all?: "it is just riches wasted . . . like chaff or sheep's dung, and yet there are riches there . . . but not a soul sees it." At last Sanka, the young shepherd, asks the old one what he would do with the treasure if he ever found it, but the old man cannot answer. This inability raises another question for Sanka: "why was it old men searched for hidden treasure, and what was the use of earthly happiness to people who might die any day of old age?"

As the story ends, the young man ponders not on the fortune, "but on the fantastic, fairy-tale character of human happiness." We imagine we do not know how to achieve happiness, but we do not even know what it is, and probably never will. A thousand years would pass, the narrator muses, and "no soul would ever know . . . what secret of the steppes was hidden there."

Chekhov's best-known novella devoted to such mysteries is *A Boring Story* (1889), a title chosen by the story's ironic and self-absorbed hero. He begins: "There lives in Russia a certain Honored Professor Nikolai Stepanovich, privy councilor and knight, who has received so many decorations, both Russian and foreign, that when he has occasion to wear them all, his students call him 'the icon stand.'" This highly successful professor seemingly has nothing to ask for, and yet, as he approaches death, experiences

utter despair. His family disappoints him, for no particular reason, and he finds himself escaping to visit his ward Katya, a girl he remembers as a child—enthusiastic about everything—but who has grown as unhappy as he. At one point, she offers him all her money, not because he needs it, but as a way to reach out to the only one she loves. He refuses, but we realize it would have been less selfish to accept. At the story's end, she visits him to beg for some answer to the despair she feels at life's pointlessness. He has nothing to say, and as she leaves forever, he can only think: "so you won't be at my funeral?"

Nikolai Stepanovich imagines that he suffers and cannot help Katya because in his many ideas about science, philosophy, and himself, "there is no common element, nothing that would unify them into a whole. Each thought and feeling exists in isolation . . . even the most skilled analyst would be unable to find what is called a general idea. . . . And without that there is nothing." Chekhov was making the same demand of himself, but here he shows that a unifying idea is not at all what the old man needs.

Writing to Pleshcheev, Chekhov suggests what the professor is missing. Pleshcheev had complained that readers know little about the other characters. How else could it be, Chekhov replies, when we hear the whole tale from the professor's point of view, and "one of my hero's chief characteristics is that he cares too little about the inner life of those who surround him. . . . Were he a different sort of man, Liza [his daughter] and Katya might not have come to grief." The professor thinks Katya requires a philosophical principle, but she really needs him to empathize with her "inner life." His thought of his funeral, rather than of her living soul, represents a missed opportunity for both of them.

People have the wrong ideas about ideas. They think that, to live right, one needs the correct abstractions, but more often ideas get in the way. In "The Name-Day Party" (1888), a husband given to endless political argument exasperates his wife, who goes into premature labor and loses the child. "Olya," he sobs as the story ends, "I don't care about

property qualifications, or circuit courts or about any particular views. . . . I don't care about anything! Why didn't we take care of our child?" Enlightenment is not through, but away from, ideas.

Enlightenment *away from* ideas provides the controlling metaphor of "Lights" (1888). Some lights only darken. Chekhov realized that, like the student sensing St. Peter, we need not solve some riddle to appreciate the world's mystery.

The surer we become that we have gotten to the bottom of things, the more likely we are to be mistaken and, either by cruelty or neglect, to cause real harm. As "Lights" begins, the engineer, Ananyev, and his assistant, Baron von Schtenberg, gaze at the railroad they have been constructing. An endless sequence of evenly spaced lights trails off into the distance. The older man sees valuable work, the younger one only pointless activity. The narrator, a traveler there by chance, feels "as though some weighty secret were buried under the embankment and only the lights, the night, and the wires knew of it."

The lights remind the baron of the campfires of the Amalekites and the Philistines as they prepared to battle Saul and David. This association suggests to him not a mystical connection with the past, but the futility of human effort. "Once Philistines and Amalekites were living in this world . . . and now no trace of them remains. So it will be with us. Now we are making a railway and standing here philosophizing, but two thousand years will pass—and of this embankment and of all those men . . . not one grain will remain." The narrator begins to understand the baron's "slightly ironical" face, his figure "expressive of spiritual stagnation," and the listlessness of his attitude to work and morals.

"I hate those ideas with all my heart!" Ananyev replies. It seems that he, too, once entertained "thoughts of the aimlessness of life, of the insignificance and transitoriness of the visible world, and Solomon's 'vanity of vanities,'" along with materialist notions denying free will and the dignity of the individual person. These beliefs led him to com-

mit a disgraceful act that common decency would have forestalled.

As a young man visiting his home town, Ananyev desired a quick affair. While there he unexpectedly comes across Kisochnka, a woman he had known as a schoolboy. She has become a deep, sensitive, and truthful woman. Married to a shallow and vulgar man, she is miserable but blames no one. Ananyev sees his chance. Reminding Kisochnka he always loved her, and swearing to devote his life to her, he seduces her, and then sneaks out of town. For her, the moment of love constitutes "a complete revolution in life," whereas for him it means nothing. He readily justifies the deception. After all, "there is no such thing as free will and therefore I was not to blame"; neither she nor anyone else has any real self; and, in any case, "life has no meaning" and her grief is trivial in comparison with endless time.

And yet, for the first time, Ananyev senses in these sophisticated ideas an unspeakable shabbiness. No reasoning could disguise that "I had committed a crime as bad as murder." And so the incident turns out to be a revolution in his life as well. Evidently, he lived differently from then on. The narrator notices small signs that he cherishes his family, "in all probability is tenderly loved by his wife," and exhibits the "calm imperturbable good humor often acquired by decent people" living a decent life.

Ananyev has not adopted the opposite of his former views. Rather, he has changed his attitude to views as such. Unexpectedly, he does not reject the idea of Ecclesiastes as false, just inappropriate for anyone but an

experienced old man. Then it can rest "upon a Christian foundation because it is derived from love of humanity . . . and is entirely free from the egoism" of youthful intellectual dilettantes. He tells the baron: "You despise life because its meaning and its object are hidden from you and are afraid only of your own death, while the real thinker is unhappy because the truth is hidden from all and he is afraid for all men."

The lights reminding the baron of the Amalekites suggest to Ananyev the "thoughts of man. . . . You know the thoughts of each individual man are scattered like that in disorder . . . and without shedding light on anything, without lighting up the night, they vanish somewhere far beyond old age." The narrator agrees. Placing one's faith in ideas is chasing the darkness. As he rides away, the narrator concludes that "in this world you can't figure things out."

This ending disturbed the critics and was clearly meant to. Chekhov had slowly worked his way beyond the need for an abstract idea. Now he confidently replied to the story's critics:

It's about time that everyone who writes—especially genuine literary artists—admitted that "in this world you can't figure things out." . . . The crowd thinks it knows and understands everything; the stupider it is, the broader it imagines its outlook. But, if a writer whom the crowd believes takes it upon himself to declare that he understands nothing of what he sees, that alone will constitute a major gain in the realm of thought and a major step forward.

New poems

by Dick Allen, Jeffrey Harrison
& J. Allyn Rosser

“To be with a koan”

“To *be* with a koan,”
said the Zen Master,
“has nothing to do with *Hamlet*,
those old jokes about small pigs
or tiny villages,
bees and bee keepers. No,
to *be* with a koan,
you must get inside it
without forcing your entry.
It’s like you’re lemonade powder
dissolving in water.
Something other than you
does the stirring,
but there’s nothing other than you,
and after awhile, nothing stirs.”

—Dick Allen

Smokehouse

Brick painted white on the outside, and inside
blackened by smoke, windowless, it stood
in the driveway's circle as if central to our lives
and not, as even in childhood we knew,
the vestige of a long-gone epoch, post-bellum,
now used only for storing rusty bicycles,
old grills, tires worn smooth, chipped flower pots,
bird feeders, shovels, rakes with bent prongs,
red dented gas can, green hoses coiled like snakes.

It scared my brothers and me to unlatch the door
that was one shade darker than the yews that flanked it
and grew shaggier, taller, and more shadowy each year,
but one time, playing hide and seek, I crept
into that dim cell smelling of dank ash,
cool even in summer, like a mausoleum,
and hung, as my eyes adjusted, with cobwebs,
wasp nests, and tattered snake skins—shivering,
heart pounding, praying to be found.

—*Jeffrey Harrison*

To Pluto, who happens to be fairly good-looking

Don't think I'm unaware of your stalker eyes,
shifting like candles when the wick is low,
hot wax twisting knots along one side
when wind slams through the empty house,
December's white-deal door blown wide.

Don't think I think I dread to see your realm
of creaky silhouette and charred echo;
where the past is all one can look forward to,
and absence is the only thing seen clearly:
where speech is like breath held—let go.

Don't think of me as one who'd try to run
were you to drape me in that ash-soft cloak,
leering through your hemlock-scented hair,
crooning with slick insinuation
that it's my time to descend your spiral stair.

I'll come willingly, wrapped in a sheet
of music from Orpheus' fake book,
that tune he never got to play, saved
to celebrate when she reached open air.
You'll hear me out. You'll get no backward look.

—*J. Allyn Rosser*

Fiction chronicle

Go walkabout

by *Stefan Beck*

“Before tourism there was travel,” wrote the critic Paul Fussell, “and before travel there was exploration.” This statement, from Fussell’s *Abroad: British Literary Traveling Between the Wars* (1980), seems uncontroversial, even banal. But he didn’t mean merely that exploration was a precondition for travel, and travel for tourism. Rather, he meant that travel was all but dead, and that the ashes of exploration had been scattered to the four winds: “Because travel is hardly possible anymore, an inquiry into the nature of travel and travel writing between the wars will resemble a threnody, and I’m afraid that a consideration of the tourism that apes it will be like a satire.”

It’s possible to read this part of Fussell’s critique as satire with a straight face, but nevertheless, it caused some offense. In *The New York Times*, Jonathan Raban called *Abroad*’s travel-is-dead thesis “bad-tempered nonsense,” supported by “contradictory complaints,” and stolen from Evelyn Waugh at that. When Fussell passed away in May, the *Times*’s obituary quoted from Raban’s review, as if to say—with apologies to the old gag about Nietzsche and God—that, though Fussell may be dead, travel lives. Yes, travel lives. That will come as no surprise to those who recognized and wrestled with Fussell’s hyperbole. Yet if travel is endangered, be it by tourism or technology, what of the travel novel?

Fussell’s distinction between travel and tourism applies, it turns out, to books as well. Martin Amis’s *Lionel Asbo*—whose subtitle, *State of England*, advertises the thrill of

travel to non-Brits—feels oddly like the work of a tourist.¹ Oddly, that is, because the Amis of *London Fields* (1990) and *The Information* (1995) seemed perfectly at ease in his country’s grimy Londerworld. The Amis of *Asbo* observes England’s criminal class from a safer remove, with all the subtlety of a binoculars-wielding rube on safari.

Indeed, much like the self-conscious “anti-tourists” Fussell mocks in *Abroad*, Amis is a little too eager to establish his bona fides; he boasted to *The Guardian*’s Sarfraz Manzoor, “I know that world. . . . When I was a kid I was farmed out to a working-class family in Wales for months on end, and loved it.” The understandably skeptical interviewer shot back: “That’s a long way from pit bulls.”

Those pit bulls belong to the titular Lionel, a thug—make that a cartoon of a thug—whose surname is a self-applied tribute to his having received his first Anti-Social Behavior Order at age three. His dogs, kept mean with hot sauce and hangovers, are tools of Lionel’s trade, if crime be a trade. (His areas of expertise are blackmail and receiving stolen property, but he is up for any sort of mayhem.) They are also early indicators of how heavily this book will lean on, if not clichés, facts of the low life that are already well known to many readers. Can the tools of Amis’s trade—humor, verbal invention, a borderline-cruel sense of morality—save *Lio-*

¹ *Lionel Asbo: State of England*, by Martin Amis; Knopf, 272 pages, \$24.95.

nel Asbo from being something like the novelization of a Guy Ritchie movie?

Actually, this question is unfair to Ritchie, whose films, whatever else may be said of them, are far longer on story than *Lionel Asbo* is. The plot, as wispy as a Tesco bag, follows the unlettered and ultraviolent Lionel from dirty, noisy, council-flattened Diston (a fictitious London neighborhood) to the high life—his ascent made possible by a £139 million National Lottery win. Lionel's nephew and charge, Des, quietly pursues his romantic and academic ambitions while living in mortal terror that Lionel will uncover and punish Des's darkest secret. The tabloids nickname Lionel the "Lotto Lout" and mock him as he burns through cash. He takes up with a preposterous woman called "Threnody," a "model" turned "poetess." Des falls in love. Lionel makes a fool of himself dismantling a lobster in a fine restaurant—and he drinks his champagne from a pint glass, naturally.

That's about it. This is a book that points and laughs, but has little time for contemplating its own vicious mirth.

It is going entirely too far to call *Lionel Asbo* satire. The "Lotto Lout" is not even a creature of Amis's invention: Michael Carroll, a British garbage man, won nearly £10 million in 2002, wasted it rather unimaginatively on cocaine, prostitutes, cars, and jewelry, and in February of this year appeared in West Norfolk Magistrates' Court for the theft of a Strongbow and a sandwich. Threnody is based on the British pseudo-celebrity Katie Price. Britain's tabloid press, like its American counterpart, is satire-proof by design. If one were being very charitable to Amis, one might speculate that this two-dimensional book, more slideshow than travelogue, is his way of implying that today's England doesn't deserve Dickensian empathy. Amis did, after all, recently pack his bags for "[e]mbarrassingly idyllic" Brooklyn.

Yet if *Lionel Asbo* is, for lack of a better word, trivial, a whining email from an unpleasant vacation, it is nonetheless an email from a master stylist. There are passages one breezes through in a state of almost narcotized amusement. Amis's dissection of Lionel's accent manages to bypass *corny* and

cranky and wind up at *caustic* and *comic*; the dialogic *pas de deux* between Lionel and his unaccountably brainy nephew can be a pleasure, too. If there is an emotion other than scorn or resignation lurking in these pages, perhaps it is genuine sorrow that England's soil has become inhospitable to those like Des who find themselves—as Amis seems to have found himself—strangers in their own land.

There are, *pace* Fussell, some contexts in which the spirit of genuine travel will never die. Deployment—warfare—is an obvious example. A less obvious but vastly more common one is commerce, which never pauses for peacetime. Business travelers probably come closer than anyone to witnessing the real life of foreign places, parachuting each night into locales with little or nothing to offer the tourist.

Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah Economic City—a name that thunders, "Look on my works, ye Mighty, and enjoy the turndown service"—is just such a place, and it is given unexpected life in Dave Eggers's novel *A Hologram for the King*.² The book is, like *Lionel Asbo* and not unlike the KAEC itself, more or less formless. A divorced, middle-aged consultant named Alan Clay, beset by every kind of professional and post-marital strife, goes to Saudi Arabia to pitch a holographic teleconferencing system. His "team" consists of indolent, incurious young people who regard him with suspicion or indifference, and who do little but complain about the defective Wi-Fi. Alan tends to arrive late to meetings, but the Saudi king, to whom the presentation must be made, fails to show up at all, day after day after day.

So the book's ennobling allusion is to *Waiting for Godot*; there is even an epigraph from the play thrown in for the benefit of the obtuse. And, as is typically the case with an Eggers book, there is a Big Theme to pick apart. Where Eggers's previous books have descended from on high to address the travails of American teachers, the crisis in Sudan, and the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina,

2 *A Hologram for the King*, by Dave Eggers; McSweeney's Books, 328 pages, \$25.

this one is about globalization, offshoring, the decline of American manufacturing, and the ascendancy of the mysterious Other. Clay, Eggers's sad-sack protagonist, used to work for Schwinn—a perfect symbol of the homegrown and the happy-go-lucky—before he unwittingly helped wreck it. One could be forgiven for asking: Is *A Hologram for the King* a novel or is it a TED talk?

It is, mercifully, the former. Like many great or very good books, it finds a life of its own and gives its author's original plan the slip. One opens it expecting something ripped from the pages of *The Economist* or the *Financial Times* and finds, instead, an absorbing tale of one man, out of his element, trying to do his level best. Alan Clay's practical objective is to make a score big enough that he can pay his daughter's college tuition, but in a grander and more abstract sense he wants to make something like a mark on the world. It is a Sisyphean task. Every day the king fails to appear occasions a disappointing return to Clay's anxieties, financial, existential, and—in a hilariously revolting and entirely relatable subplot—medical.

As central as Clay's soul is to the book, and as barren a backdrop as the KAEC provides, *A Hologram for the King* is altogether successful at depicting Saudi Arabia. (Of course, this judgment entails a leap of faith on the reader's part, if he has never visited the country himself.) Eggers summons a Kingdom of façades, of glittering, mirage-like luxury rising from a wasteland. The reader is given the sense that it is incomplete, hollow, a place uninterested in accruing history or character. As for its people, they are "forced into the role of teenagers hiding their vices and proclivities from a shadowy army of parents."

The most memorable and comic character is Clay's driver, Yousef, who both explains and embodies the Kingdom's contradictions. Clay and Yousef trade stories and jokes: "We don't stone people here," Yousef informs his friend at one point, in mock anger, only to add: "We behead them." Clay's first encounter with his new friend—and his new friend's pride and joy, "an ancient Chevy Caprice, puddle-brown"—leads to this unsettling exchange:

—Engine problem? Alan asked.

—No, no. I had to disconnect the engine before I went into the lobby. I just have to make sure no one wires it.

—Wires it? Alan asked. To explode?

—It's nothing terroristic, Yousef said. It's just this guy who thinks I'm screwing his wife.

Eggers's sandblasted prose and deadpan dialogue, a departure from much of his previous work, is well matched to his desert setting. He is often very funny, able to conjure images and set pieces that lodge in the mind. Yousef's "dainty" cigarettes come in a box that is "silver and white and tiny, like a miniature Cadillac driven by an insect pimp." Alan recalls in grimly absurd detail how his credit was ruined by a delinquent double-digit charge on his Banana Republic store card. Alan gets lost in a half-finished building, only to find himself in the midst of an enormous room full of brawling imported laborers. There are many wonderfully strange details, like a Saudi soldier lounging next to his machine-gun-mounted Humvee, "his feet soaking in an inflatable pool."

There are also darker moments, of startling emotional subtlety. When Clay joins Yousef at a desert hideout, which turns out to be sort of crude castle Yousef's father built with money from his sandal shop (Clay's own father was a foreman at a Stride-Rite factory), an attempt to impress his new Saudi friends leads Clay to the brink of an unspeakable tragedy. It is the novel's way of chastening Clay, or keeping his hope and energy at bay, exactly as one imagines real life probably would do. It is also a reminder of how difficult it is to pass casually between cultures and of how "globalization," for all its economic implications, is a long way from taming the differences that make us who we are.

Whether as tourist, businessman, or traveler, there is always someplace new to go. Cities are chiseled out of the desert. Famous places that any schoolboy could name are battered beyond recognition by warfare or natural disaster and then reborn. Everything and everywhere changes all the time,

without the intercession of dramatic, let alone cataclysmic, events. As Heraclitus of Ephesus is said to have put it, no man can step in the same river twice. Paul Theroux, whose *Great Railway Bazaar* was recognized by Fussell as “one of the few travel books to emerge from our age of tourism,” must have had Heraclitus in mind when he composed *The Lower River*, a book about a former Peace Corps volunteer’s impulsive late-life decision to revisit his Malawian stomping ground.³

Ellis Hock isn’t a memorable character on the order of Theroux’s immortal Allie Fox, but he’s no slouch, either. Like Eggers’s Alan Clay, Hock is a divorced, middle-aged businessman; unlike Clay, he is happy to abandon the world of commerce for the promise of simple, even primitive pleasures.

The catalyst for Hock’s marital ruin is a somewhat heavy-handed symbol of suffocating modernity: a smartphone. His wife purchases the phone for him and, while configuring it, chances to download “his entire year’s mail up to that day, all the messages that Hock had received and sent . . . even the ones he had thought he’d deleted, many of them from women, many of those affectionate, so complete a revelation of his private life that he felt he’d been scalped.” One gets the sense that Hock—who runs a haberdashery in Theroux’s birthplace of Medford, Massachusetts—is a man who fell into conventionality through carelessness and had been hoping to make his exit on similar terms.

The evidence of Hock’s savviness comes early and often:

The sunglasses over [the driver’s] smooth jut-jawed face gave him a cricket’s profile. He smiled greedily at Hock’s watch. Hock knew that lingering gaze of admiration was like a request, but [the man] had a watch of his own.

“Let’s leave at seven.”

“Eight will be best. African time. No worry, be happy?”

“Seven,” Hock said without a smile, and the man turned deferential—respectful, with a

slight jerkiness in his face of fear. All that happened quickly. Hock could see that the time [the man] had spent with other foreigners had made him overconfident. Something showy about his clothes, his ease, his laugh, his knowingness; but the correction had reduced him, moving him from familiarity to subservience.

Hock’s own savviness, his knowingness, can’t save him. Malabo, the beautiful and welcoming village of his happiest memories, has been reduced by circumstance—by “externalities,” one might euphemistically say—to a hellhole of greedy, grasping children. Its headman, Festus Manyenga, designates Hock an honorary chief only in order to imprison and leech off him. As Hock’s old flame, Gala, explains with the wisdom of her advanced years, “They will eat your money. . . . When your money is gone, they will eat you.”

Hock’s escape attempts become increasingly desperate and terrifying. He winds up in an encampment of HIV-infected children who try to murder him; he is ignored by a helicopter from which celebrities hurl aid packets at stampeding natives; he is threatened and driven off by Western agents of the ghoulishly-named *Agence Anonyme* when he stumbles, bearded, hungry, and crazed, upon their jungle compound. The moment when he catches his reflection in a steel water tank is among the novel’s finest: “His first thought was, I am a monkey. His hair was wild, clawed to one side but stiff with caked dust and dried sweat. The grit in his eyebrows thickened them, made them seem hairier, and the bristles in his week-old beard were darkened with dirt and streaked with muddy sweat, still damp.”

The Lower River is by no means a great book. It foreshadows its most climactic scenes like an airport thriller. Hock, we are told, learned to handle deadly snakes during his youthful adventure in Malabo. Do you suppose that skill will figure into his flight from same? A few critics have complained that the book has too few sympathetic African characters, and that it is too eager to present the reader with stock dark-skinned villains.

Fair enough, but some of the major complaints about *The Lower River* are nonsensical.

³ *The Lower River*, by Paul Theroux; Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 336 pages, \$25.

The *Los Angeles Times* bemoaned Theroux's "stale tropes." That a populace infantilized by corrupt rulers and indiscriminate foreign aid will learn to covet, manipulate, and exploit? That young women with nothing else to sell will learn by instinct to monetize their bodies? Whether Africa is truly as hopeless as Theroux's book implies is a matter for the experts to decide, but suppose *The Lower River* is an accurate account? Does an unpleasant, even tragic reality become unmentionable simply because it is no longer new or startling to a Western readership? Theroux's novel embraces the place he has loved and pays it the compliment of genuine, if harshly expressed, concern.

One of the *Los Angeles Times*'s critiques of *The Lower River* does, however, ring true: "[Hock] never is in quite as much trouble [as the impoverished Africans], because he has the tie to the West: If he reaches the right contact, he can get home." This is what distinguishes *The Lower River*, which reads for all the world like a story of genuine travel, from an account of what Fussell regarded as the unattainable ideal: exploration. One last quotation from the late critic is in order:

In 1855 what we would call exploration is often called travel, as in Francis Galton's *The Art of Travel*. His title seems to promise advice about securing deckchairs in favorable locations and hints about tipping on shipboard, but his sub-title makes his intention clear: *Shifts and Contrivances Available in Wild Countries*. Galton's advice to "travelers" is very different from the matter in a Baedeker. Indeed, his book is virtually a survival manual, with instructions on blacksmithing, making your own black powder, descending cliffs with ropes, and defending a camp against natives.

This certainly is exploration, and it too seldom fires the imaginations of today's novelists. One should be grateful, then, that Everyman's Library has reprinted Patrick White's 1957 modernist epic *Voss*, a tale of exploration that makes Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* seem almost corny or grotesque by comparison.⁴ Johann

⁴ *Voss*, by Patrick White; Everyman's Library, 472 pages, \$24.95.

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Ulrich Voss—modeled on Ludwig Leichhardt, the Prussian explorer who disappeared into the Australian interior in 1848—is an undiscovered continent unto himself, and his reckless but self-possessed attempt to deflower Australia, as it were, is unforgettable.

In Nicholas Shakespeare's introduction to this edition, he notes that "White had never ventured into the hinterland which his book brings into blazing dimensions, and would never do so save in his head." This fact grows more astonishing the farther one follows Voss: White renders Australia's most forbidding landscapes, rich in beauty and menace, so vividly that it is almost impossible to believe they were alien to him.

Few authors would attempt an imaginative project like White's nowadays. Amis told the *Guardian* that his research involved consorting with "villains," adding, to heighten the sense of risk, that it would be "bang out of order" to carry a notebook. Eggers made trips to Saudi Arabia to write *A Hologram for the King*. Theroux is a seasoned traveler who could draw on his own Peace Corps experiences when describing Hock's.

It is fitting that White had to reach deep into his own mind to erect the furnace in which Voss and his party are tested. *Voss* is not a mere journalistic account of a hitherto unknown territory. It is a study of interiority itself, of men pressing against their psychological and spiritual boundaries, discovering their souls. For White, as for the madman Voss, exploration is an act of creation. Asked by his expedition's patron, Mr. Bonner, whether he has "studied the map," Voss replies, "The map? . . . I will first make it."

Voss, who detests humility and weakness and who seems convinced his doomed journey will transfigure him, might have been an uninteresting sociopath, a cliché. He is saved from this by White's ability to inhabit Voss's mind credibly, to show him endlessly reconsidering and revising what he understands of other people. Yet what humanizes him above all is his relationship—his mystical, almost telepathic relationship—with Laura Trevely-

an, the orphan charge of Mr. and Mrs. Bonner, her aunt and uncle.

Voss spends just a few hours in Laura's company, first in a drawing room, and later, at night, in a garden, where he conspicuously does not ask for the cup to pass from his lips. Discussing atheism with Laura, Voss remarks that the atheists' god is "easily destroyed, because in their own image. Pitiful because such destruction does not prove the destroyer's power. *Atheism* is self-murder." Laura responds, "[Y]ou, Mr Voss . . . it is for you I am concerned. To watch the same fate approaching someone else is far, far worse." There is never any doubt that Voss will destroy himself. Nevertheless, he proposes marriage to Laura by letter not long into his journey, and enjoys a puzzling connection to her, and she to him, all the way to his end.

The parallel stories of Johann Ulrich Voss and Laura Trevelyan, complementary tales of the wild and the domestic, are narrated by a voice at once stern and florid—the voice of a god in Voss's image. According to Nicholas Shakespeare, White's Australian contemporaries were unkind to his prose: "pretentious and illiterate verbal sludge," said the poet A. D. Hope. The prose is challenging, even exasperating, but perfectly suited to the inner life of White's strange characters. It sounds like struggle, like an anguished verbal effort to transcend the life with which ordinary men are content.

Voss contains multitudes. It is a metaphysical text, frequently an impenetrable one, but it is also an adventure story that any inquiring and patient teenager could enjoy. It is, like all the finest travel writing, a catalogue of unbelievable hardships and gruesome tragedies. The members of Voss's party—Judd the convict, Le Mesurier the mad diarist, Palfreyman the ineffectual but sympathetic naturalist, the simple lads, the unreadably complex "blackfellers"—could not be more fully realized. And so one hopes that *Voss*, reprinted for a society in which true privation and truly dangerous curiosity are unknown, will also be a spur. As Patrick White well understood, there is an Outback in everyone.

Theater

Claustrophobia & catastrophe

by Kevin D. Williamson

It's the day after tomorrow, and New York City has been cut off from the rest of the world by a biological-weapon attack followed by the invasion of the white-helmeted Eggheads, an army of Islamist lunatics who may or may not be in league with the Chinese, shadowy corporate interests, or Mrs. Winship's Farm, a rural utopian community of white supremacists. Surviving women are given Auschwitz-style tattoos on the back of the neck and required to cover their heads with identifying blue bonnets when in public or be hanged in Union Square; surviving men—and there are not many—are castrated and worse. Nobody really quite knows what is going on in the rest of the world, but there are rumors of safe havens in Pennsylvania and Ohio.

Such is the world of *Through the Yellow Hour*, the writer and director Adam Rapp's claustrophobic new play at the Rattlestick Playwrights Theater downtown. I am an admirer of these kinds of audacious attempts at large-scale storytelling without a *War Horse* budget or extranaturalistic pretentiousness. There is a fine-grained and sometimes uncomfortable realism at work in the play: When the first gun goes off, blood splatters the walls. There is a great deal of physical trauma and medical unpleasantness in the story, as Ellen (Hani Furstenberg), a nurse dug in to her fortified Manhattan apartment, fends off invaders, barter drugs and other supplies, and hopes for news of her vanished husband, who almost certainly has been tak-

en prisoner by the Eggheads. Some of it is quite unpleasant to look at—the occasionally low lighting being the director's main concession to audience squeamishness and what I assume is a fairly limited budget for visuals—but seldom egregious. Audiences will squirm, and not just from the uncomfortable little seats.

Through the Yellow Hour is a real achievement of writing technique. Because the entire play is set in Ellen's apartment, a great deal of the story must be told through expositional dialogue, always a chancy business. The limitations of the set are a problem, and Mr. Rapp cleverly uses them as a solution, too, with an intelligent dramatic choice: Ellen makes a point of leaving the apartment only when absolutely necessary—we learn early in the play that she has not been out of doors in months—and so it is dramatically plausible that she would need so much of what is going on in the world outside her four walls explained to her by her visitors, who include Maude (Danielle Slavick), a junkie who has come to trade one of her infant twins to Ellen in exchange for a few days' shelter and a narcotics fix, and Hakim, an Iraqi Christian who had been working as a visiting professor at Fordham University before the invasion and his subsequent imprisonment and torture. Better still, the conversations revealing the details of the exterior conflict take place during very tense interior conflicts within the apartment, so the audience is hardly aware that the bulk of the story

is being communicated second-hand. This is not executed faultlessly—there is probably about fifteen minutes' worth of expendable dialogue in the play—but it is done very well.

In these politically correct and cowardly times, the choice of an Islamic villain was unexpected. Ellen, noting that the Eggheads tend to be better behaved along the waterfront, theorizes that they expect the arrival of "Allah on a jet-ski." I briefly despaired at Hakim's suggestion that the Muslim malefactors may simply be hired hands fronting some kind of utterly predictable corporate conspiracy, fearing that the play was about to take a turn in a very banal and conventional direction, and again at the appearance of the so-white-they're-all-dressed-in-white emissaries from Mrs. Winship's Farm. But like the occasional mention of a possible Chinese angle to the mess, these developments really served only to complicate the plot and expand the incomprehensibility in which the characters are immersed. If the world is indeed ending—or at least our little corner of it—who is to say that opportunists in Beijing or moneyed race cultists might not also play a role in the drama?

Mr. Rapp here is singularly uninterested in political sermonizing: This is simply a play about survival and desperation, with an undercurrent of torture porn. The handling of the political themes reminded me a little of Qui Nguyen's *The Inexplicable Redemption of Agent G*, in which questions of power and identity that easily lend themselves to ill-timed flights of rhetoric are treated as only one more tool in the dramatic toolbox. I have a sense that many of the younger playwrights whose work I have seen in the past several years are tiring of, and perhaps a little bit hostile toward, the political pieties of their elders and the accompanying demands for conformity. There seems to be a move away from general political themes and toward more specific moral questions. *Through the Yellow Hour* is full of them: Our heroine turns out to be a human trafficker, who trades Maude's infant daughter to Mrs. Winship's Farm—which is in need of healthy, fertile, white women—in exchange for Darius

(the evocatively named Vladimir Versailles), an unwanted black stable boy formerly employed by the utopian colony. Darius identifies himself as being fourteen years old; Mr. Versailles looks to my eye about twenty-five. Darius is shy and has lived a very sheltered life at the farm. He is almost entirely unaware of the war going on around him. It is possible, I suppose, that the character does not actually know how old he is, and the fact is relevant inasmuch as Ellen seems to have acquired the young man at least in part for sexual purposes.

One frustrating aspect of the play is that the question of Ellen's motives, beyond brute survival, is never quite fully resolved, but perhaps that is as it should be: Human motives can really only be understood in a broadly comprehensible context. Some plays, David Mamet's for example, derive their power from taking what are fundamentally familiar situations and heightening their drama. Some plays acquire a different sort of power by placing familiar characters in utterly alien situations, and this is such a play.

Islamic nutters attack New York, and the city is covered in dust and smoke: It is of course impossible to watch the play without having the events of September 11, 2001 in the back of one's mind, though I do not think that Mr. Rapp here has attempted to write a 9/11 play. The attacks were not the first bad thing to happen in New York City and surely will not be the last, but practically every Manhattan catastrophe not involving credit default swaps echoes it. (Even shallow cinematic stuff touches the subject: What was the found footage horror film *Cloverfield* if not the American answer to 1954's *Gojira*?) It may be that we have arrived at the day when 9/11 is just another cloud in the nation's emotional sky. But it is a big black cloud.

The acting in the play is almost uniformly very good: Mr. Versailles is a little too insubstantial, but then he does not have a great deal to do except sit there looking innocent and confused. Oddly enough, the evening's best performance may have come from the one actor with even less to do: Brian

Mendes, whose character is simply known as Dead Man. He is a shambling mound of a man who invades Ellen's apartment in the opening scene and is shot dead—or not quite dead. He seems dead, but then revives, if just barely, in key scenes that may be hallucinogenic. Toward the end of the play he is well and truly dead, and mummified; Ellen declines to remove the corpse, arguing that it “adds texture to the room.” So Mr. Mendes spends most of the play silently slumped against the wall, but he is marvelous in his few moments of reanimation.

The last Rattlestick production I saw was Jesse Eisenberg's *Asuncion*, another attempt at complicated if straightforward storytelling, which was merely competent. This is superior. In both cases, the company deserves credit for its emphasis on craft-oriented productions that are light on gimmickry.

A final word about *Through the Yellow Hour*: The audience seemed to hate it. There were very loud sighs when the play did not end at one or two points where it seemed it might, and my informal sidewalk poll afterward did not turn up many admirers.

Charlie Chaplin also had an interest in young girls, if not quite so young as the one in Ellen's story. The oldest of his three wives, Oona O'Neill (daughter of Eugene), was no more than seventeen years old when their affair began and the only one not pregnant (or at least claiming to be) at the time of the marriage. His affair with his second wife could have earned him a statutory-rape conviction if Californian authorities had been so inclined. And thus *Chaplin* turns out to be the jolliest musical tale of ephebophilia since “Mack the Knife.”

Chaplin is a pretty good musical: some nice songs, some fun choreography, and a very good performance from Rob McClure in the title role. It is rather like the Oliver Stone film *Nixon*: fine, so long as you don't imagine that it has anything to do with the man whose name is in the title. But that is a bit of a problem here, because *Chaplin* is nakedly hagiographical, and it is hard to make a saint of a guy who (never mind the jail

bait) spent his life furthering the reach of the twentieth century's most bloodthirsty dictators, accepting awards from the Comintern, consorting with Soviet spies such as Ivor Montagu, and palling around with Chou Enlai. *Chaplin* is the story of an immensely gifted cinematic artist who ends his days as an exiled victim of the Red Scare, but Chaplin's was a very different kind of story: that of an immensely gifted cinematic artist who became a grotesquery, a multimillionaire living high in a villa on Lake Geneva while lending his prestige to the masters of gulags and the architects of the Cultural Revolution.

The story is a paint-by-numbers biography, marrying the formidable musical skills of the composer Christopher Curtis with the expository sophistication of an eighth-grade book report. Young Charlie is both inspired by his mother, Hannah (Christiane Noll, nice big voice), and traumatized by her abandonment of him. She teaches him to mingle on the street and to imagine the stories that led people to their current stations in life. In what is the play's most visually memorable scene, Chaplin summons those figures in memory and steals a little piece off of each of them—a hat here, a frock coat there—assembling them into the Little Tramp. It is a very nice effect that introduces the play's main charm, which is Mr. McClure's pinpoint impersonation of Chaplin performing as his most famous character. Here, the actor shows a remarkable gift, but the show, to its credit, never quite devolves into one of those Branson-worthy spectacles like *Always . . . Patsy Cline*. *Chaplin* walks right up to that line, but it manages, if only just barely, to keep going on as a play rather than an impression.

The muted gray palette of the production (which includes the actors' makeup, at least some of the time) is meant to recall the black-and-white films that made Chaplin famous, and there are other visual effects based on the earliest days of cinema. The actors' silvery faces have proved polarizing; I myself found the look of the show charming and attractive, if oddly inconsistent: The evening's finest performance behind McClure's lead came from Jenn Colella

as the diabolical gossip columnist and radio mockery artist Hedda Hopper, who is anything but a pencil portrait in shades of gray, all blazing Technicolor cruelty. Ms. Colella gets much of the show's best music, and her blaring, unsubtle voice fits the role nicely. Though Mr. McClure's Chaplin is of course a very sympathetic figure, one does not watch Hedda Hopper devour him without some measure of satisfaction. But here again, *Chaplin* would have done better to borrow some of the moral complexity of the real world: The play's Hopper is motivated by petty vindictiveness, but the woman herself seems to have been a formidable character, one who vexed Spencer Tracy to the point of physically assaulting her. She also seems to have been a genuinely committed anticommunist rather than a Cruella de Vil with Nazi sympathies.

And that, really, is most of what is wrong with *Chaplin*: not that it ignores the moral complexity of the man's life but because, in doing so, it stacks the deck so heavily in favor of the saint-savant at its center that the stakes are far too low to care about. Chaplin tears his destructive streak through the lives of any number of young wives and lovers, business associates, family members, etc., but pays effectively no price for it—indeed, he never even seems threatened with paying a price for it beyond trading in Hollywood for Switzerland, collecting his Oscars (his knighthood goes unmentioned) as richly deserved tribute to his genius. He's too sweet, this Chaplin, which suggests that the play's creators committed precisely the same error that their subject complains about throughout the proceedings: mistaking Chaplin for the Little Tramp, conflating the man and the character. A touch of Mr. Rapp's genuine nastiness would have been welcome here, a peppery shot of Tabasco on this two-minute egg of a production.

Chaplin's contemporary Noël Coward has a new play on at London's Vaudeville Theatre, which is an odd development in the life of a man who has been dead since 1973. *The Volcano* has never been produced before, prob-

ably because it is not a very good play. It is not a very bad play—it is better than much that is new and celebrated—but it isn't quite top-shelf Noël Coward, either, or second-tier Noël Coward for that matter. But any Noël Coward is not so bad.

The Volcano is the story of a just-past-his-prime seducer, Guy Littleton (Jason Durr), and a big part of the play's draw is that Guy is supposed to be based on Ian Fleming, though damned if I can see much of a connection. Given the 007 interest and the play's exotic colonial setting (a fictitious volcanic island in the South Pacific), you'd expect a little bit of *Our Man in Havana* by way of *Fallen Angels*, but what you get is *The Painted Veil* on stage with a gigantic dose of melancholy bitchiness administered as an enema. The still-dashing Guy and his in-everything-but-the-deed-itself mistress, the widowed plantation owner Adela (Jenny Seagrove, who is terrific), are unhappily awaiting the arrival of Guy's hard-faced and deeply unpleasant wife, Melissa (the appropriately named Dawn Steele). Guy is being driven batty by Adela's holding out on him, and so turns his attention to her young houseguest, Ellen (Perdita Avery), and then to her husband, with whom we discover in a particularly sweaty scene he has carried on an earlier affair, back in their military days. (The idea of don't ask, don't tell probably never occurred to Noël Coward, who here seems addicted to both asking and telling.) Guy is not a charming cad, but ghastly, repulsive, and compulsive. He is suave enough in his way, though when he sneaks off with his war buddy Durr it is as if the ghost of Coward were whispering in his ear: "Remember who thought up this goddamn spectacle."

Coward wrote *The Volcano* while living as a tax refugee in Jamaica. Fleming and the other inspirations for the play's characters were friends and neighbors. Perhaps it was the unpleasant experience of real-life adultery among these unpleasant real-life expatriates that gave *The Volcano* its bitter edge: It is a world away from the happy-go-lucky scene of *Private Lives*. The lovers mock and bait one another as they do in Coward's more plainly

comic work, as do the rivalrous women, but they do so with relatively little wit and an absolute lack of joy. Coward's wit at its best is cruel (as wit is), but only theatrically cruel, not toothless but not drawing blood, either. The world of *The Volcano* is a less exuberant one: an adult world populated by adults who refuse to become adults. The volcano that is constantly on the verge of erupting in the play performs roughly the same function as the cholera epidemic in *The Painted Veil*: a stand-in menace for the destructive power of infidelity and wantonness. Coward being nothing if not a competent craftsman, you may be sure that the marital explosions arrive at the same moment as the geothermal one. To the playwright's credit (and the producers'), one is never quite sure whether serious harm will come to any of the characters, and the eruption itself is handled stylishly.

There are nice bits of vintage Coward that come through. Informed that the local savages worship the island's volcano, Melissa replies deadpan: "I'm finding it difficult to like it." But the abusive volleys between Guy and Adela are unpleasant to watch, unrelentingly dreary. I suppose that may be a nod to realism—adultery really is a tedious thing—but

one does not come to Noël Coward to satisfy cravings for cold truth in domestic matters.

Coward was justly famous for his sense of timing, but timing was working against him in *The Volcano*: Ten years after the publication of Gore Vidal's *The City and the Pillar*, the play's homosexual themes must have lacked the shock of the new. And, worse for Coward, he was finishing the play just as John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* was opening in the West End, announcing a deep shift in the British theater and sweeping aside anything smacking of drawing-room comedy. Coward's fashionable mannerisms suddenly were out of fashion, with Guy in his white dinner jacket looking ridiculous next to Jimmy Porter in his dungarees.

I left the theater feeling a little sad: *The Volcano* feels to me like a museum piece. It is not a great work of art, but in the right time it would have been a very well-executed piece of ordinary entertainment. But that time has passed, and we are as irrevocably cut off from it as we are from *The Mystery of Adam* or the drama of Hrotsvit of Gandersheim. And what will the museum pieces of our time be? *The Book of Mormon*? The Spider-Man musical?

Mark Rothko: the decisive decade

by *Karen Wilkin*

Mark Rothko's so-called "classic style" works, with their hovering rectangles of insubstantial color, are among the best known and most passionately admired of abstract paintings, as easily recognized and readily parodied as Jackson Pollock's poured tangles and, it seems, far more beloved. But Rothko didn't paint the first of his "classic style" compositions until late in 1949, when he was forty-six. (Born Marcus Rothkowitz in Dvinsk, Russia, in 1903, he died, a suicide, in New York in 1970.) When he began the series that would preoccupy him for the rest of his life and define him as an artist, he had been painting for a quarter of century and exhibiting for more than twenty years; he began to study with Max Weber at the Art Students League in 1925 and was included in his first New York group show in 1928. The floating rectangles that are now synonymous with Rothko's name were not the result of a sudden decision to reduce painting to its essentials. Quite the contrary, this "signature image" evolved logically over a long period.

During the 1930s, Rothko experimented with economically presented subjects from modern life, tackling everything from lakeside bathers to subway riders, in a typical quest for a young, ambitious artist of the period, to translate his own experience into the language of French modernism—which he had learned from Weber, an active participant in the Paris vanguard, part of Matisse's and Picasso's circle. During the 1940s, Rothko, like most adventurous New York artists of his genera-

tion, moved away from the stylized figuration of his early works, first to explore the implications of Surrealism and then to dedicate himself wholly to expressive abstraction. In doing so, he became the artist we recognize. Yet the large and varied body of work that he produced during these formative years remains unfamiliar even to Rothko lovers and all but unknown to the majority of the audience for American post-war art.

Until now, that is. The crucial period when Rothko became "Rothko" is the focus of an informative touring exhibition, "Mark Rothko: The Decisive Decade, 1940–1950," jointly organized by the Arkansas Art Center, Little Rock; the Columbia Museum of Art, South Carolina; the Columbus Museum of Art, Ohio; the Denver Art Museum; in conjunction with the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.¹ The exhibition brings together thirty-seven paintings and works on paper from the National Gallery's vast holdings of the artist's work, donated in 1986 by the Mark Rothko Foundation. These are set in context by an introductory section devoted to paintings, drawings, and paperworks by Rothko's friends and colleagues, including Pollock, Milton Avery, William Baziotis, Arshile Gorky, Adolph Gottlieb, Robert Motherwell, Richard Pousette-Dart, Theodoros

1 "Mark Rothko: The Decisive Decade, 1940–1950" opened at the Columbia Museum of Art, South Carolina, on September 14, 2012 and remains on view through January 6, 2013.

Stamos, and Clyfford Still, all drawn from the collections of the organizing museums. In the '40s, like Rothko, his New York contemporaries were attempting to forge visual languages able to cope with the enormity of the world events of a fraught decade. All of them, in individual ways, were probing the unconscious mind, adopting myth and symbol, and embracing the expressive potential of both the materials and the act of painting itself, in an effort to respond to the terrors of World War II, the Holocaust, and the start of the Atomic Age. A handsome catalogue, with essays by scholars of the period, including the National Gallery's curator Harry Cooper, the Rothko specialists David Anfam and Ruth Fine, the artist's son Christopher, and others, provides a useful overview of both Rothko's development and his concerns during the 1940s. In addition, the installation at the Columbia Museum of Art, the exhibition's first venue, makes ample use of quotations from the painter's extensive writings.

We are introduced to Rothko by the modestly sized, stylized *Untitled (Man and Two Women in a Pastoral Setting)*, painted about 1940; the man, puffing on a pipe, and the two women in what may be bathing suits, are waist-deep in exuberant plants that are treated far more freely and adventurously than the rather stiff figures. The prismatic, fragmented quality of the landscape setting and the suggestion of an internal frame, which turns the picture into a vignette, along with the palette of fresh greens, chalky blues, and earthy pinks, have overtones of John Marin's energetic late oils, which were regularly exhibited in New York at the time. (Some of Rothko's earliest watercolors, from the 1920s—not included in this exhibition—also suggest that he was paying attention to Marin.) We are prepared for the simplifications of Rothko's summer idyll by a small Milton Avery in the prologue: a cellist in profile, almost fused with her instrument, perched on a black chair silhouetted against a luminous yellow ground, all presented as generous, largely uninflected color shapes. The painting bears witness to a friendship

that began in 1925 as well as to a shared aesthetic or, more accurately, to an influence, since Avery, ten years Rothko's senior, had considerable standing among his younger peers. (According to Avery's widow, Rothko and his close friend Adolph Gottlieb were such frequent visitors to the older painter's studio and their work so related to his during the 1930s that Avery banned them from the premises, but the friendship survived.)

The Avery, from the Columbia Museum of Art's collection, points to this important connection, but since it dates from 1958, it hardly speaks to the moment when Rothko's work was closest to that of his friend and colleague. In the same way, the introduction's Gottlieb, a 1948 pictograph in gouache, from the Arkansas Art Center's celebrated collection of works on paper, is clearly intended, like the Avery, to signal a significant relationship. But the pictograph is a modest effort that fails to represent adequately the tie between Rothko and Gottlieb, who met around 1929–1930, and were especially close in the 1940s—developing their work in tandem, exhibiting together, and issuing statements about their purpose together—during exactly the moment on which the exhibition focuses. The relationship of Gottlieb and Gottlieb's art to Rothko and his work seems generally downplayed throughout, on wall texts, exhibition labels, and in catalogue texts. (In contrast, Rothko's friendship with Clyfford Still is emphasized, which provokes uncharitable thoughts about the link between the current art market and scholarship, but that's another matter.) Pollock, similarly, is represented by a drawing done in 1942 as part of his psychoanalysis; it's vivid testimony to the currency of ideas about the collective unconscious at the time, but it was never exhibited during Pollock's life (and not for many years afterwards), so it could not have been seen in the 1940s. Such discrepancies suggest that ready availability was the main criterion for inclusion in the exhibition's preamble. It's an understandable approach, but given the evident ambition of "The Definitive Decade" to be authoritative in tracking Rothko's evolution, the presence of works that he might actually have encountered during the decade

under review would have added a good deal to our understanding.

Happily, the exhibition's selection of rarely seen works by Rothko himself soon overwhelms any quibbles about the choice of comparative material. His dominant concerns during the 1940s quickly become evident and, what is even more striking, so does the multiplicity of ways he embodied these concerns. The artist's son, while emphasizing that the decade was an unusually productive one for his father, who was otherwise habitually slow and painstaking in the studio, also reminds us that Rothko's "progression toward his classic style, although constant, is not necessarily linear." He then rather pedantically itemizes the painter's entire working life as six stylistic periods "as a point of reference": Figurative (c. 1923–40), Surrealist—Myth-based (1940–43), Surrealist—Abstracted (1943–46), Multiform (1946–48), Transitional (1948–49), Classic/Colorfield (1949–70). However they are classified, the earliest works in "The Definitive Decade"—after the unequivocally referential *Untitled (Man and Two Women in a Pastoral Setting)*—are testimony to Rothko's struggle to load his paintings with the emotions evoked by the figure's powerful associations, without resorting to conventional modes of representation.

By 1941–1942, the discrete characters of the pastoral scene are replaced by hints of vaguely classicizing, curly haired protagonists, often, like the pipe-smoking man and his companions, in threes. This penchant for trios is an echo, it is suggested, of the traditional grouping of the Three Graces, or perhaps of the conjoined heads of the three ages of man, above conjoined animal heads, in the enigmatic Titian (and Workshop), *Allegory of Time Governed by Prudence* (c. 1550–1565, National Gallery, London). There may also be an association with the Trinity, given the exhibition's untitled painting of 1941–42, among others that were not included, with themes from the Passion of Christ. The work on view dissects an image of the Crucifixion, detaching and rearranging pierced hands, a tense torso, oversized feet, and other body parts, multiplying them by threes in their as-

signed compartments. Rothko flattens and melds the faces of his freely indicated figures, scribbling multiple eyes across a "frieze" of heads and punctuating them with schematically indicated profile noses. Torsos and limbs are sliced and reassembled into horizontal zones that recall the irrational stacking of Titian's allegory and, with the clear vision of hindsight and despite their being filled with body parts at various scales, can be read as prefiguring the floating rectangles. Titles such as *Antigone* (c. 1941) and *The Omen of the Eagle* (1942) alert us to Rothko's high-minded intentions. No more improvisations on everyday experience of public transport and vacations in the country. The fresh palette of the pastoral scene is supplanted by pale, brooding earth colors applied in washy sweeps, relieved by dull blues and a little red. We have entered the realm of myth and Greek tragedy.

Rothko was not alone in co-opting such subjects for his own endeavors. Surrealism's contention that the unconscious was the source of art had long been percolating among the younger New York artists, even before the center of the Surrealist art world shifted to New York, with the arrival of the "Artists in Exile," mostly Surrealists, fleeing the German invasion of France. Almost from its inception, in 1929, the Museum of Modern Art exhibited Surrealist works and in 1936 mounted the important exhibition "Fantastic Art, Dada, and Surrealism," with some influential examples from the show, including Alberto Giacometti's haunting *The Palace at 4 AM* (1932) entering the museum's collection. Additionally, the dealer Julien Levy and Peggy Guggenheim's Art of This Century gallery organized other significant showings of the Surrealists and their confrères. Freudian and Jungian theories of how myths are re-enacted in our lives were common topics of discussion. The American publication of Sir J. G. Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, in 1936, confirmed the Jungian view that primordial racial memory is shared and universal by showing how corresponding myths run across cultures and through time. Symbol and myth assumed new importance: If the source of art was the

unconscious, and the unconscious was a vast repository of shared cultural memory, then the artist was provided with a new kind of universal subject matter. The mythology of all cultures, from any time—Greek tragedy, archaic art, the art of Africa, Oceania, and more—were legitimate sources for everyone (even for nice, educated Jewish boys, like Rothko and Gottlieb, working in New York). Forward-looking artists, like Rothko and Gottlieb, were quick to realize the implications of these ideas. So, too, did many of their peers, even in other disciplines—witness Martha Graham’s danced meditations on mythological themes, the sculptor David Smith’s Egyptian-inspired riffs on hermetic transformation, Pollock’s fascination with Native American practices, and more. In the first half of the 1940s, with World War II raging, the assumption that all of humanity shared a common inheritance of archetypal beliefs that transcended nationality and time must have gained special resonance and perhaps a measure of irony, against the background of violent conflict in Europe and Asia.

Gottlieb, interviewed in 1968, remembered the remarkable effect of venturing into this new, uncharted country:

[it] started with some conversations that I had with Rothko . . . everyone was painting the American scene . . . and I said, well, why not try to find a good subject matter like mythological themes? And, well, we agreed to do that, and Mark chose to do some themes from the plays of Aeschylus and I played around with the Oedipus myth. . . . We suddenly found that there were formal problems that confronted us for which there were no precedent. We were in unknown territory.

(The obvious relationship of Gottlieb’s Pictographs, with their dislocated, allusive “glyphs” arranged on loose grids, and Rothko’s disjunctive, boxed “figures” of the early 1940s speaks to their close connection and makes the exhibition’s downplaying of their friendship conspicuous.)

By the mid-1940s, Rothko had abandoned the fragmented, recombined, tenuously “dis-

guised” allusions to the figure of the “Myth-based” works, in favor of delicately rendered, ambiguous dream or delirium imagery. The canvases and watercolors of this period are crowded with a large population of enigmatic biomorphic forms, defined by exquisitely controlled drawing and loosely scrubbed patches of subdued, crepuscular grays and ochres, with occasional flushes of pink, touches of red, and slightly more emphatic black drawing. This unnamable cast of characters floats in indeterminate space invoked by broad sweeps of a coarse brush. Often this brushy ground is split into large horizontal zones, once again alerting us to what is to come. While nothing can be identified specifically, Rothko’s fragile forms are animated, seemingly engaged in some kind of event, or at least exerting a magnetic pull on one another. Edges blur, suggesting movement and rendering the images more mysterious. Memories of the body, marine creatures, and microscopic organisms inflect these obscure dramas, reaffirming Rothko’s contention that he was not an abstract painter—although I suspect that he meant not that his work was referential, but rather that it was about deep feeling and abstruse meaning rather than about formal relationships. (He also insisted that those meanings were always dark. More about that later.)

However we choose to read them, it’s impossible, confronted by these works, not to think about Arshile Gorky’s ravishing, evocative dream images of the early 1940s, with their multivalent “personages” and disembodied floods of color, or about Joan Miró’s eerie, tense abstractions, so regularly exhibited in New York that they have been credited with inspiring what have been termed “the biomorphic ’40s.” Rothko’s atypically crisp *Sea Fantasy* (1946) with its clearly defined “actors,” slender vertical and horizontal axes, and clear yellow ground, is specially reminiscent of Miró.

By about 1946, even these elusive, unstable gatherings of identifiable forms proved too specific for Rothko’s avowed desire to paint “psychic events,” rather than to allude, however obliquely, to anything tangible in

the world around him. The vaguely associative, delicately rendered forms inhabiting his work in the early '40s gradually lost their fine drawn lines and relatively distinct identities, becoming soft-edged, inchoate color events, like still unformed matter floating in a primordial soup. Rothko continued to avow that his art was about intangibles, and bleak intangibles, at that. In 1945, he wrote that “tragic experience . . . is the only sourcebook for art” and, in a celebrated 1956 interview, he expressed his pleasure when people wept in front of his paintings, maintaining that these viewers were sharing the “religious” experience of “tragedy, ecstasy, and doom” that he himself felt when making them. Yet the works in the last galleries of “The Decisive Decade”—even the most somber—can also be read as celebrating the fact that the act of painting and the physical substance of paint can be abstract carriers of feeling. Abandoning even the vestiges of allusion seems to have been difficult for Rothko. The so-called Multiforms, with their unbound patches of color, are often overloaded, the sheer number of pictorial events and paint applications—scrapes, bleeds, scumbles—all but overwhelming the picture. But the last paintings included in the show—stripped-down works on paper and canvas from 1949, with radiant oranges and yellows, set off by darker “fields” made of transparent layers—make it plain that Rothko soon learned to trust the expressive potency of his materials, eliminating drawing and allowing uncomplicated, large areas of color to speak for themselves. (This new fascination with the power of chroma is supposed to have been triggered by Rothko’s study of Henri Matisse’s *The Red Studio* [1911] which arrived at the Museum of Modern Art in 1949.)

Next stop, the “Classic” paintings. One of these, an untitled work from 1950, ends the show with stacked, weightless fields of light-struck gold and diaphanous darkness, their boundary dissolving, hovering against an orange ground implied only at the edges. Harry Cooper, in his perceptive catalogue essay, quotes Rothko writing in 1954 of his “desire for the frontal, for the unveiled, for the experienced surface,” a desire that has plainly

been fulfilled. *Untitled*, paradoxically, seems to possess color but not substance, to assert a literal surface and simultaneously suggest limitless space. We mentally enter realms of color whose limits seem defined only by radiance, at the same time that we are aware of the painting as an accumulation of scrubbed-in touches.

Cooper’s quotation illuminates Rothko’s evolution, charting the path from reference to abstraction, drawing a thread from the flattened figures in the pastoral scene of 1940 through the unmoored organic forms of the early 1940s and the shifting patches of the Multiforms to the confrontational expanses of his best known, most acclaimed works. Unlike most of the quotations in the exhibition’s wall texts, which are heavy on the rhetoric of “tragedy, ecstasy, and doom”—the emptying out of the Classic paintings is interpreted as “absence” provoked by the death of the artist’s mother in 1949—the 1954 comment is about *making*, about the formal questions that preoccupied Rothko when he was working on what many consider to be his most powerful paintings. “The Definitive Decade” brings that search to life and allows us to follow it. Whether it offers evidence of “tragic experience” or “tragedy, ecstasy, and doom” is up to the individual viewer.

Exhibition notes

“Paul Klee—Philosophical Vision:
From Nature to Art”
McMullen Museum of Art,
Boston College.
September 1–December 9, 2012

Paul Klee (1879–1940) may have protested that “we are much too concerned with biography in art,” but this revealing exhibition shows that even the most imaginative artist can’t escape the influence of his own life and times. The show is organized into eight thematic sections, tracing “the artist’s dialogue with nature,” “the drama of existence,” and “movement, flight, and the balance of forces,” as Klee explored them over the decades.

In the satirical etching *Comedian* (1904), a rumped-faced actor in a plumed helmet sports a mask that looks much like his own face. Klee, an accomplished violinist and music critic, was also an avid operagoer who considered opera the highest form of theater. This grotesque *buffo* character presents a maddeningly inconclusive image, but we can still delight in its expressionism and the energy of its pulsating lines.

Klee's technique becomes more diffuse in the etching *Small World* (1914). Peering closely at the lines, shapes, and blobs, one can make out a mask, stick figures, and the year and number of the work drawn in the plate. The energy that Klee has invested in working the plate and the thicket of jittery imagery reinforces Marcel Franciscano's contention that Klee's "basic impulse was graphic."

This undisciplined world gives way to *City of Cathedrals* (1927), a drawing of such restraint that it moved even Michel Foucault to an unexpected moment of clarity: "In order to deploy his plastic signs, Klee wove a new space." This childlike work is deceptively rich, encompassing Klee's constant experiments with line, structure, rhythm, and language. That Foucault would use the word "wove" is further intriguing because in 1927 Klee was at the Bauhaus teaching weaving design. In his discussion of the impact of weaving on Klee's work in the catalogue, Claude Cernuschi also cites André Masson's *Eulogy of Paul Klee* in which Klee's grids and interest in language are linked to pre-Columbian textiles and the Inca quipu. (Historians believe that the Inca runners carried the quipu, a group of knotted strings, from village to village to convey news or records of tribute goods.) This isn't so farfetched given Klee's interest in many kinds of language systems, from musical notation and Egyptian hieroglyphics to simple Xs and Os.

Polyphonic Architecture (1930) is a sample of Klee's "polyphonic paintings" in which he explored simultaneous themes in space and time, just as he had done as a musician, playing melody and counterpoint. But, he writes in his diary, "Polyphonic painting is superior to music in that, here, the time ele-

ment becomes a spatial element. The notion of simultaneity stands out even more richly."

In *Polyphonic Architecture*, we again see cathedrals as sign-units, but this time, a grid of richly colored squares threatens to overwhelm the delicate lines. Rhythmic color values send the eye bouncing around the surface of the work. The conflict of scale between the varied squares and the tiny cathedrals exists alongside the dialogue between representation and abstraction. The fact that the work is watercolor on cotton sends us back to the motion of weaving and the interplay of the hand. It is a remarkably cogent example of Klee's "multiple temporalities."

Äloup (1931) is an example of what might be called polyphonic pointillism. Ranks of dots punctuated by black outlined areas and thick black strokes are suspended over a colorful layer of pink, yellow, and lavender. The curators offer little comment on this piece, falling back on its decorative potential. But Klee scorned decoration as a dead end, so there must be more at work here.

The onomatopoeic title sounds like "alley-oop," a phrase that originated among French gymnasts and trapeze artists who launched themselves with "allez, hop!" Klee frequently depicted tightrope walkers, so it seems likely that he would have heard this phrase. *Äloup* might then be the view from high in the big top with the entertainers appearing as stylized scripts over the heads of a tightly packed audience. The lack of center in the painting and the rhythm created by a sea of dots draws attention, however, not to what is seen, but to what is experienced.

The gallery titled "The Failure of Politics" takes a more serious turn. By 1933, when Hitler became Chancellor of Germany, Klee was an internationally recognized artist. But after having his artwork seized by the Nazis and being (inaccurately) denounced as a Jew, Klee decided to return to Switzerland. The confiscated artworks appeared in 1937 in Goebbels' *Entartete Kunst*, or Degenerate Art, exhibition.

The works on exhibit from this period are frenzied pencil sketches, what Klee called

“psychic improvisations.” They depict scenes of murder, public denunciations, violence, and sorcery in an atmosphere of coercion and fear. Klee somewhat mitigates the imagery by drawing on his operatic works, showing secret agents as barbarians in doublets and military tribunals as witch trials.

In 1935, Klee’s health had begun to deteriorate. A series of symptoms including bronchitis, pleurisy, and persistent fatigue baffled the doctors who first diagnosed measles. In 2010, Dr. Hans Suter, a physician and Klee enthusiast, published what is surely the definitive history of this mysterious malady, now generally believed to be scleroderma. Suter quotes Klee’s reflection on approaching death: “not as oblivion but as the pursuit of perfection.”

An uncharacteristically bleak work from 1939 belies this equanimity. While *A Gate* is classical in its allusion to death as a threshold, Klee uses masses and line in a monochromatic palette to distance himself from the experience that seems imminent. Günter Figal notes that works such as *A Gate* “do not have foreground and background. So they are not mere optical phenomena; rather they *encounter* the beholder. . . . They are intensely present in what can be called their texture.”

Among the strongest works in the show are continuous line drawings such as *Eidola: Erstwhile Philosopher, No!*, and *Stick It Out!*, all from 1940. Although Klee made drawings such as these throughout his life, these three distill the formal themes of his body of work into a resolution that is at once coolly theoretical and all too human. *Eidola: Erstwhile Philosopher* depicts a contemplative figure, examining his fate in a pose similar to Rodin’s Thinker. *No!* offers an elegant refusal, its ultra thin line counterbalancing the weight of the negative. In *Stick It Out!*, the continuous line portrait turns inward on itself, becoming so distorted that its energy is torqued into a cubist head with spirals for eyes.

In her catalogue essay, Eliane Escoubas concludes that Klee finds in these drawings the “essence of rhythm” and a sense of art in the process of becoming. The French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty had already drawn this conclusion in 1961, noting

that Klee freed the line so that “[it] no longer imitates the visible; it ‘makes visible’; it is the diagram of a genesis of things.” It would seem that Klee had succeeded in making—as he himself defined art—a “simile of creation.”
—Leann Davis Alspaugh

“Art of Change:
New Directions from China”
Hayward Gallery, London.
September 7–December 9, 2012

“Everything Was Moving:
Photography from the ’60s and ’70s”
Barbican Art Gallery, London.
September 13, 2012–January 13, 2013

The art of modern China has once again entered the London galleries in force. The Hayward Gallery, which has a long and successful record of exhibiting work by the world’s most adventurous and innovative artists, has now devoted its entire main space to contemporary work from China—pictures, sculptures, photography, videos, human statues, and performance art. Across town in the Barbican Art Gallery, hidden away upstairs in a couple of side rooms in a large photography exhibition, is the utterly contrasting work of the Chinese photojournalist Li Zhenshang. Li has given the world its most extensive visual record of the horrors of Mao Zedong’s Cultural Revolution of 1966–76. It provides a grimly realistic prelude to the world of high contemporary fantasy at the Hayward, an exhibition which has so many new Chinese directions that it almost ceases to have direction at all.

Perhaps the most outré room in the Hayward exhibition is that given over to the work of Sun Yuan and Peng Yu. At the center is their *Civilization Pillar* (original 2001), a twelve-foot-high obelisk made of human fat collected as a by-product of liposuction. It parodies traditional, dignified Chinese marble pillars meticulously curved with clouds and dragons; this one is soft, yellow, perishable, and seemingly slapdash—the very antithesis of that which is being parodied. Many

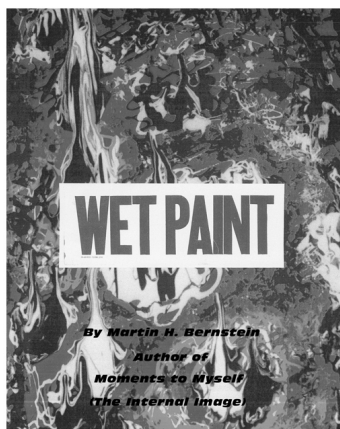
westerners will feel the unintended horror of historical memory tied to the piece is further compounded by the impassive young Chinese women in baggy striped pajamas who stalk viewers as part of another “exhibit.” To the side is the video *Dogs that cannot touch one another* (2003); Chinese fighting dogs race towards each other but are held stationary by being leashed to countervailing treadmills. The dogs’ frustration, which mirrors that of everyday life, is comic, and they are now safe from injury. Behind the fat column lurks *I Didn’t Notice What I am Doing* (2012), two huge, lumbering fiberglass models, one of the familiar rhinoceros with its horn of compacted hair and one of the long-extinct, bony-horned dinosaur, triceratops. By making these quite unrelated animals the same size and placing them in proximity, as if they were cousins, the artists are indulging in a playful mockery of the wrangles of Darwinists and Creationists. The juxtaposition of these exhibits shows how much Chinese and Western ideas have become intertwined in an essentially international art.

“Bernstein creates images which bring the pleasure of seeing to those who would look.”

Howard Greenberg, Howard Greenberg Gallery

“Bernstein shows us a powerful abstract whose historical origins are found in New York.”

Jonathan Goodman, New York Based Critic



WET PAINT by Martin H. Bernstein

Author of *Moments to Myself* (*The Internal Image*)

Available at Barnes & Noble, Amazon.com,
and the MOMA Book Store in New York

For sheer Lewis Carroll and Gilbert and Sullivan fun there is Wang Jianwei’s *Surplus Value* (2010), an almost unplayable Ping-Pong table full of sudden declivities with a film of people playing projected overhead. Paddles and balls are provided. A Japanese tourist asked me for a game; nobody won. A gentler experience is to be had in Liang Shaoji’s Daoist-inspired silk room in which silk threads are wound round a maze of pebbles and a set of heavy hanging chains. In the room, you can listen to the hard-spinning, mulberry-chomping silk worms through headphones. Variety indeed.

Ai Weiwei has implied that the works in this exhibition are entirely apolitical; it would be fairer to say that their comments are subtle and indirect. Some are poignantly sad, as with Chen Zhen’s burning of old newspapers—mere old news—in a parody of the book burnings carried out by the Red Guards, or his room full of discarded objects covered in dried mud. In order to make his photographs and films (*Cycle-Growing, Sowing and Harvesting* [1993–4]) over an entire agricultural year, Wang Jianwei signed a contract with a peasant collaboratively to sow his fields with the latest imported genetically modified grain and, between them, they brought in a record harvest. Contract had replaced socialism and there was no egalitarianism to hold the entrepreneurial peasant back. Seen in the light of the forced exile of intellectuals to the countryside during Mao’s time, this entire exercise in modern farming enterprise can be viewed in an ironic way. Then, ideological enthusiasm was everything, technical expertise was denigrated, and there was a xenophobic repudiation of foreign knowledge. The intellectual was supposed to learn from the peasants, not they from him. In *Sowing and Harvesting* all is reversed—Mao’s world turned upside down.

There could not be a bigger contrast to the Hayward exhibit than the realistic black and white photographs of Li Zhensheng at the Barbican. Li worked for a provincial newspaper in the industrial city of Harbin, close to the Chinese border with Russia, for eighteen years. He recorded the excesses, enthusiasms,

and cruelty of the Cultural Revolution. Li even took a camera with him when sent into rural exile for political reasons after being denounced by malicious colleagues. He hid roughly thirty thousand negatives for thirty-five years, at some risk to himself. Many were only printed abroad in the twenty-first century. Li's photographs reveal the totality of what was happening in China, a view from the forbidden periphery where foreign journalists could not go. For his official photographs, Li would induce the frenzied mobs to chant a Maoist slogan selected because its particular sounds made the chanters widely open their mouths, looking ecstatic. For his own collection, however, he often chose angles and compositions that made the crowd look crazy. The power of these manipulated gangs led to the hideous public humiliation of individuals they disliked. Li's photo from September 12, 1966 shows teenagers of the Red Guard literally tearing out the hair of a deposed provincial governor who dared to have it cut in the same fashion as Mao himself. A further photo from August 24 of that year shows the Buddhist monks of Harbin publically displaying a banner that says "To hell with the Buddhist scriptures, they are full of dog farts." He was even able to take pictures of people being executed; the worst of these (from 1980, so it was not included in this exhibit) shows guards dislocating a woman's jaw before forcing her to kneel in the snow to be shot, so that she could not cry out her innocence while waiting for the bullet.

—Christie Davies

"Materializing 'Six Years': Lucy R. Lippard & the Emergence of Conceptual Art"
The Brooklyn Museum's Elizabeth R. Sackler Center for Feminist Art.
September 14, 2012–February 3, 2013

This review doesn't matter: the exhibition's potential is confirmed by its existence rather than by its content. Conceptual art, after all, inherently bypasses criticism. Judging it is less interesting than following through on its ideas—ideas that reveal the invisible apron strings of the "real world's" power

structures. But don't take my word for it. Take it from Lippard, the pioneering art historian whose words I have quoted, almost verbatim, in the preceding sentences.

Lippard was fundamental in establishing the free-for-all that is today's mainstream art world—a milieu rife with woolly intellectualizing, political posturing, and (*ahem*) "aleatory strategies [that] de-center the authorial function and thus reevaluate the role of logical argumentation and hermeneutics as the guarantors of aesthetic function." The exhibition takes its title from Lippard's *Six Years*, a slim volume published in 1973 detailing the advent of Conceptualism. As such, "Materializing Six Years" ushers viewers back to the late 1960s, wherein sticking-it-to-the-man was the prevailing mantra. Within New York City's headier art precincts, "the man" was the art critic Clement Greenberg and his "arrogant formalism."

Art and Culture is the first thing viewers encounter upon entering the exhibition, but not, that is, Greenberg's seminal book. Rather it's a Cornelian *objet trouvé*, created by the British artist John Latham, which holds the book's remains. Latham held a party wherein guests were invited to chew pages torn from *Art and Culture*; the resulting pulp was subsequently mixed with yeast in order to (wait for the *mot*) form an "Alien Culture." Latham later attempted to return the library book in its masticated form—buying his own copy didn't square with the aesthetic program, I guess—and was consequently dismissed from his position as teacher at the St. Martin's School of Art.

Nowadays, Latham would likely be granted tenure for his strike against the status quo. But this stunt occurred in the days before transgression, nihilism, and narcissism—the defining attributes of the dematerialized art for which Lippard was promoter, cheerleader, and scribe—became the status quo. As such, the myriad objects on display at The Brooklyn Museum have a certain obstreperous integrity—they include photocopied exhibition announcements, type-written instructions for constructing works of art, grainy documentary films, diagrams, a pile of sand, plant de-

tritus, receipts for sheet metal, and scribbled nostrums like “there’s a spot of yin in every yang & a spot of yang in every yin.” That’s not to say, however, that any of it should be mistaken for art.

But, then, what might art be when anybody can be a “cultural producer?” (Not an “artist,” please, we’re non-elitists.) The organizers of “Materializing Six Years” consider the hybridization of identity—or, rather, the denigration of hard-won expertise—Lippard’s signal contribution to contemporary culture. Artists weren’t “special” or “different,” the argument went: “like anyone else, [they] just arrange the material of the earth.” Which isn’t to say that Lippard was averse to the prestige art affords. Conceptual Art might lead to the demise of the art object and art criticism, but that doesn’t mean one couldn’t dabble in the stuff. “Sometime in the near future it may be necessary for the writer to be an artist.” Hmm, you wonder: what writer could Lippard have been thinking of?

Lippard’s efforts as curator did garner criticism. A few observers noted how the exhibitions she organized—among them, *Eccentric Abstraction* at the Fischbach Gallery in 1966 and *557,087* at the Seattle Art Museum three years later—bolstered Lippard’s own “creative originality” at the expense of the “explanatory historicism” exemplified by the artists she championed. Still, Lippard knows what’s what. *Six Years*, the book, “was probably the best show I’ve ever created.” Lippard’s finest exhibition, then, was no exhibition at all, but hard-copy evidence of how one influential art historian had a finger on the pulse of the times and consequently turned the resulting ephemera into neo-Dadaist gold. Without abundant verbiage and abstruse theorizing—that is to say, without the Conceptualist Diva’s blessing—the desultory ephemera featured in “Materializing Six Years” would have no significance—aesthetic or otherwise. Clement Greenberg was arrogant? He had nothing on Lucy R. Lippard.

—*Mario Naves*

Forthcoming in *The New Criterion*:

Art: a special section in December
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Gallery chronicle

by James Panero

I can pretty much imagine how the show “To be a Lady: forty-five women in the arts” took shape.¹ Jason Andrew, the curator of this exhibition of female artists that spans a century and focuses significantly—but not exclusively—on abstract painting and sculpture, has one of the most observant eyes in art. As the director of Norte Maar, a non-profit apartment gallery in Bushwick, Brooklyn, he has probably surveyed more of the outer-borough art scene than any other curator. As something of a neighborhood impresario, he has most likely seen more Bushwick-based art than anyone else, period. According to one challenge he issued to himself on Twitter, he recently tried to visit every open studio during Bushwick Open Studios weekend. (An impossible task that would have left little more than a minute per venue, including travel time; he still far outpaced the rest of us.)

Andrew has an inclusive eye but also a discerning one, and it has taken him far beyond Bushwick. He is the manager of the estate of Jack Tworikov, the first-generation Abstract Expressionist, and has curated landmark shows of the artist. He has produced art-infused dance performances choreographed by Julia K. Gleich. He has mounted historical exhibitions about the arts of Black Moun-

1 “To be a Lady: forty-five women in the arts” opened at the 1285 Avenue of the Americas Art Gallery, New York, on September 24, 2012 and remains on view through January 18, 2013.

tain College, and of the artists who passed through the Wells Street Gallery, an avant-garde gallery in late-1950s Chicago. He has hosted a series of events around the centenary of John Cage. Several of these projects have been covered in this column.

Andrew has a gift for seeing the essential qualities of art. He can look past what’s marketable to uncover what shines. He unearths art that projects a personal, often mystical, light. He sees connections between art works that cut across geography and time, adding his own energetic voice to the resonances that exist between the 1950s vanguard and what we see on the vital periphery of art today. This is a vision Andrew has been generous enough to share, and one that has influenced my own view of art.

I said I could imagine how his current show came together, because it probably started with an observation I have similarly made while surveying this artistic landscape: much, maybe most, of the art that interests me these days is by women.

For me, I must say, this kind of thought sets off neither a light bulb nor an alarm bell but instead the klaxon voice of my mother, a 1970s-era feminist. *What do you mean? Why would you notice? Why shouldn’t it be?* And on it goes until the thought shuts down in ear-splitting mental agony.

It is regrettable that our culture today does not seem any better equipped to discuss such sexual distinctions. Even when elicited, such talk often devolves into giggles or indigna-

tion. So Andrew should be applauded for taking this observation and making something big of it. “It is not the intention of this exhibition to be a comprehensive survey of women in the arts,” he writes. “It’s a selection of artists I know, have come to respect, and whose aesthetic I admire.”

“To be a Lady” is not a scholarly exhibition or one that makes a single explicit claim. It mainly comes across as a show of Andrew’s personal taste, telling the story of his own wandering eye—just one that separates the ladies from the gentlemen. It circles through the Tworkov era, with several works by artists born, like Tworkov, at or near the turn of the last century. This includes Alma Thomas (1891–1978), Charmion von Wiegand (1896–1983), Louise Nevelson (1899–1988), Alice Neel (1900–1984), Barbara Morgan (1900–1992), Irene Rice Pereira (1902–1971), Janice Biala (1903–2000), May Wilson (1905–1986), Lenore Tawney (1907–2007), and Louise Bourgeois (1911–2010). The Wells Street group is also represented, here by Judith Dolnick (born 1934).

Then there are many familiar names from Andrew’s Bushwick—artists who either live, work, or exhibit in the neighborhood. A partial list, which includes Mira Schor (b. 1950), Mary Judge (b. 1953), Tamara Gonzales (b. 1959), Brece Honeycutt (b. 1960), Julia K. Gleich (b. 1965), Austin Thomas (b. 1969), Ellen Letcher (b. 1972), and Brooke Moysé (b. 1978), signals the wide range of artists who are now associated with this scene. All told, the works on display, which fill both sides of the bustling and often distracting lobby of the UBS Building in midtown, come from personal loans, Andrew’s own collection, and two dozen or so galleries and estates that are within Andrew’s orbit.

More than just mounting a personal show, however, Andrew recognizes that the distinction at the heart of “To be a Lady” says something, even if he is not altogether sure quite what. Is this an exhibition of women, a show about women, or a survey that happens to be made up of women? Are women artists the overlooked equals of men, or do

they have their own separate story to tell? In trying to answer, Andrew gets lost in the weeds, perhaps understandably so, because the answer to all of these questions is yes.

In his catalogue essay, Andrew explains how the title, “To be a Lady,” is meant to be taken ironically, deriding how artists like Joan Mitchell were once brushed aside, so to speak, as “lady painters.” Yet at the same time, the title seems to suggest that there might, in fact, be something decorous and “lady-like” in what these artists do. Through their art, these women define what it means to be a lady, and maybe that’s not such a bad thing after all. As someone who has gotten to know many of the younger artists in this exhibition, I can say that they are indeed upstanding ladies—far superior to the drunks, deadbeats, and louts that have made up much of the male art mafia over the past hundred years. (I hasten to add that, contrary to this historical group, the male artists I know are almost all perfect gentlemen.)

Andrew further writes how “gender rarely factors into my curatorial criteria,” yet “these women have problematized and played with gender identifications and characterizations, from *lady* to *woman* to *other* in some form, consciously or unconsciously.” He writes that his exhibition brings together artists “who happen to be women.” He quotes Lee Krasner, who said, “I’m an artist not a woman artist.” It’s a sentiment that seems to be shared by many of the artists here on view. Yet Andrew also says that these happen-to-be-women artists burst open “the once taboo subjects of politics, societal roles, sex, and gender with their work.”

Part of the confusion here may lie in the way political feminism has controlled our sex-based dialogue, all while trailblazing women into an artistic ghetto. Feminist art might now take pride of place in the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center at the Brooklyn Museum, where Judy Chicago’s *The Dinner Party*, a feminist Seder table with vagina-themed place settings, takes up the museum’s attic. But this arch work only extended the most hyperbolic qualities of over-sexed macho art. It sent Picasso’s *dentata* to the orthodontist

and felt satisfied with newly straightened teeth.

And just as the meteoric rise of the New York School at mid-century obscured, rather than illuminated, the great abstract artists who both preceded and came after, so too has the era of feminist art, centered in the 1970s, done little to highlight artists who happen to be women but never happened to be feminists. (Here I am reminded of a story the legendarily tough critic Dore Ashton recently told me about receiving a delegation of feminists, “a very unattractive group of ladies in leather jackets and what-have-you. And I said very sweetly, ‘I’m not going to join you. The day you start advocating for working-class women, I’ll join you,’ and they never did.”)

The fact is that feminism has largely been the sideshow, rather than the main event, for women in the arts. That’s why Andrew’s handful of political inclusions in “To be a Lady” largely seem like distractions from the main event. *Cod Variations: Hoop Dreams (Large)* (2009), by Michelle Jaffé (b. 1956), claims to evince the “hubris of a nation, suggesting the Logo, Branded Identity, and caricature of the Cartoon Action Hero.” Yet this sculpture of plastic mesh suspended from a basketball hoop in the shape of a protective cup is more a rim shot than a slam-dunk. So too is *Amnion Folds* (2003), a photo collage of rolled skin by Genesis Breyer (b. 1950), a professional (ahem, male) gender-bender whose one-time project was to have extensive plastic surgery so he could resemble his wife.

These examples aside, what “To be a Lady” mainly suggests is that sexual difference means more than nothing and less than everything in art. That’s a wide area to operate in, and it should be, because being a lady (or being a gentleman, for that matter) is one of the great assets informing an artist’s individuality.

It’s too bad that the language of music cannot apply to visual art. We all know there’s a difference between a tenor and a soprano, yet we value them equally. In fact, opera is rather dull without both. The same holds true for the voices of painters or sculptors. With its

concentration of abstract artists, “To be a Lady” suggests, in particular, why women’s voices have been essential to the evolution of modernism. Even without pivotal figures on display like Helen Frankenthaler, the lady who made the men look like boys, “To be a Lady” suggests how women have advanced an abstract language that is thankfully free of distracting male quavers. Without macho bluster, the works here can settle into contemplative, often symmetrical compositions.

That’s why we can see connections back and forth across generations between *Red Scarlet Sage* (1976), Alma Thomas’s tessellated, terrazzo patterns in paint, and *Round Place Square* (2010), Austin Thomas’s intricate, magical collage. The mystical radiance of *Invocation to the Adi Buddha* (1968–70), by Charmion von Wiegand, reappears in the prismatic topography of *Mount* (2011), by Brooke Moyses, which further reflects the sculptural light of *Hawk* (2012), by Rachel Beach. *Soft Star Series, No. 6* (2007), Mary Judge’s delicate mandala of powdered pigment, speaks to *Untitled (220-09)* (2009), Hermine Ford’s Byzantine tile fragment in oil. *Untitled* (c. 1960), Lee Bontecou’s haunting wall sculpture, reacts to *Hawthorne* (1999), Pat Passlof’s forceful testament to how a painting can bend and fold (my favorite single work in the show).

For every example here, there are ten others that could be included and would be equally worthy, from Dee Shapiro to Judith Braun, Lori Ellison to Julie Torres. One issue is that the UBS lobby is something of a corporate—dare I say, masculine—space, and so much of the art by women that I see these days is of a more intimate—dare I say, domestic—scale.

“For women in the arts,” writes Andrew, “as in many other fields, a special fortitude and commitment can be seen in the work and lives of those who succeed.” He’s right, but this statement could also apply to almost all artists, ladies and gentlemen alike, who work against convention to make art of significance. It’s just that the women who succeed in art have worked against more, and their art has often been better and more nuanced than the boys’ because of it.

Music

New York chronicle

by Jay Nordlinger

When someone wins the Gold Medal at the Tchaikovsky Competition, you want to hear him. This medal is probably the shiniest, most coveted bauble in the entire realm of musical competition. (No offense to winners of other competitions. As it's good to be king, it's good to win, whatever it is.) Daniil Trifonov won the Gold Medal last year. He is a Russian pianist, now twenty-one, as his bio tells us. Bios do that: They give a musician's age when he is nicely young, and they give it again, often, when he is nicely old. In between, silence, where age is concerned. Trifonov studies with Sergei Babayan at the Cleveland Institute of Music. Babayan is one of the most respected teachers in the world today, in addition to being a very fine pianist, of course, in his own right.

Trifonov appeared with the New York Philharmonic, playing Prokofiev's Concerto No. 3. He has long, straight hair. I couldn't help smiling as he bowed, before he sat down. He looked so young! The conductor, Alan Gilbert, established one tempo, and the soloist, when he entered, took another—a faster one. Trifonov has a very good pair of hands. But much of what he did with those hands was suspect. You need to be percussive and dry sometimes in this music, but you don't need to slap at the keyboard, as Trifonov did. Often, the sounds he made were too thin and bony. Yuja Wang, another young pianist with a great pair of hands, has this same problem. Trifonov made some excellent rude sounds in this first movement,

true. But he was not much for subtlety, as the music also requires.

He was better in the second movement, the theme and variations. He caught the idiosyncratic rhythms, and he also applied the right piquancy. There was one awkward moment: when the pianist botched his approach to the top of a phrase. It was a case of mistiming. And the pianist could not quite cover it up. In the final movement, he made some beautiful cascading sounds. But he also made a lot of noise, noise that was trying to substitute, I think, for genuine excitement. The music missed some of its menace and mystery. By the time Trifonov got to the end, he was out of juice—he had spent so much beforehand. The final pages ought to be thrilling, but instead they were oddly dull.

But the crowd stood and cheered, and Trifonov bowed charmingly, his hair flopping. He is an endearing personality. He played an encore, Schumann's song "Widmung," in the Liszt arrangement. He played beautifully, with superb judgment. The piece was truly song-like. I look forward to hearing him in recital, and in concertos, for years to come.

This was a concert of Russian spectacles, beginning with *Night on Bald Mountain* and ending with *Scheherazade*. Gilbert and the Philharmonic performed the first piece in the Rimsky-Korsakov arrangement. Their account was precise, virtuosic, and, to a degree, colorful. It was altogether professional. But it had no suspense, no knife edge, no wizardry. There is a calm section at the end

of the piece, and you could use the calming down, given what has gone on before. But on this afternoon, there had been nothing to calm down from. So the final section made little sense. *Night on Bald Mountain* is a tremendously exciting piece, sometimes a terrifying piece. You could never have known it, though. I would have traded some of the orchestra's precision and elegance for some abrasion and excitement.

As the audience applauded, I said to the friend next to me, "Do you like that piece?" "Yes," she said, "it's pretty." Exactly—that was the problem.

A *Carmen* at the Metropolitan Opera started very badly. The overture was rushed—absurdly fast—but, worse, it was barely articulated. Notes were slurred, blurred, fudged. An overture sets the tone of an opera, and of an evening at the opera. If the overture is poor, you, sitting in the audience, can be dispirited. On this night, the rest of Act I did not go much better. Playing and singing were sloppy, almost indifferent. Nothing was crisp, nothing was well-defined. The music did not have its gaiety, its charm—its *Carmenness*. No doubt, the conductor, Michele Mariotti, would have liked a do-over.

The mezzo-soprano in the title role was Anita Rachvelishvili, a Georgian, as her name tells you. As you might also guess, she has a big, glowing, smoky voice. The Habanera did not go well. Rachvelishvili just sort of honked it out there, without nuance. And she had a case of the wobbles (and a lesser case of the flats). She improved, though, as Act I continued. The wobbles disappeared. And she did something impressive at the end of the *Séguidille*. Most singers, when they yelp at the end, do so without regard to the top note—without worrying where they land. Rachvelishvili yelped right into the B, right into the center of it. It was beautiful. Also, Rachvelishvili is to be admired for her willingness to act out this role with gusto. She is not a small woman, may I say. Yet she carries herself as though she were a hot tamale. She got down and wrestled with her

rival cigarette girl. And when it came time to dance, she danced up a storm.

The tenor, our Don José, was Yonghoon Lee, a Korean. He has a beautiful voice, and it is a voice with some power. He can also float a pretty little head voice. In Act I, he was very, very tight. His singing was pinched, strained, effortful. He looked extremely uncomfortable on the stage. The night before, I had seen Anna Netrebko in *The Elixir of Love*, and I thought, "Has anyone ever been more at home onstage than she? She's more at home on a stage than most people are in their living rooms." I don't think I've ever seen anyone less at home onstage than Lee in this first act.

Neither Rachvelishvili nor Lee is what you would call an exemplar of the French language. And the two did not look comfortable with each other. (Lee, I'm afraid, would not have been comfortable with anyone. And Rachvelishvili was as game as possible.) It is not like me to mention something like this, for opera is primarily a musical experience, but the amorous play between Carmen and Don José was painful to watch. Once, when I knew it was coming again, I looked away. I wasn't proud to do so, and I don't think I had ever done it before.

In Act II, Mariotti had better control of the pit and the stage. The Escamillo was respectable (as the Micaëla had been). The Quintet was more or less together. Lee got through the Flower Song, though barely. The two pizzicatos at the end of the aria were pathetic, absolutely laughable. The players did not even overlap, as they plucked. James Levine, the music director, would have been shocked. A cloud of mediocrity hung over this evening. I went home after the second act—and was told later by a singer in the audience that the final two acts went much, much better. That they were good, actually. I was not surprised: Opera can be like this. As with sports, you just never know.

Carnegie Hall opened its season with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, led by its music director, Riccardo Muti. They played a three-concert stand. The middle concert

began with Wagner, his overture to *The Flying Dutchman*. Muti shaped this in intelligent, dramatic fashion. I was ready to hear the rest of the opera. The overture shows off woodwinds and horns. The CSO's came through, although there was some imperfect horn playing along the way. The unified brass playing at the end was terrific—and *loud*.

Then came a new work, by one of the orchestra's composers-in-residence, Mason Bates. I have praised his music in the past. Carnegie Hall's program notes informed us that Bates "has spent many nights as a DJ, spinning and mixing at dance clubs in San Francisco, New York City, Berlin, and Rome." His new work is *Alternative Energy*, which is in four movements. This is an example of a recently developed kind of piece, namely the environmentalist piece, or, as I sometimes say—wit that I am—the "green-piece." Music often follows political fashion. Those in the business would probably prefer to say "social conscience."

The first movement of *Alternative Energy* is "Ford's Farm, 1896." The second is "Chicago, 2012," depicting "a present-day particle collider." Next comes "Xian Jian Province, 2112." Here we see, or hear, "a futuristic Chinese nuclear plant." And finally, "Reykjavik, 2222." We are now in "an Icelandic rain forest on a hotter planet." Humanity is down to its last few inhabitants. "Distant tribal voices call for the building of a fire—our first energy source." Friends, a piece like this can get you all the grants and honors you want. The orchestra includes a "laptop" and an "extensive percussion battery." Perhaps it includes a car battery as well. According to the program notes, "old car parts" are involved.

In any event, the proof is in the pudding. How does the piece sound? For a while, it's clever, written in a popular vein: jazzy, energetic (appropriately enough). I thought of such composers as Blitzstein, Eisler, and Copland—early Copland, the composer of such proletarian masterpieces as *Into the Streets May First*. But *Alternative Energy* soon becomes dogged by clichés, I'm afraid—by the tics and trademarks of today: a psychedellic tinge; sci-fi sounds; jungle sounds; the

end-of-the-world bleakness. I found the piece tedious. The audience apparently disagreed, for it stood and cheered. Bates was on hand to take his bows. He is handsome, young, and cool. The world has ever loved handsome, young, and cool.

Muti ended the concert with a Romantic symphony that used to be a staple, but is relatively rare, I think, in today's concert halls: the Franck Symphony in D minor. I have never heard it so transparent and unclotted—"Apollonian," to use a word often applied to Muti's conducting. The playing was terribly clean and accurate, doing the music much good. I believe the last movement could have used more suspense and excitement, and also more of its swirling joy—that swirling, giddy joy we also find in the last movement of Franck's violin sonata. Muti was rather stolid. Still, it was good to see the old warhorse out for a ride.

About a week after that Met *Carmen*, the company presented a *Trovatore*. Do you remember what Caruso quipped? All you need to put on this opera is the four greatest singers in the world. Of the four principal singers, only one was familiar to me—Franco Vassallo, the Italian baritone singing the Conte di Luna. The Azucena was supposed to be Dolora Zajick, who comes as close to "owning" this role as anyone comes to owning any role. But she was sick, replaced by Mzia Nioradze, a Georgian mezzo, as you can tell, like our *Carmen*.

In the title role, Manrico, the Troubadour, was Gwyn Hughes-Jones—yes, another Welsh singer, and, specifically, another Welsh tenor. Wales has almost as many singers as it has sheep. But not many of them sound as Italian as Hughes-Jones does. He was a superb Manrico, in every respect: He could pump out "Di quella pira" and then sound like a *tenore di grazia*—as when he sang the tender lines, "Madre? Non dormi?" *Il trovatore* is a combination of bel canto and blood-and-guts grand opera. Hughes-Jones exhibited this combination in his own person. His Leonora was Carmen Giannattasio, a soprano from Italy. She too has a fortunate

combination: lyricism and power (adequate power, put it that way). In the first and second acts, she sang with common sense, musical sense, and decent intonation. She was entirely sympathetic. But in the last half of the opera, she was a different animal altogether: totally free, unerring, singing her part to the nth degree. I have heard many a Leonora more famous—but none better.

Vassallo made a solid Conte di Luna. Nioradze may not have been as riveting as Zajick, typically, but who's comparing? The substitute was riveting enough, a very canny opera singer. I should mention a fifth singer too: Morris Robinson, the bass singing Ferrando. His is a big and handsome voice, and one that can move: one that doesn't lumber but can move through the notes.

I have not mentioned the most important person in this *Trovatore*, and the most important person in any *Trovatore*, and almost any opera: the conductor. He is the straw that stirs the drink. He is the one who determines how the music goes. He's the one on whom almost everything depends. The program said "Daniele Callegari," and I thought, "Okay, fine: another Italian journeyman." Far from it. From the opening measures, Callegari had rare authority. He knew the opera inside and out, and he knew how to get what he wanted. This *Trovatore* had the right tension, the right rhythms, the right colors (many of those). It was consummately Verdian. The orchestra played splendidly for Callegari, as for Levine. I was reminded that this is, in fact, a top orchestra. The chorus sang splendidly too, in the Anvil Chorus and elsewhere. Callegari demonstrated the trick of being bouncy without being too bouncy—of being bouncy and full at the same time. Really, he scarcely put a foot wrong.

In the parlor game of "What is the best Verdi opera?" the usual nominees are *Otello*, *Falstaff*, *La traviata*. So good was this performance, I thought, "Why not *Il trovatore*?" On my way to the opera house, I figured this would be just another Monday night—a ho-hum cast, a ho-hum conductor. You just never know.

The next night's *Otello* looked a lot better than the *Trovatore* on paper. Starring as Otello was Johan Botha, the formidable South African. Also starring was Renée Fleming, the foremost Desdemona of our time. In the pit was Semyon Bychkov, the veteran Russian. He was in very good form. He was alert and commanding, juggling the sprawling forces with ease. Of particular note was his sense of rests—his understanding of their place in the music and drama. One of his best moments was just before the love duet: Those measures, which tingle with anticipation, were wonderfully calibrated. Not so wonderful was "Sì, pel ciel marmoreo giuro," the tenor-baritone duet. It was far too fast, unable to express its swagger and nobility.

Iago was Falk Struckmann, the German baritone, or bass-baritone. It occurred to me that I had never before heard him sing in Italian. And he was plenty Italianate. His "o," to give a small example, was not German, not warm. It was properly Italian. Overall, Struckmann was virile and stylish—cunning, as an Iago, of course, must be.

When Botha sang his opening notes—"Esultate!"—I doubted he could get through the night. As the opera continued, he struggled mightily, not able to get near his high notes, making horrible, strangled sounds. It was hard to sit in one's seat. I left mine after Act II. A couple days later, I was on foot in Manhattan, waiting at an intersection. A woman was talking to her friend. She and her husband had attended *Otello*. "And we paid \$600!" she said. It pays for critics—who are freeloaders—to remember the paying customer.

A footnote, if I may (or a second footnote). The program told us that James Morris was singing Lodovico. Reasonably or not, I felt a pang. Morris has been an important Iago; Lodovico is a role that men assume toward the end of a career. I recall seeing Robert Lloyd as a guard in *The Magic Flute* a few years ago. The Robert Lloyd, the famous Sarastro, and Boris, etc.? Yes. One day they're bestriding the world like colossi, the next day they're singing "Affitto." (That's Benoît in *La bohème*, demanding the rent.) Or "La spada a me." (That's Lodovico, at the

end of *Otello*, demanding the sword from the Moor.) But at least one can perform well, whatever the task. I heard Paul Plishka, for example, sing “Affitto” and “La spada a me” many times, perfectly.

Alan Gilbert and the New York Philharmonic are engaged in the Nielsen Project: “a multi-season survey of the six symphonies and three concertos by Denmark’s beloved composer.” Let’s not slight Niels Gade! The Nielsen Project is a good idea. He is a strange composer, and I mean “strange” in the Harold Bloomian sense—a complimentary sense: individualistic, peculiar, unexpected. Often, Nielsen employs an amalgam of styles, rather than just one. He whiplashes you, pleasantly. In a public interview with me a few years ago, Esa-Pekka Salonen said something interesting about Sibelius: He left no school, no tradition—he was *sui generis*. I believe the same is true of Nielsen.

On a Thursday night, a concert started with the Nielsen Flute Concerto, in which the soloist was Robert Langevin, the Philharmonic’s principal. It’s good to see the principals step out. Generations ago, the Philadelphia Orchestra had a series of records called *First Chair*. When Gilbert gave the downbeat, the orchestra did not start together, which was a pity: As it’s dispiriting to hear a bad opera overture, it can be dispiriting to hear a concert begin with error. In the first movement, Langevin was not at his best, though he was certainly adequate. He seemed buried in the score on his stand. Instrumentalists, apart from pianists, routinely use scores in their concerto appearances. A puzzling tradition. In the latter parts of the concerto, Langevin was far more surefooted. He was virtuosic and musical, taking advantage of his instrument’s many colors. He never did any forcing or showing off. He played with taste, almost an aristocratic restraint. At his best, he was hypnotic.

Gilbert did his part competently, as he can be expected to do, although much more can be made of this score. Assisting the soloist were various members of the woodwind and

brass sections, in particular the bass trombone (I believe), to whom Nielsen gives some nice slidey licks.

After the Flute Concerto came Nielsen’s most popular and best concerto, the Violin Concerto. Serving as soloist here was Nikolai Znaider, who, name aside, is from Denmark. He is hit or miss, this violinist: On some occasions, he is magnificent, virtually historic (I think of an Elgar Concerto); on other occasions, he is well-nigh amateurish (a Tchaikovsky). On this occasion, he was at or near the top of his game. It was a pleasure not to worry about him. He played with command and beauty. I could quarrel with some interpretive choices, some attitudes, if you will: For instance, I think the last movement benefits from more insouciance and matter-of-factness. But Znaider provided satisfaction. So did Gilbert, on the podium. In certain spots, the Philharmonic was not as warm or lush as an orchestra should be. But that has been a longstanding problem with this band.

The Met Orchestra stepped out of the pit and onto the stage of Carnegie Hall. Conducting them was their *Otello* conductor, Bychkov. Like the Chicago orchestra before them, they began with a Wagner overture—the one to *Tannhäuser*. The horn kicked things off with a bad onset. Who would ever want to take up the horn? The rest of us just pick on them all the time. Wagner’s music then unfolded in its great-souled way. There is an abundance of great-souled music by that black-souled man. This is one of the mysteries of art. I could pick a few nits about Bychkov’s reading: In one stretch, the accompanying strings were simply too loud. But this was a fine reading, and the clarinet solo toward the end was first-rate.

Then Michelle DeYoung, the mezzo-soprano from Colorado, sang more Wagner: the *Wesendonck Lieder*. She did this with a signature characteristic of hers: great-hearted warmth. The horn playing at the end was painful to the ear. See how we’re always picking on them?

The media

Get real

by James Bowman

A couple of years ago, I bought a Dell computer. Almost every day since then, I have received one or more spam emails from Dell offering to sell me something else. As I write, the latest one is titled: “We have unreal deals. You only have three business days.” Why should Dell think I would be interested in an unreal deal? There used to be a saying that somebody or something was “the real deal.” Now should we say instead “the unreal deal”? And if, as I suspect, “unreal” is just an ironic superlative—so good that it seems unreal, or too good to be true—what then becomes of St. Anselm’s Ontological Proof of the existence of God, which holds that no Being with the attributes of God could exist without also having the attribute of reality? Maybe, on the contrary, God is all the more perfect for not being real, or not seeming so. But then it wasn’t long ago that a learned man told me Anselm had never proposed the Ontological Proof in the first place, so I guess that all such speculation is pretty unreal too.

Most examples of simple irony, such as the alleged use of “bad” to mean good in youthful slang are easy enough to sort out. I don’t think I have ever heard it used so in the wild, as it were, but if I did I would expect the context to make it clear whether “bad” meant bad or good. I’m not so sure about “unreal.” That may be an example of double or ironic irony. “Unreal,” that is, may ostensibly mean real but it also may actually mean unreal. The ambiguity is a useful one

in a media environment rife with aggressive and tendentious use of these words in an effort to gain political advantage. Our side, needless to say, is always the one belonging to “the reality-based community”—a phrase used by the media’s more vocal critics of the George W. Bush administration to describe themselves—while the other side, as we insist with increasing vehemence, must be strangers to reality.

Since I wrote last month in this space about “lies,” “lying” and, especially, the growing numbers of accusations of same (see “Lexicographic lies” in *The New Criterion* of October 2012), the question has become more urgent as the ever-more-bitter partisan division of the election campaign has resulted in both sides making, or being tempted to make, the charge of lying against each other. Such accusations were also a part of the 2004 campaign, but they were mostly left to surrogates to make. Both President Bush and Senator Kerry were more circumspect than some of their supporters, and the former hardly bothered to defend himself against the charge of lying, among other scurrilities, perhaps to avoid giving it greater currency.

As I write, such circumspection shows signs of wearing thin in the current campaign, if not of disappearing altogether. Thus, President Obama attempted to explain his poor performance in the first debate by simultaneously accusing Mitt Romney of uttering untruths and taking credit for not doing so. “I think it’s fair to say I was just

too polite,” he told journalists, “because, you know, it’s hard to sometimes just keep on saying, ‘and what you’re saying isn’t true.’ It gets repetitive.” The “it” in that last sentence, if I understand it correctly, refers to telling someone, in this case Mr. Romney, that “what you’re saying isn’t true”—which falls just short of calling him a liar, as many of the President’s less polite defenders did not scruple to do.

One such was Kevin Drum of *Mother Jones*, whom I had occasion to mention last month and who wondered if it mightn’t after all have been politic for Mr. Obama himself to have condemned what he took to be his opponent’s lies as such, and at the time they were uttered:

The conventional wisdom says you can’t do that. It’s too negative and voters don’t like it. Personally, of course, I think it would be fascinating to watch Obama buck that conventional wisdom and flatly accuse Romney of lying. . . . But it’s also the kind of pipe dream that only bloggers can indulge in. In reality, no matter how satisfying it might feel, the conventional wisdom is probably right. It would hurt Obama, not help him. Why? Because one of the weird aspects of American politics is that voters, no matter how cynical they claim to be, basically accept politicians at their word when they make concrete promises. Romney says he won’t raise middle class taxes? Then he won’t. Romney says his plan won’t increase the deficit? Then it won’t. The fact that it might be mathematically impossible doesn’t seem to carry any weight. It’s all just confusing numbers, after all. What matters is whether you think Mitt Romney would look you in the eye and tell a bald lie. Most people don’t, and unless you’ve literally got a secret video with smoking gun evidence proving otherwise, they consider accusations of lying to be playground level mudslinging. Maybe that’s weird. Maybe that’s unfair. But it’s reality, and it’s a pretty good deal for Mitt Romney.

That last sentence provides a good example of the way in which lots of people now use the word “reality”—as if they can take it

for granted and, more importantly, can expect their audience to take it for granted that it means no more, can mean no more, than what they think. As we all increasingly find ourselves writing for people who think more or less as we do, I suppose it becomes ever easier to make such an elision. In the same way, “the fact that it might be mathematically impossible” is treated by Mr. Drum as if it meant that it *is* mathematically impossible—which, by the way, Joe Biden loudly and repeatedly insisted it was in the vice-presidential debate the following week. Why should his or Kevin Drum’s belief that Mr. Romney’s tax plan is mathematically impossible carry any weight unless they believe their belief to be tantamount to reality just because they believe it? They may or may not show their work, though neither Mr. Drum nor Mr. Biden did, but either way they expect their readers to accept their mathematics as infallible—and most of them, probably, do.

What I think is that people dislike politicians who accuse each other of lying not because they accept them at their word but because they don’t. They expect politicians to lie, and it is an expectation in which the media encourage them. That’s why their “Fact-checkers” can make light of the politicians’ actual or supposed lying by rating them on a scale of “Pinocchios” or “Pants on fire”—an implicit recognition that a licensed deception is all part of the infantile game they themselves, along with the rest of the media, have done so much to make of our politics. And if the political game presupposes that its players will say untrue things, to complain that the things they say are untrue is not to play the game. Or, more precisely, to make such complaint in the morally fraught language of “lies” and “lying” must seem unfair and hypocritical, at least if you start from the assumption, as I think people generally do these days, that both sides may be expected to be equally cavalier with the truth.

The expectation extends to the whole media environment. Dell’s advertising its “unreal deals” in an email is echoed in a humorous radio commercial for Advance Auto

Parts, which claims that *their* latest deal on oil changes is “ridiculous.” This may well be an extension of the time-honored advertising ploy by which a merchant pretends to be “crazy” or “insane,” so great are the deals he is offering and so much against his own interest. Except that he doesn’t really expect us to think that. He knows we know it’s a joke. “Crazy” and “insane,” as well as “ridiculous,” have become words of approbation in the vernacular, along with “outrageous,” “wicked” and, as stipulated, “bad.” All are examples of simple irony that can function as a double irony when the speaker wants, as a tactical matter, to preserve a certain ambiguity about his attitude to his subject, or to make a joke about it. The selling is done by the joke, not by what may or may not have been said about the product.

In other words, what is “ridiculous” about the price of an oil change from Advance Auto Parts is not how low it is, but the implied claim that it is so remarkable as to be (ironically) “ridiculous.” The advertiser assumes we are in on the joke and will automatically gather from the context that he is being ironic and self-deprecating about his own formal irony. The trick is the same when used by a Ford dealer advertising that his “certified pre-owned” cars are “not just pre-owned, but pre-adored, pre-worshiped and pre-babied by their owners.” He thus plays up to and makes fun of the used car dealer’s reputation for untrustworthiness. Knowing that we know nobody can *really* have worshiped or adored the cars he is trying to sell us, he also knows that we expect and are rather amused by such hyperbolic language from a car dealer. It’s largely what we expect of car dealers—and, increasingly, from politicians. Both may hope to endear themselves to us by simultaneously acknowledging and ridiculing the stereotype.

The automatic assumption of dishonesty in our political class, however, has a baleful influence on our politics. Even in the debates, the one forum where the candidates might be expected to speak to us and to each other without the mediation of the media and

their own “spin” merchants, the expectation has never been lower that substantive matters ever will or ever could outweigh the sorts of superficialities that are important to the media. Which candidate is more likeable? Which would you rather have a beer—or, in Mr. Romney’s case, a glass of chocolate milk—with? Which looks more “presidential” or “in command”? Which looks as if he has something to hide? Such matters in the media context cannot help seeming more important than that of which candidate is more likely to do anything about our ruinous levels of public debt or unsustainable entitlements.

The politicians themselves hardly expect that their obsession with superficialities during the campaign will have anything to do with the serious business of governing after it. There was a wonderful irony about the report that, according to *The New York Times*’s explanation of the President’s debate performance, “Mr. Obama does not like debates to begin with, aides have long said, viewing them as media-driven gamesmanship.” And so they are, too, but it sounds rather an odd complaint coming from someone who owes his political career—as, increasingly, all politicians do—to media-driven gamesmanship. Perhaps this is just the one form of it he’s not particularly good at. But the possibility would be too frightening to contemplate that he supposes the sorts of campaigning he *is* good at are somehow *not* media-driven gamesmanship.

The media themselves must know that they are. They may recognize that there is a conversation to be had about the important matters of public policy that will determine our security, our prosperity, our well-being, but they certainly don’t expect it to take place during an election campaign. The debates, like everything else, constantly get in the way of that conversation by diverting it into trivialities and irrelevancies and attempts to delight the media with hints of scandal in the other fellow’s background or scandalous negligence, like Mr. Biden’s “mathematical impossibility” in the formulation of his proposals. Such diver-

sions obviously best serve the purposes of the candidate whose substantive positions, where he has any, are weaker, but the media would probably pursue them anyway—except in a case like that of the would-be gaffe of President Obama’s open-mic assurance to Dmitri Medvedev that “after my election I have more flexibility.”

Even there, however, the slip didn’t make much impression at least partly because nobody expected him to be frank about his intentions in the first place. Everybody assumes that what is said for electioneering purposes will have little or nothing to do with what is actually done by the winner after his election. Thus, too, Walter Pincus of *The Washington Post* wrote of the very serious matter of sequestration as if he took it for granted that nothing could be done about it before the election. He quoted the former Defense Secretary Robert Gates as saying: “My hope is that following the presidential election, whatever adults remain in the two political parties will make the compromises necessary to put this country back in order.” It was his hope too. It’s everybody’s hope. But the unstated assumption is that it is futile to hope that anything of the sort could happen any sooner—during the period, say, when voters might actually be asked to approve or disapprove of their efforts. Such efforts must simply be suspended for the duration of the election season when the “adults,” with their adult concerns about such *real* real matters as debt and insolvency and the prudent arrangement of budgetary priorities, are expected to go into hiding in order to leave the field clear for the children to get on with their “reality” games.

These, it ought to be clear by now, are not quite the same as what Michael Scherer of *Time* calls the “battle over the very nature of reality” that he sees as engaging the candidates in this election.

Both of the men now running for the presidency claim that their opponent has a weak grasp of the facts and a demonstrated willingness to mislead voters. Both profess an abiding

personal commitment to honesty and fair play. And both run campaigns that have repeatedly and willfully played the American people for fools, though their respective violations vary in scope and severity. The rules for this back-and-forth were set in 1796, in the nation’s first contested presidential election, when John Adams’ supporters falsely charged Thomas Jefferson with atheism and loyalty to France while Jefferson’s forces made up fables about Adams’ monarchist ambitions. In the centuries since, campaigns have evolved into elaborate games of cops and robbers. Candidates and their supporters bend, twist and fabricate facts as much as they can without sparking a backlash. Reporters and opposing politicians do their best to run down the deceptions for voters.

Mr. Scherer is being no more controversial than *Time* generally is, and he expresses what is now probably the consensus view, certainly among the media and probably among the general public as well—with the aim of reassuring us that things are just the same as they always were. He appeals to people’s expectations that politicians have always lied and always will lie and that it would be foolish to expect anything better of them.

By doing so he does his bit, whatever else he does, for the media effort to neutralize the Republican advantage on matters of substance. For generalizing the expectation of dishonesty from both sides disproportionately benefits the side that has the most to fear from honesty. It’s also the only way in which that side can hope to get away with a strategy like that of the Democrats as outlined by Yuval Levin at *National Review* online:

Romney advanced a series of principles and policies in the debate, and rather than argue that these are bad for the country, the Democrats are basically arguing that Romney’s ideas are too good to be true—so good, moderate, and sensible that they couldn’t really be Mitt Romney’s, and therefore that Romney is not telling the truth about his agenda. These charges of dishonesty aren’t just false (though they are false), they’re also downright strange. A Republican candidate stands before 60 million

voters and commits to an agenda and his opponent responds that this isn't really his agenda, and that voters should instead look to Democratic attack ads and liberal think-tank papers to learn what the Republican is proposing. That's the strategy?

It sounds improbable when you put it like that—unreal, you might almost say—but once the expectation has been established with the help of the media that what you see is never going to be what you get and that all politicians dissemble, must be expected to dissemble, and, therefore, can hardly be blamed for dissembling, it might just about be possible to pull it off.

Yet it is not true that things are as they always have been. The difference today is that we're desperately short of those without an agenda of their own who are willing to "run down the deceptions for voters." What Mr.

Scherer calls a "battle over the very nature of reality" can only be fought when any possible common ground on which truth can be sorted from falsehood has been eliminated. Or, to put it another way, the increasing tribalism of our politics which I mentioned in this connection last month now extends to the tribe of the media, which have become in effect the third party in this election — a party in coalition with the Democrats, to be sure, but one which retains its own interests and agenda distinct from those of the other two. Those who once stood, or at least claimed to stand, for nonpartisan reality now implicitly acknowledge that there is no such thing—though by not being explicit about it and pretending still to believe in a real, non-tribal reality with which they are, uniquely, in touch, they hope to advance their own cause as well as that of their Democratic allies.

Books

He was the change

by James Piereson

Four years ago, in the excited aftermath of the 2008 election, Barack Obama was widely viewed as a liberal messiah who would engineer a new era of liberal reform and cement a Democratic majority for decades to come. He would prove to be, as many pundits predicted, a Franklin Delano Roosevelt, or perhaps even an Abraham Lincoln, for our time. They were not alone in saying this: Obama himself said much the same thing.

These forecasts seemed grandiose at the time; today, after four years of an Obama presidency, they look positively silly. In contrast to 2008, 2012 Obama looks less like a transformational president and more like a typically embattled politician trying to survive a tight contest for reelection. Even some of his strongest supporters are now “defining Obama down” as just another Democratic “pol” making compromises and paying off constituencies in order to keep his coalition together. Extravagant hopes have given way to a scramble for survival. Few continue to believe that Obama will establish the foundations for a new era of liberal governance. Some are beginning to point toward a more surprising turn of events: Far from bringing about a renewal of liberalism, Obama is actually presiding over its disintegration and collapse.

This is the thesis of Charles R. Kesler’s fascinating and insightful new book, *I Am the Change: Barack Obama and the Crisis of Liberalism*.¹ Mr. Kesler, a professor of government at Claremont McKenna College and editor of *The Claremont Review*, is a well-

known conservative scholar and authority on the history of liberal thought. Professor Kesler presents a critical yet nuanced portrayal of Obama and his rise to power. From his perspective as scholar and theorist, Kesler sees Obama as a conventional liberal or, better yet, as a progressive, and not as a socialist or anti-American subversive (as some of the President’s critics would have it). Viewed through a wide historical lens, Obama appears as the most recent—and perhaps the last—of a line of liberal presidents beginning with Woodrow Wilson a century ago and running through FDR to Lyndon Johnson and beyond to Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton. A signal virtue of this book is that it shows how the Obama presidency fits into the evolution of modern liberalism from its origins in the Progressive movement more than a century ago.

The great political battles in the United States during the nineteenth century were never ideological contests in the modern sense but rather controversies fought over the meaning of the Constitution and the intentions of the founding fathers. Political contests over expansion, the Bank of the United States, slavery, secession, and the regulation of commerce were fought out along constitutional lines. The politicians and statesmen of that era were not divided into liberal and con-

¹ *I Am the Change: Barack Obama and the Crisis of Liberalism* by Charles R. Kesler; Broadside Books, 276 pages. \$25.00.

servative camps; those terms had little meaning in nineteenth-century America. Abraham Lincoln was not thought of as a “liberal,” nor were slave owners derided as “conservatives.” Both sides of that controversy appealed to the Constitution or to the Declaration of Independence to defend their positions.

The Progressives introduced an ideological element into American politics by detaching their arguments from the Constitution and grounding them instead in claims about progress and historical development. Progressives (they were not yet called “liberals”) asserted that the Constitution, with its complex framework designed to limit government, was out of date in the modern age of science, industrialism, and large trusts and corporations. Constitutionalists looked backwards to the founding fathers; Progressives looked forward to a vast future of never-ending progress and change. The founding fathers and their nineteenth-century successors anchored popular government in a philosophy of natural rights; Progressives looked to different foundations in history and development. Progressives could not get rid of the Constitution, but they could reinterpret it to allow for more federal action to regulate the trusts, resolve industrial disputes, and engineer progress. Thus was born the idea of a “living Constitution,” an open-ended and flexible document readily adapted to changing conditions.

The Progressives were proponents of scientific government, not necessarily of popular or representative government. They disdained legislative bodies with their vote-trading and petty disputes over constituent interests; thus, they looked to the presidency rather than to the Congress for national leadership in the direction of reform and progress. The president spoke for the people or the nation, Congress spoke for special interests. Progressives wanted to delegate power to administrative bodies, commissions, and bureaus staffed by disinterested experts who could apply up-to-date knowledge to solve new problems. The Interstate Commerce Commission, the Food and Drug Adminis-

tration, the Federal Trade Commission, and the Federal Reserve Board were Progressive initiatives. The Progressives dreamed of a time when political contests among rival interests would give way to impartial administration by experts and judges trained by and recruited from the best colleges and universities in the land. Academic institutions, as Mr. Kesler points out, would go on to play a major role in the evolution of liberalism.

Professor Kesler identifies Woodrow Wilson as the chief architect of this vision in American politics, helping to lay the intellectual foundations for progressivism and then beginning to put them in place during his term as president. As a research scholar and university president, Wilson brought some of the abstract qualities of a college professor to the study of politics. He wrote an influential study of the US Congress without visiting the US Capitol. While he admired the founding fathers, he criticized them for leaving behind a constitutional structure that was disorderly and inefficient, and encouraged conflict rather than cooperation. Thus he claimed that the separation of powers in the Constitution was a mischievous invention designed to limit the powers of government and to prevent cooperation among the branches (which was partly true). Wilson wanted to bring the branches closer together through presidential leadership and responsible party government. He favored a parliamentary system like that in place in Great Britain in which the executive and legislative branches are unified under the control of a single party and led by the Prime Minister.

Most fundamentally of all, Wilson claimed that the vision of the founding fathers did not lead to progress but to endless division and factional infighting. The Constitution was a Newtonian machine designed to balance conflicting forces when what was now required was a Darwinian instrument flexible enough to evolve in response to changes in its environment. It was not necessary to change the Constitution itself in order to bring about such a fundamental change; it was only necessary for Americans to think about it in a new way. After all, Washing-

ton, Jefferson, and Madison led a revolution and wrote the Constitution in response to the challenges of their time: Why should not Americans in the twentieth century do the same? Thus Wilson and his associates in the Progressive movement looked to an intellectual revolution as the means by which Americans would liberate themselves from the constricted and obsolete doctrines of the founding fathers, and in the process free themselves from the limits the founders placed upon government.

Given his vast ambitions, Wilson could not hope to implement much of this agenda in eight short years in office. Yet he established the foundations for an influential and long-running movement based upon progress and change as a way of life, presidential leadership and executive power, trust in experts, and disdain for traditional constitutional forms. Mr. Kesler does not spend much time on Wilson's path-breaking approach to international diplomacy, his role in the Paris Peace Conference, and his aborted personal campaign "to make the world safe for democracy." Yet these may be understood as logical extensions from his broader philosophy that traditional forms of governance had reached a dead end and that new ones had to be built through inspired leadership.

It was FDR who began to use the term "liberalism" in place of "progressivism" in order to distinguish the New Deal from the Progressive Party that flamed out in the 1920s and, in contrast to the progressives, to associate his program with the founding ideals of the nation. It was also Roosevelt who hijacked the term from the classical liberals in order to associate it with reform and the welfare state in opposition to free markets and limited government. FDR, as Professor Kesler suggests in an illuminating chapter in the book, kept the language and rhetoric of the founders while not so subtly changing their meaning and purposes. This has also been true of the liberal presidents who have succeeded him.

The Republican victories during the 1920s demonstrated to Roosevelt just how fleeting and transient Wilson's victories turned out to

be. "Think of the great liberal achievements of Woodrow Wilson's New Freedom," he said in one of his radio addresses during the 1930s, "and how quickly they were liquidated under President Harding." Roosevelt formulated programs (like Social Security and the Wagner Act) that had popular followings but were also grounded in the language of rights and liberty such that no one could claim that they were "un-American." FDR paid homage to Jefferson and the Declaration of Independence, but also said that the basic rights outlined in that document were subject to redefinition in light of changes in the social order. Jefferson wrote about natural rights and liberty while FDR spoke of positive rights as a foundation for security. In his Second Bill of Rights, FDR outlined a vast agenda of such positive rights, including a right to adequate medical care, to a good education, to a decent home, to a "remunerative" job, and to adequate protection from "the fears of old age, sickness, accident, and unemployment." The pursuit and perfection of these rights provided modern liberalism—and the Democratic Party—with an almost unlimited agenda of reform.

Among FDR's successors, no one tried harder to emulate him and more miserably failed to do so than Lyndon Baines Johnson. Johnson began his political career in the 1930s as a New Deal functionary and then as a young member of the House of Representatives. "FDR was my hero; he was like a father to me," Johnson told a reporter during his White House years. Johnson mastered the art of using public patronage to build political support. "He wanted to out-Roosevelt Roosevelt," according to one of his aides. "We're in favor of a lot of things and against mighty few," he said during his 1964 campaign, thereby giving voters a taste of things to come.

Johnson, as Professor Kesler explains, sought to complete the agenda of *quantitative* liberalism by passing federal health insurance programs for the aged (Medicare) and the poor (Medicaid), and expanded welfare and food stamp programs to assist the underprivileged. Yet, given the insatiable spirit of modern liberalism, Johnson was not content

to rest there. In his Great Society speech, he proclaimed a new agenda of *qualitative* liberalism through which government would elevate the spirit and quality of life of the American people. The Great Society, he said, “is a place where the city of man serves not only the needs of the body and the demands of commerce but the desire for beauty and the hunger for humanity.” Johnson launched a “war on poverty” and a campaign to end urban decay, passed civil rights bills, funded the arts and education, and gave the federal government license to enter into every area of American life.

Yet, by a cruel irony, Johnson’s high hopes and grand expectations soon turned into disappointment and tragedy as the country was torn apart by crime, riots in nearly every major urban center, and violent protests against the war in Vietnam. His vast expansion of domestic expenditures turned loose an ugly stampede for federal dollars that only incited demands for more. Far from being an era of spiritual fulfillment, the 1960s was one of anger, alienation, and escape through drugs and violence. Mr. Kesler writes that the enduring legacy of the 1960s is “the strange combination, still very much with us, of a more ambitious state and a less trusted government than ever before.” The more patronage the government handed out, the less satisfied its beneficiaries became.

If the New Deal stands out as the great triumph of modern liberalism, then the Great Society represents its signal tragedy and failure. This was the period, as Mr. Kesler writes, when “the radicalism that was latent all along in liberalism broke free of its faith in progress, science, and the democratic process itself?” Johnson’s failures arose from overreaching ambitions and the delusion that all human problems, even those of the spirit, must find solutions in politics and government programs. Yet, as the author argues, this kind of over-reaching is endemic to modern liberalism. It was already present, for example, in Wilson’s claims about progress and change and also in FDR’s unlimited agenda of positive rights. Liberalism both lives and dies off promises it cannot fulfill.

Barack Obama is the latest liberal president to attempt to harmonize grand hopes with the messy realities of programmatic reform. In this sense, he is a worthy heir to the legacy of Wilson, FDR, and LBJ, all of whom addressed the same challenge. Yet of the three, only one of them may be said to have ended his presidency on a positive note. Obama hopes to join FDR as one of the successful presidents of the liberal era, but Mr. Kesler doubts his prospects for success.

Like FDR, who distinguished the New Deal from the New Freedom, Obama tried to make his break from the rancorous politics of the 1960s. He celebrates the flag, observes patriotic holidays, and praises the military. He is a solid family man. He even extolls the founding fathers, up to a point. In his view, the founders made a good start in laying down some noble principles, even if they did not live up to them and perhaps did not really believe them.

Obama was also aware that many of the bold initiatives of the 1960s were eventually discredited and, for the most part, rejected by the American people. No liberal today could possibly run for office citing the model of the Great Society. Without an ambitious programmatic agenda on which to run, Obama had little choice but to organize his campaign around “hope and change.” Few asked what exactly that might mean. One answer was that Obama himself, as a biracial and multicultural candidate, son of a Kenyan father and middle-class American mother, personified the change he and others were seeking. It was proof that America could overcome its racially scarred past. “I am the change,” as he has suggested on more than one occasion.

Here, then, according to Mr. Kesler, is one terminus of the liberal project. Where can it go beyond Barack Obama and the personal politics of hope and change? Another end point is fiscal and budgetary. With Obama’s signature health care legislation, an ambitious stimulus package, a series of trillion dollar plus deficits, and the impending retirement of the baby boomers, there is no more money left to fund further liberal projects. There is not even enough money left to fund those already in

place. Will Obama's presidency mark the end of the politics of public spending and thus the end of a movement that came into its own a full century ago with the election of Woodrow Wilson? That is a distinct possibility, and one brought into clear focus in this most illuminating and gracefully argued book.

Baudelaire was better

Roberto Calasso

La Folie Baudelaire.

Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 352 pages, \$35

reviewed by Jeffrey Meyers

Educated at the same lyceé as Degas, attached to yet estranged from his domineering mother, stepson of an army general whom he despised, dependent on exiguous handouts from his financial guardian, humiliated by his cruel Haitian mistress, addicted to hashish and ravaged by syphilis, the brilliant Charles Baudelaire (1821–67) was abrasive and self-destructive. The photographer Félix Nadar—who took his portrait, with bulging forehead and flowing hair—described him as “a nervous, testy, irritable, and irritating young poet, often utterly unpleasant in private.”

In his rambling series of vague aperçus—without any clear structure or argument—Roberto Calasso focuses on Baudelaire as an art critic, not as a poet, and discusses Ingres and Delacroix, Degas and Manet, as well as Rimbaud, Laforgue, Flaubert, and Proust. Calasso's erudition and style have been highly praised, yet this book shows the same obvious weaknesses and tedious mannerisms that also marred his work on Kafka.

He uses verbatim repetition when introducing a quote; lapses into ponderous vacuity: “a writer is he who inevitably reveals things . . . through the written word” and Sainte-Beuve has “a tightrope walker's ability to protect his own respectability;” indulges in far-fetched analogies: “For Baudelaire, the disappearance of the old place du Carrousel . . . is like the disappearance of Troy for Andromache;” makes incorrect assertions (from Gottfried

Benn): “‘Snow’ . . . offers little in the way of either linguistic or emotional ideas,” though the chapter called “Snow” is the high point of *The Magic Mountain*; wanders into pointless digressions about Vedic seers explaining “the primacy of *manas* and *vac*,” and favors otiose obscurity: “Who is speaking here? . . . Damascius or Iamblichus? Is it an Egyptian theurgy?” As Byron said of Coleridge, “I wish he would explain his explanation.”

Calasso begins to hit his stride when he drifts away from Baudelaire and offers sound readings of paintings by Degas and Manet. But, in a shaky start, Calasso is puzzled by the unreality of the mirror-like lake in Degas's *Mlle. Fiocre in the Ballet “La Source,”* though the lake, painted on a theatrical stage, is deliberately unreal. As Merleau-Ponty once observed, a “mirror is the instrument of a universal magic that changes things into spectacles.” Calasso misreads *The Bellelli Family* by asserting that “this painting develops around an empty space in the center,” though the younger daughter, Giulia, sits exactly in the center; that the father “*has no gaze*,” though he's seen in profile gazing at his children; and, misusing biographical information, that it's a “portrait of a family united by reciprocal aversions,” though there's no evidence of hostility between Bellelli and his children.

Calasso is on firmer ground with *The Misfortunes of the City of Orléans*, a portrayal of sexual violence in the late Middle Ages, whose source Degas found in Jules Michelet's monumental *Histoire de France* (1844). Like Goya's *Disasters of War*, it portrays the tragic fate of civilian victims. The three horsemen have raped and murdered four women, whose corpses lie abandoned on the ground. The surviving women—naked, vulnerable, and about to be slain—are helpless and pitifully erotic. Calasso links Degas's woman bound to a tree to the heroine in Ingres's *Angelica Saved by Ruggiero*, but does not elaborate on this comparison.

In Ingres's painting, based on Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*, Ruggiero's frightened hippogriff, rearing above a supine sea monster with outstretched claws, also seems to threaten Angelica. Its talons reach toward her head just as the monster's tail lunges toward her feet. Rug-

giero plunges his lance down the creature's throat and through the teeth once destined for Angelica's flesh. In this horrific but erotically charged painting, Angelica—chained and naked, swooning and submissive—seems already half in love with her savior.

Calasso writes of *Interior*, Degas's most enigmatic and fascinating painting, "we can infer nothing certain regarding what has happened. All we can sense is something diseased and desperate. . . . Something sexual and unsaid has swept across the entire scene." But the details reveal a clearer meaning. The white undergarments of the half-dressed, disconsolate woman are exposed in the open traveling case and flung carelessly on the wooden floorboards. The domestic touches suggest that the fully dressed man, staring coldly at his victim, has paid for her room and violated her body. The mirror above the fireplace reflects both the man's cruel passion, now spent, and the psychological effects of the rape on the woman. The sexual violence is symbolized by the dancing fire, her red hair and his red beard, the red flowers on the wallpaper and lampshade, the red stripes in the rug, and by the gaping case with its pink lining garishly exposed by the lamp.

Baudelaire (in illuminating passages not quoted by Calasso) observed that Manet "has a definite taste for reality, modern reality—which is a good sign—a rich and lively, sensitive and audacious imagination." After Manet had been savaged by the critics, Baudelaire, writing to a friend they have in common, paradoxically admired the abuse and encouraged his stoicism: "When you see Manet, tell him this: that torment . . . that mockery, that insults, that injustice are excellent things, and that he should be ungrateful were he not thankful for injustice." Baudelaire—a connoisseur of condemnation—believed that the insults of fools merely confirmed his talent, that suffering spurred him on to greater effort, that meaningful victory could only be won after a hard struggle.

Calasso does not mine the rich ore of Manet's *Olympia*, whom he defines with negatives: "she is neither complacent nor complaisant; she is neither languid nor dreamy?" Manet's masterpiece, celebrating a forbidding

and threatening sexuality, and involving the spectator in its louche appeal, continued to provoke derision long after his death. Calasso notes in passing that "irony is concentrated only in the hump of the cat's back." But the cat, whose black fur contrasts with Olympia's white skin, is a witty and dramatic detail. While Olympia's glance is inviting, the cat, with hostile arched back, seems to be hissing at the client about to intrude in its domain. In French, as in English, synonyms for "cat" suggest the female sexual organ, and the large erect tail signals sexual promiscuity. Calasso does not mention that just as Baudelaire derived his portrayal of cats from his translation of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Black Cat," so Manet also "Baudelaired" all his cats, taking them from "Le Chat" in *Les Fleurs de Mal*, where Baudelaire associates the cat with his enchanting and destructive black mistress.

Calasso could also have said much more about another elusive masterpiece, *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*, which connects to the title of his own book. The barmaid—dispensing bibulous pleasure but receiving none herself—has the disillusioned, world-weary expression of a sensitive and forlorn woman. Her steady gaze and black dress convey a deep sadness. The fashionable gentleman reflected in the mirror represents the barmaid's chance to escape from servitude into another, more luxurious, form of bondage. Manet was suffering from a fatal disease when he painted this picture. So it's possible to see the gentleman at the bar, approaching the barmaid from an unexpected angle and appearing in an unnaturally oblique reflection, as a figure of death.

Calasso convincingly stresses the painter Berthe Morisot's "profound infatuation" and "tormented love" for the married Manet, whose brother she eventually married. Obsessed with her striking beauty and magnetic presence, Manet expressed his love for her and revealed her feelings for him in a series of eleven stunning portraits. In *Berthe Morisot with Hat, in Mourning* her hair falls loose on her forehead, her eyes are troubled and the expressionistic slashes of paint on her face

reinforce her sorrow and anguish. In *Berthe Morisot with a Fan* her refined, vibrant face is as lovely as ever, her expression intelligent and alert. Her left arm, with elegantly expressive fingers forming a circle and touching the tip of her decorated fan, is bent backward in response to something that startles her outside the frame of the picture.

Casting his net too wide, jumping from subject to subject and writing in a rather precious style, Calasso does not do full justice to the great writers and artists in this book.

Keep for end

Seán Lawlor & John Pilling, editors
The Collected Poems of Samuel Beckett.
Faber & Faber, 528 pages, £30

reviewed by Paul Dean

Any admirer of Beckett's plays and prose can see that he was a poet, but could he write poems? On the basis of this sumptuously annotated edition, the first to print a completely reliable text and to document fully the relationship between the poems and Beckett's other writings, the answer has to be "Only sometimes." Beckett's later deprecations of his youthful efforts, *Whoroscope* (1930) and *Echo's Bones and Other Precipitates* (1935), are no more than just, yet there was no period of his life at which he was not writing poetry; indeed, the last thing he composed was a poem, "Comment dire" ("What is the Word"), written little over a year before his death. The English title points to his lifelong search for an adequate verbal expression of thought, baffled by the elusive nature of language itself.

Whoroscope comes just three years after Joyce's *Pomes Penyeach*, four after Pound's *Personae*, and in the same year as Eliot's *Ash-Wednesday*. Like those writers, Beckett had a cosmopolitan mind, which had absorbed the classical epics, Dante, and nineteenth-century French literature, as well as substantial portions of the philosophical canon. Modernist assumptions about the difficulty, allusiveness, and obscurity proper to high

art were all around him, to the detriment of many of his early poems which are crammed with arcane vocabulary, smugly clever, and determined not to please. There is none of the feeling that one has, usually with Eliot and sometimes with Pound, that the unattractive surface may reward patient frequentation. Although Beckett's later English poems are much freer and more direct, their very simplicity can have a threadbare texture, as in this complete poem from 1984–85:

Brief Dream

Go end there
One fine day
Where never till then
Till as much as to say
No matter where
No matter when

In their notes, Lawlor and Pilling relate this to Beckett's last extended piece of prose, *Stirrings Still* (1988), but anyone who turns up that text will realize the ways in which the idea behind this painfully slight piece takes on greater richness there.

Yet any impression of Beckett's attitude to poetry as sterile or etiolated would be completely mistaken. He responded to it with intense emotion, and as a highly musical person relished the sound-palette of poems he loved. Anne Atik, in her beautiful book *How It Was: A Memoir of Samuel Beckett* (2001), recalls her husband, the painter Avigdor Arikha, and Beckett reciting from memory great swathes of Shakespeare, Milton, Keats, Yeats, Hölderlin, Goethe, Heine, Dante, Petrarch, Leopardi, Verlaine, and Apollinaire, among others—the two of them often standing up at particularly moving lines or stanzas. Beckett's poetic successes, in any genre, are matters of musical cadence, of the rich interplay of sounds: they obey the Imagist prescription to compose in the rhythm of the musical phrase, not in that of the metronome.

With Beckett's poetry, as with his prose, the major breakthrough came when he began writing in French in the later 1930s. The editors have an admirable comment on the

difference in style from his English poems, noting that he chose “to adopt a deliberate simplification and refinement of means and method, reducing (if not wholly abandoning) allusions, exploring the self-sustaining subtleties of syntax without necessarily emphasising the verbal surface and without surrendering unexpected juxtapositions, and contenting himself for the most part with a single and singular focus.” This bore fruit, among other ways, in his translations, of himself and of other poets, which on the whole seem to me his best work in this genre. In the late 1970s, he wrote a number of verbal snapshots which he called *mirlitonades*; a *mirliton* is a toy flute, and *vers de mirliton* is French for “doggerel.” Here is one of them:

imagine si ceci
 un jour ceci
 un beau jour
 imagine
 si un jour
 un beau jour ceci
 si ceci
 cessait
 imagine

We are asked, as in the prose text *Imagination Morte Imaginez* (1965), to imagine what is unimaginable yet can only be imagined, since by definition when it is experienced it will entail the end of imagination. The turning of “ceci” into “cessait” is a masterstroke, yet the fact that “si ceci” contains when read aloud the English word “cease” is hardly less brilliant. (Compare the title “Mort de A. D.,” a bilingual pun commemorating Beckett’s friend Arthur Darley.) I also wonder whether the “si” in “si ceci” is to be understood, not as “if” but as “yes,” the French alternative to *oui* when one wants to insist on something that one’s interlocutor has doubted or questioned—as if “un beau jour ceci” had been followed by the reader’s objecting “Ceci—what, surely not all this?” “Oh yes,” the poem insists, “this.” For all its brevity, this is a much richer poem than “Brief Dream” in texture.

Beckett was equally brilliant in translating other poets (although their originals are not

printed in this edition). His work on the *Anthology of Mexican Poetry* (1958) is well represented here, but, as I have no Spanish, I will pass that over. His translation of Rimbaud’s “Le Bateau Ivre,” made in 1932 and presumed lost until its rediscovery and publication in 1976, is justly famous, but it is bettered, I think, by that of Apollinaire’s “Zone” (1950), which displays remarkable skill in finding equivalents for the rhymes of the original and in catching its tonal diversity:

It is the fair lily that we all revere
 It is the torch burning in the wind its auburn hair
 It is the rosepale son of the mother of grief
 It is the tree with the world’s prayers ever in leaf

(C’est le beau lys que tous nous cultivons
 C’est la torche aux cheveux roux que n’éteint
 pas le vent
 C’est le fils pâle et vermeil de la douloureuse mère
 C’est l’arbre toujours touffu de toutes les prières)

“Burning/auburn” is a tiny, telling example of Beckett’s exquisite ear. Anne Atik records how Beckett would recite from Apollinaire’s “Le Chanson du Mal-Aimé,” chanting or crooning the lines, quite unlike the uninflected way he insisted his own dramatic dialogue should be spoken. He was well placed to appreciate “Zone,” which is like *The Waste Land* crossed with Joyce’s *Portrait*. But we also find him translating Mallarmé, Char, Eluard, and Jarry, among others.

Lawlor and Pilling tell us that, at the head of the manuscript of “What is the Word?” Beckett wrote “Keep! for end,” so I have done just that. If the title is taken as a question (but there is no question mark), the answer may be the poem’s first word, “folly.” Building itself up bit by bit, the following sentence, or rather sequence, emerges: “folly for to need to seem to glimpse afaint afar away over there what.” On “afaint afar away” Lawlor and Pilling compare the ending of *Finnegans Wake*: “A way a lone a last a loved a long the.” This seems to me a rare misdirection in their generally splendid notes. Beckett’s early closeness to Joyce did not last. Although he intended a compliment when

he wrote of *Work in Progress* (later *Finnegans Wake*) that “Here form is content, content is form. . . . His writing is not *about* something; *it is that something itself*,” one may reasonably object that writing which is “not *about* something” risks being about nothing. Granted, Joyce is an influence on Beckett’s early fiction, particularly *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, written in 1932 but published only posthumously, and *More Pricks Than Kicks* (1934). *Finnegans Wake* was not published until 1939; Beckett’s next work would be *Watt*, which marks a shift away from Joyce. He long refused to reprint *More Pricks*, and was content not to publish *Dream* when he could easily have done so. His love-hate relationship to “the word” is worlds away from Joyce’s careless exuberance; the relentless paring down of language that characterizes Beckett’s later art bears witness to an agony that Joyce never knew. “You must say words,” observes the narrator of *The Unnamable*, “as long as there are any.” Beckett’s poems trace in miniature his lifelong inability, despite his best efforts, to keep silent.

Hook-up feminism

Nathan Harden

Sex & God at Yale.

St. Martin’s Press, 301 pages, \$25.99

reviewed by Emily Esfahani Smith

Feminism is in disarray, and its unresolved issues are slowly percolating to the surface of our culture. Naomi Wolf is currently having a meltdown in the public square. *Cosmopolitan* magazine, once at the vanguard of the women’s movement, has become a monthly manual in how teenaged girls can get intimate with their boyfriends. And on our college campuses, many young women are, in the name of female empowerment, having casual sexual encounters that they, by their own admission, do not want to have—the hook-up culture.

Television shows like Lena Dunham’s *Girls*, articles like Kate Bolick’s blockbuster

Atlantic essay “All the Single Ladies,” and books like Hanna Rosin’s *The End of Men* are all attempts to navigate the choppy waters of our post-feminist world. Where do we go from here? Add Nathan Harden’s voice to the mix. His *Sex and God at Yale* tackles these womanly issues from a decidedly unique perspective: that of a conservative young man. The book is less about God than it is about sex, but maybe that’s the point. Ladies, be warned: his traditional ideas about women and propriety have already left some feminists pretty upset.

For Harden, the culture of sexual permissiveness on campus is one that is now institutionalized by the university. Pornography is screened at the law school, porn stars stand in as professors, and the most read article in the history of the *Yale Daily News*’ website is about oral sex. This is not only demoralizing, it is absurd. How could the same school that gave this country five U.S. presidents, nineteen Supreme Court justices, and Nathan Hale host the burlesque performer “Darlinda” to speak about her “pleasure-seekers Bill of Rights”?

In a way, it’s a familiar story. Harden’s polemical memoir of his time as an undergraduate at Yale is part of a long conservative tradition. Sixty years ago, William F. Buckley’s *God and Man at Yale* first diagnosed the metastasizing relativism and proto-political correctness that was robbing elite colleges of their intellectual and moral backbone. Add Benjamin Hart’s *Poisoned Ivy* (about Dartmouth in the Eighties) and Ross Douthat’s *Privilege* (about Harvard at the turn of the millennium) to the list, and it practically seems that writing such a book is a rite of passage into the world of conservative opinion-making.

What makes the book unique is Harden himself. Harden, a homeschool dropout, is not your typical undergraduate. He worked as a luggage handler for United Airlines before college, got into Yale after being rejected twice, and arrived on campus with a wife by his side. He has an interesting story, and when he’s telling it, he tells it well. But when he’s not telling it, he’s leading the reader through one long and brutal descrip-

tion of Yale's Sex Week, which makes up most of the book.

Sex Week, a biennial event held at Yale since 2002 and supported by the college, is what happens when you leave sex to the fringe feminists. It's also what happens when the sexual revolution meets the culture of the politically correct. Jeffrey Hart, a professor emeritus at Dartmouth, described the charade perfectly when he wrote, in *The Dartmouth Review*, that it is characterized by "crushing banality and asphyxiating bad taste." Colleges around the country now sponsor some version of Sex Week on their campuses, usually coordinating its date with Valentine's Day. At Dartmouth College, my alma mater, the week of Valentine's Day has been rechristened as "V-Week"—that is, Vagina Week.

Sex Week at Yale describes itself as "a biennial series of events and workshops on sexuality, intimacy, and relationships organized by and for Yale students. We believe these discussions are vital for young adults developing self-understanding and responsibility within a liberal arts education." Said programming includes a litany of events whose descriptions are not appropriate for this magazine, but here's a taste: Yale invited the founder of Vivid Entertainment Steven Hirsch onto its campus in 2008 to talk to students about "The Business of Pornography: How Vivid Made It Mainstream." At the event, after admitting that he has been intimately involved with "thousands" of women, Hirsch was asked by one female student, "What would you do if one of your own children wanted to appear in one of your films?" His response: "Uhhhh . . . I'm going to support my kids in whatever they choose to do."

The good news is that Sex Week is only around every two years. In 2008, the *Harvard Crimson* quipped: "Sex at Harvard is a year-round activity. At Yale, it lasts a week." It's a funny line, but not exactly true, which brings up the bad news: There is another part of the social-sexual landscape of Yale and other schools that is more lasting and endemic: the hook-up culture. In the hook-up culture, which is primarily driven by

women, college students prefer to have sex with "no strings attached"—that is, they seek to have meaningless, casual sex outside of the context of a relationship. Some women consider this "empowering," as Harden finds out by eavesdropping on a conversation between two female students, one of whom has this to say about her hook-up conquests, who are football players on campus: "If you go up to them at a party and just get them drinking, and start dancing with them, and kissing them, they will totally end up sleeping with you. They don't even know they're being played. They have no clue."

Cue reality: "Could it be possible," Harden writes, "That these girls don't understand a fundamental fact about the human male? You normally don't have to trick a man into having sex." Young women today, influenced by Sex Week-style programming, have lost track of how the sexual marketplace really works.

They have also lost track of basic biology and psychology, as the feminist dissenter Camille Paglia recently pointed out at Yale. In September, Paglia denounced traditional feminism at the Yale Political Union, saying, "Those who espouse the idea that the model for human life should be gender-neutral—that we have been born blank slates and society prescribes upon us gender roles—have never made the slightest inquiry into science, history, or anthropology," she said. "Girls have been trained how to be nice," Paglia told Yale. "They have to learn how to say no."

Harden agrees:

When it comes to sex, a major source of a woman's power is the control she exercises over her own body. It is only if she gives this up and conforms to a typical college existence, consisting of endless hookups with men she barely knows, that a woman really loses power in relationships.

At Yale, Harden continues, a guy "only has to show up at a random party and talk to some girl for a few minutes—and make sure she has a few drinks" to essentially guarantee that he will have sex with her that night. It's all so easy and effortless for men. There is no

dating, no calling, and barely any taking to the girl. “This is why,” Harden writes, “sexual liberation never really empowered women in the way it was supposed to.”

Therein lies the irony with sexual liberation—with Sex Week, the hook-up culture, and the rest. Raunch feminism has given rise to a man’s world, which leads the alumnus Christopher Buckley to ask, in his foreword to the book, “Why wasn’t this going on while I was there?”

I’m just surprised that Harden gives the women of Yale a free pass. “I don’t blame Yale women. I blame the culture they are a part of,” he writes. His paternalism is unhelpful. These women, as he elsewhere admits, drive the culture. That means that they, too, can change it—if they want.

Liberalism’s “Kulturismog”

R. Emmett Tyrrell, Jr.

The Death of Liberalism.

Thomas Nelson, 208 pages, \$19.99

reviewed by Andrew Roberts

It’s either a brave or foolhardy writer who publishes a book entitled *The Death of Liberalism* only four months before America’s most left-wing president in history stands for reelection in a contest in which the bookmakers are giving odds for his victory at two-to-one. By the time most of you read this, the election will likely be over, and should Barack Obama have been reelected, this short but punchy polemic by Robert Tyrrell—the founder and editor of *The American Spectator* magazine—will certainly be held up by Leftists as an exemplar of premature right-wing triumphalism and hubris, all stemming from the “shellacking” that Obama received from the Tea Party in the midterm elections of 2010.

Tyrrell attempts to cover himself from such criticism by pointing out in his opening pages that it is “true liberalism: classical liberalism, or, as it is sometimes called, nineteenth-century liberalism,” of which he is writing—the small-L liberalism that “stood for adherence to in-

dividual liberty, to tolerance, to reason and, for many of us, to empiricism.” This places it in exquisite counterpoise to the capital-L Liberalism of the modern Democratic party, which he accuses of having, “over the decades twisted all these values into absurdities.”

In this he is right, but it will not save him from having the title of this book thrown in his face should Obama win, not least because, as he himself argues, the capital-L Liberals have created what he calls a *Kulturismog*, which he defines as a “pollution of our culture by politics, almost exclusively Liberal politics” in which truth takes second place to ideology. He is fortunate that Tom Wolfe, another distinguished observer on the American political and cultural scene, has also defined *Kulturismog* for us as “the social manipulation of ‘The Good,’ a subset of the sociology of concept construction,” a phenomenon that Wolfe dates back to the Phoenicians.

As well as his courage in his choice of title, Tyrrell is brave in his choice of the liberal sacred cows that he here leads to the abattoir. Mahatma Gandhi has been long overdue for critical examination, and Tyrrell’s unmasking of him as a “colossal fraud” is worth the price of the book alone. To read that the Beatles were merely “four singers in their twenties with a TV viewer’s education” was uplifting too, though this reviewer was unconvinced that their song *Hey Jude* is genuinely about masturbation, as Mr. Tyrrell assures us.

Tyrrell states that George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, and other great early Americans were classical liberals, but the way that their creed has been hijacked by modern Liberals, such as Paul Krugman and Al Gore, means that “Liberalism has lost the trust of reasonable minds.” He copies Vladimir Lenin in calling leftists infantile, claiming that they ruined a once great political philosophy by confusing equality of rights with equality of economic outcome, true toleration with the tyranny of political correctness, and empiricism with new secular religions such as global warming (or “climate change” as we are now enjoined to call it whenever it snows).

In an otherwise lucid and logical discourse, Tyrrell does stumble in one area; indeed, he

reveals a polemicist's tic that amounts to a writer's version of Tourette's Syndrome. He is obsessed with Bill and Hillary Clinton to the point that it has become almost a conservative equivalent of the well-known Bush Derangement Syndrome, by which liberal commentators become overcome by the visceral need to attack George W. Bush on virtually any subject under discussion. In Tyrrell's case we are repeatedly brought back to the tawdry circumstances of Troopergate, Whitewater, "Pardongate," Paula Jones, and other Clinton scandals of the '90s, even though he simultaneously argues that President Clinton was not the most important politician of his generation. This is overkill; when Monica Lewinsky receives as many mentions as Daniel Patrick Moynihan in a book on American Liberalism, something is out of kilter.

Overall, however, Tyrrell's impish humor carries the book forward, in addition to a large number of interesting aperçus on people and issues as diverse as Warren Harding, Rousseau's critique of private property, Irwin Kristol, Bismarck's welfare state, Ferdinand Lassalle, hate speech, and Barry Goldwater. Yet the most powerful arguments that Tyrrell displays in this lively, hard-hitting book are not the philosophical or personal ones, but surprisingly enough the economic and financial ones, and they are fully backed up by OMB graphs on pages 152 ("Percentage of Federal Spending on Entitlements 1965–2010") and page 153 ("Spending as Percentage of GDP 1960–2011"). These illustrate with chilling exactitude how outrageously louche governments of both stripes, but particularly the Democrats, have been with the American taxpayers' dollar in extending the welfare state. The ratio of workers to beneficiaries in America has fallen from 4.9 in 1960 to 2.8 today, for example.

Liberalism, therefore, is simply unsustainable as an economic system, quite regardless of whether it makes any moral, social, or political sense. So it all comes down to a race; will the American people spot this truth and take the necessary steps before so many of them are on welfare and benefits that they will vote Democrat simply to ensure the sur-

vival of the system? Whether they do or not, books like Mr. Tyrrell's means that they can't say they weren't warned.

The radical passion

David Horowitz

Radicals: Portraits of a Destructive Passion. Regnery, 256 pages \$27.95

reviewed by Mark Bauerlein

Why has David Horowitz devoted so many years and words to expounding the radical left-wing mind? It started in the mid-1980s with Horowitz and collaborator Peter Collier speaking and writing about their "Second Thoughts" of being 1960s radicals. Horowitz turned a microscope upon himself in 1997 with *Radical Son*, a memoir of Red Diaper childhood and militant adulthood amidst the Black Panthers and *Ramparts* magazine until he retreated out of disgust at the violence, white guilt, and indifference to the fate of South Vietnam after US troops withdrew. Several books followed, including *The Politics of Bad Faith* (2000), *Left Illusions* (2003), *One-Party Classroom* (2009), and now *Radicals: Portrait of a Destructive Passion*, which "is perhaps the last [Horowitz] will write about a subject that has occupied [him] in one way or another over the course of a lifetime."

The radical mind is a duplicitous, self-deceiving, willful, and scheming formation, one that exercises enough pull on certain groups and figures and policies in the United States to merit ongoing diagnosis. That's the assumption underlying Horowitz's work, indeed, his whole life—that is, once he broke with the left after uncovering a murder committed by Black Panther leaders whom he had theretofore glorified. Radicalism has its political content, he agrees, but it marks a pathological condition as well. If it were only political, it would advocate for a single-payer healthcare system, a more steeply progressive income tax, and other policies expanding state control. People demand

those reforms, of course, but they aren't really radical, for they work through democratic channels to enact them. Genuine radicals target the channels themselves.

To attempt this in a country as free and self-critical as the United States, however, they must distort the reality in front of their eyes and the identity they have constructed over the years. Horowitz alleges that they act and speak in bad faith: that contradictory psychosocial state first analyzed in Jean-Paul Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* and illustrated by Horowitz's subjects time and again. *Radicals* tenders five of them in in-depth portraits (Christopher Hitchens, Bettina Aptheker, Cornel West, Susan Lydon, Saul Alinsky), and dedicates another chapter on three female "bombers" (Kathy Boudin, Linda Evans, Susan Rosenberg: the latter two were released from prison when President Clinton commuted their sentences on his last day in office, while Boudin was paroled in 2003). Each one offers a tale of super-political deeds and writings, but Horowitz zeroes in on something else, not the terrorism, TV appearances, speeches, and theories, but particular occasions, recounted by themselves, in which extraordinary blindness, naiveté, misrepresentation, inconsistency, and other acts of bad faith surface.

Consider this summation by Aptheker of her pedagogy when she started teaching Women's Studies classes at UC-Santa Cruz:

I redesigned the curriculum and retitled it, "Introduction to Feminism," making it more overtly political, and taught the class in the context of the Women's Movement. . . . Teaching became a form of political activism for me, replacing the years of dogged meetings and intrepid organizing with the immediacy of a liberatory practice.

The quotation stands out for its cluelessness. As Horowitz comments, "Nothing remotely academic or scholarly entered her lesson plan." Aptheker doesn't seem to realize that the course's "liberatory" nature applies to herself, but at the cost of open discussion and the independence of her stu-

dents. Can one imagine raising a whisper of doubt about feminist perspectives with such a teacher? Clearly, any student who ended up in the classroom but didn't toe the party line would judge it just as "dogged" as the Party meetings of Aptheker's communist past.

Aptheker recalls the moment triumphantly, however, blithely unconcerned about the incompatibility of education and activism. Two pages earlier, Horowitz cites another astonishing incognizance. When Aptheker completed a manuscript later published in 1982 as *Woman's Legacy: Essays on Race, Sex, and Class in American History*, she received a note from the Communist Party's National Commission on Women rebuking her for diverging from its theory of "the source and nature of woman's oppression under capitalism." It threw her into "complete turmoil," she recalls in her memoir, for she "had not expected a broadside like this, which dismissed all of the research I had done and decreed what constituted Marxism-Leninism."

Horowitz's immediate comment pinpoints the unreality of her response: "It is difficult to understand how such a sentence could be written." The Party had "decreed" theory and threatened dissenters from the beginning, and Aptheker herself had enforced its line, and yet, "at the age of thirty-seven she was stunned to discover that Communists would enforce their party line against *her*."

Cornel West's bad faith occasion unfolds during his notorious meeting with Harvard president Larry Summers in October 2001 to discuss the University Professor's performance. As narrated in West's memoir, *Brother West: Living and Loving Out Loud*, Summers welcomed him with a conspiratorial notion to target conservative Harvard professor Harvey Mansfield, using the f-word to "break the ice." (Horowitz doesn't entirely trust West's account, but it strikes me as true.) West demurs, calling Mansfield his "brother," and the meeting turns sour, Summers stating, "Professor West, you have to cease making rap albums which are an embarrassment to Harvard." West's reply changes the question, then plays the race card:

“Professor Summers, when you say ‘an embarrassment to Harvard,’ which Harvard are you talking about?”

“The Harvard I have been hired to lead,” he said. “But your Harvard, Professor Summers, is not my Harvard. And I’m as much Harvard as you are. Look, we all know that Harvard has a white supremacist legacy, a male supremacist legacy, an anti-Semitic legacy, a homophobic legacy. And we also know that Harvard has a legacy that’s critical of those legacies. That’s the Harvard I relate to.”

Apart from the obvious power play, the rejoinder is psychologically curious in that West seems to believe what he says. If only all of us could divide our employer into two parts—the vicious-uncongenial and the just-congenial—and declare, “I only relate to #2!” But only one Harvard signs West’s paycheck, and whatever racist “legacy” Harvard carries, it certainly didn’t lessen West’s bountiful compensation. Herein lies the bad faith—denouncing an institution for its hostility while receiving from it princely benefits.

Similar discrepancies litter the lives of other radicals here portrayed, the grand one announced long ago by Raymond Aron: “the attitude of the intellectuals, merciless toward the failings of the democracies but ready to tolerate the worst crimes as long as they are committed in the name of the proper doctrines.” To Horowitz, it’s not a political strategy—it’s a “destructive passion,” the “fantasy of a world made right” that nonetheless delivers catastrophe. Saul Alinsky, subject of the last chapter, is its final expression in that Alinsky dropped the bad faith and aimed directly and unequivocally for power. No empty gestures for him, no street theater protests, no attributions of idealism—just tactics and gains. He lays bare the real goal of radicalism, not as a constructive, new politics, but as “political nihilism” demolition of the status quo, and his success stands in stark contrast to the vain postures of the others. After all, Alinsky was the subject of Hillary Clinton’s senior thesis, three of Barack Obama’s Chicago mentors trained at the Alinsky Indus-

trial Areas Foundation, Obama’s “green jobs” czar Van Jones came from Alinsky cadres, and, Horowitz notes, “for several years Obama himself taught workshops on the Alinsky methods.” That Alinsky’s vision of U.S. society is delusional doesn’t matter. His methods have filtered into mainstream liberalism, and unless classical liberals, libertarians, and conservatives understand the destructive passion of the radical left, Horowitz warns, our society itself shall suffer the effects of bad faith—failed policies, the wrong heroes, a forgotten past.

The everyday surreal

J. G. Ballard

Miracles of Life: Shanghai to Shepperton, an Autobiography.
Liveright, 288 pages, \$25.95

reviewed by Brian P. Kelly

In the late 1930s, James Graham Ballard (1930–2009) was prone to go traipsing around Shanghai without his parents’ permission and was proud to be identified as “the biggest heathen” in his class by his scripture teacher. As punishment for one infraction, whose details have now been lost, Ballard was required to copy pages out of Charles Kingsley’s *Westward Ho!*, a fairly common penalty at his school. Ballard decided that the chore would be more interesting if he made up the story as he went along, and he wrote a swashbuckling adventure about pirates instead. The following day in class his teacher called him out, saying, “Next time Ballard, don’t copy your lines from some trashy novel.” This was the renowned science-fiction writer’s first review.

Despite this early start, Ballard’s rise to success didn’t happen quickly or easily. In the first American printing of *Miracles of Life*, Ballard’s autobiography, the author explains his struggles, living in a Japanese internment camp, working numerous dead-end jobs, losing a wife to a sudden infection, and being rejected by fellow sci-fi writers.

Growing up in the modernizing metropolis of Shanghai, Ballard quickly became aware of the surreal nature of the city in which he lived. Western immigrants built houses in the style of their respective homelands, eschewing Chinese architectural offerings. Wealthy foreigners would play tennis, attend dinner parties, and celebrate nightclub openings while countless Chinese peasants died of poverty and disease. Soldiers and gangsters, tourists and beggars, businessmen and prostitutes all mingled openly on the streets, themselves a swarm of rickshaws, bicycles, American cars, and food vendors. This dreamlike atmosphere had a profound effect on Ballard the child and proved an important influence on his writing as an adult:

In Shanghai the fantastic, which for most people lies inside their heads, lay all around me, and I think now that my main effort as a boy was to find the real in all this make-believe. In some ways I went on doing this when I came to England after the war, a world that was almost too real. As a writer I've treated England as if it were a strange fiction, and my task has been to elicit the truth.

After the outbreak of World War II, expat optimism quickly gave way to a recognition of the decline of the British Empire. The Japanese dominated the Pacific theater, seizing control of the International Settlement, sinking the HMS *Petrel*, arresting hundreds of British and American civilians, and taking Singapore. Needless to say, life in Shanghai became very different from Ballard's early years: business closed, social life disappeared, and the city was more dangerous than ever. While he continued to attend the Cathedral School, he was no longer free to roam the city.

One morning, while biking to school, he and his father encountered a closed checkpoint and were forced to sneak over a fence and through an abandoned casino to get back to the road. Ballard was struck by the overturned roulette tables, shattered glasses, and scattered betting chips. Gilded statues and ornate chandeliers threw glimmering light everywhere, "transforming

this derelict casino into a magical cavern from the *Arabian Nights* tales."

This casino served as inspiration for a number of his later works:

I . . . felt that the ruined casino, like the city and the world beyond it, was more real and more meaningful than it had been when it was thronged with gamblers and dancers. Abandoned houses and office buildings held a special magic and on my way home from school I often paused outside an empty apartment block. Seeing everything displaced and rearranged in a haphazard way gave me my first taste of the surrealism of everyday life, though Shanghai was already surrealist enough.

Ballard remained a fan of the deserted urban setting throughout his career as is evidenced by the abandoned, underwater London of *The Drowned World*, and the isolation in the middle of a roadway intersection of *Concrete Island*. The vacant city was so integral to who Ballard was as both a writer and a person that the last short story he published before his death featured a man who wakes up to find his home city of Shepperton—and indeed the entire world—deserted. Ballard titled this "fictional" work *The Autobiography of J. G. B.*

During the war, Ballard was interned with his family at Lunghua, a time he remembers with mixed emotions. While he was constantly hungry and frequently witnessed the guards' brutality, he also remembers the camp as "a prison where I found freedom." He would later write a fictionalized account (that hews closely to the truth) about his time at Lunghua in *Empire of the Sun*. The greatest discrepancy between the novel and Ballard's reality is the former's omission of his parents—a telling fact about the loneliness he felt growing up.

In 1946, Ballard repatriated to England with his mother and sister (his father stayed in China) and moved to Southampton. He was instantly struck by the grim outlook of the British, who had been shaken by expansive bombings, a people who "talked as if they had won the war, but acted as if

they had lost it” and despised the English class system. He attended The Leys School, which he says, “reminded me of Lunghua Camp, though the food was worse.” Disenchanted with The Leys, he made friends with the university students at nearby Cambridge, read with an insatiable appetite, and enjoyed spending time in the local cinemas. It was at this time that he began studying surrealism and psychoanalysis and, hoping to go into psychiatry, decided to study medicine at Kings College, Cambridge.

By 1951, he realized that he had no desire to be a doctor and left Kings to pursue writing. He enrolled at Queen Mary College at London University to study English literature (“the worst possible preparation for a writer’s career”), dropped out, and wrote an experimental novel—a complete flop. He took various jobs as a copywriter, a porter, and a door-to-door encyclopedia salesman, and eventually joined the RAF. Flight training was in rural Canada and, with little substantial reading material available, Ballard dug through the dime novels at the local bus depot and eventually discovered science fiction. He was less interested with novels about outer space than he was with those stories that looked at the present or near future and examined political trends that were present after the war. While he viewed “writers of so-called serious fiction” as primarily concerned with the self, he wanted to focus on “the everyday world, which was just as much a psychological construct, and just as prone to mysterious and often psychopathic impulses.”

Ballard had trouble selling his new brand of science fiction. Sci-fi publishers weren’t particularly numerous, and were adamant when it came to the homogeneity of the content they published—a laughable irony for a genre touting “alternative” and “original” stories. Finally, in 1956, Ballard had his first story published and quickly gained momentum as a writer. *The Wind from Nowhere* was published in 1961—his only foray into commercial fiction—and, following the success

of *The Drowned World* in 1963, he quit working to pursue writing full-time. The next year, his wife Mary died of pneumonia, leaving Ballard alone with their three children.

In response to her death, Ballard’s writing took a dark turn as he began *The Atrocity Exhibition*, a fragmented attempt to cope with both the loss of his wife and various global manias, ranging from Kennedy’s assassination to infatuation with celebrities. The book was eventually published in 1970, after being dropped by Doubleday after Nelson Doubleday read a passage entitled “Why I Want to Fuck Ronald Reagan.” It turned out that then-Governor Reagan was a close friend of the publishing house’s namesake. *Crash*, similarly controversial though more linear, was published three years later. A series of lesser known novels soon followed, and *Empire of the Sun* was published in 1984.

Fans of Ballard will enjoy this autobiography, both for its elucidation of the author’s life and its unsurprisingly Ballardian prose—lucid, honest, and matter-of-fact. Ballard is refreshingly open when dealing with myriad controversial subjects: on the Arts Council: “Why the taxes of people on modest incomes (the source of most taxes today) should pay for the agreeable hobby of a north London children’s doctor, or a self-important Soho idler like the late editor of the *New Review*, is something I have never understood”; or, his feelings on the use of nuclear weapons on Hiroshima and Nagasaki: “I have long supported the American dropping of the bombs.” He also speaks freely about his devotion to his family (the flexible hours of full-time writer meant that Ballard was a dedicated father) and his partner Claire Walsh. The book also covers his return to Shanghai in the early ’90s and various anecdotes about the people who he’s encountered through the years—everyone from Kingsley Amis to Eduardo Paolozzi to the Queen. If Ballard’s goal in life was to elicit the truth from the surrealism of the everyday, his autobiography is an engaging account of a life that often seemed more fiction than truth.

The Widmer uncertainty principle

by Tess Lewis

To recognize what is absurd and to accept it need not dim the eye for the tragic side of existence, quite on the contrary, in the end it may perhaps help in gaining a more tolerant view of the world.

—Gregor von Rezzori, *The Snows of Yesteryear*

The prolific Swiss writer Urs Widmer is a prominent figure in German literature, yet he is all but unknown to English readers. He has written more than two dozen works of fiction, almost thirty radio plays, a dozen theater plays, and a half dozen collections of essays, including those he delivered in the prestigious Frankfurt Poetics Lectures series in 2006.

His writing, though serious and finely crafted, is full of tomfoolery, wry deadpan humor, and implausible plot twists. One of his novels, for example, is narrated by a two-inch plastic dwarf. Still, a powerful current of pathos flows beneath Widmer's antic surfaces. His book would sit firmly on a Polonial "Tragical-Comical-Historical-Pastoral" literary matrix, though dominating the first and second quadrants and touching the last two lightly.

In one of his lectures, Widmer enumerates the reasons he writes. He begins by extolling the childlike playfulness in creating literature, its dilettantish joys, and the writer's lifelong ability to tap into childhood's "naïve-archaic modes of thinking and feeling, albeit in a more refracted, furtive, and less optimistic manner?" Only then does Widmer address the confessional impulse that animates the creation of many literary works and the writer's quixotic compulsion to master suffering and loss by

capturing it in words and communicating it to others. Far from endorsing tell-all autobiographical writing, however, Widmer insists on the necessity of "clothing the intimate." Paradoxically, the more openly and artlessly inner secrets are revealed, the less accessible they are to the reader on any but a voyeuristic level. The trials and suffering of others, he points out, must be transformed through metaphor and literary distancing to be of any "use" in illuminating or reflecting our own.

Fittingly, the first of Widmer's novels to be translated into English, *My Mother's Lover* (2000) and *My Father's Book* (2004), are artfully veiled versions of his parents' lives.¹ The passions that drive these two protagonists are so stubborn, consuming, and isolating that they are hard to distinguish from intrusions of fate. Despite an ostensibly happy marriage, the narrator's mother, Clara, develops an unrequited, obsessive, mute love for a callous, self-absorbed, and immensely gifted conductor. His father Karl's passion for books is so enthralling that he lives more consciously through them than he does in daily life, filled though that life is with love for his wife and son, political idealism, and artistic enthusiasm. For all of their reliance on historical and autobiographical facts, these books are not biographical portraits so much as literary homages to Widmer's

1 *My Mother's Lover*, by Urs Widmer, translated by Donal McLaughlin; Seagull Books, 127 pages, \$21; *My Father's Book*, by Urs Widmer, translated by Donal McLaughlin; Seagull Books, 174 pages, \$21.

parents in the guise of deeply empathetic reimaginings of lives that were “hard to live.” Both books are told from a grown son’s point of view and enriched with details he could not possibly have known first-hand.

Widmer’s tone is bemused and discreet, touching as lightly on the tragic in his characters’ lives as on the humorous. The translator Donal McLaughlin’s flowing, subtly inflected English captures the fluidity of the original German. *My Mother’s Lover* opens:

My mother’s lover died today. As old as the hills he was, and fit as a fiddle even as he died. He was bent over a lectern and turning the page of a score—Mozart’s Symphony in G minor—when he collapsed. . . . My mother loved him all her life. Not that he noticed. That anyone noticed. No one knew of her passion, not a word did she ever speak on the subject. “Edwin,” mind you, she would whisper when she stood alone at the lake, holding her child’s hand. There, in the shade, surrounded by quacking ducks, she’d look across at the sunlit shore opposite. “Edwin!” The conductor’s name was Edwin.

Comic intrusions—like those quacking ducks—occur in many of the novel’s most dire scenes. The funeral of Clara’s father—he died of a heart attack upon reading in the newspaper that he had been ruined in the crash of 1929—is interrupted by a slapstick scene in which a woman publicly excoriates both her husband and her lover. Later, an Italian cousin’s political aspirations are almost ruined at a banquet he is hosting in Mussolini’s honor: Il Duce trips over Clara’s shoes. Still, rather than detracting from the poignancy of Clara’s silent suffering, these comical moments set her anguish in bold relief.

The novel’s center of gravity is the charismatic, domineering, narcissistic conductor Edwin Schimmel, rather than the narrator’s inscrutable, one-sidedly passionate mother. Edwin, who founded the Young Orchestra and married the heiress of a major business concern, is based quite closely on the Basel-born conductor and patron of music Paul Sacher, who founded the Basel Chamber Orchestra in 1926 and commissioned new

works from composers ranging from Béla Bartók and Richard Strauss to Pierre Boulez, Hans Werner Henze, and Richard Tippett. In fact, Bartók makes several appearances in the novel, notably when the Young Orchestra premieres his *Divertimento for Strings*, which had, in fact, been commissioned and premiered by Sacher and his Basel Chamber Orchestra. Many pages are devoted to Edwin, his musical accomplishments, rise to immense wealth, and prominence as director of his wife’s family’s factory. Clara, for her part, remains a cipher throughout.

Clara’s psychological fragility is evident even in childhood. Her particular “manner” of falling into trances, of withdrawing from the world deep within herself for hours at a time, is treated with alarm and contempt by her parents. Her mother dies young and Clara divides her time between taking care of her demanding father and the equally demanding Edwin Schimmel. She works with slavish devotion as the Young Orchestra’s dogsbody, receiving no pay even after her father is ruined. Clara lives and breathes for Edwin, sleeping with him at his convenience and aborting his child when she becomes pregnant. One day she learns by chance that Edwin has married. She quits her position immediately, marries, and has a child, the narrator. Her fixation with Edwin Schimmel, though excessive, simmers away at a low boil. It does not become pathological until several years later.

It is then that her mental condition disintegrates, and it does so dramatically. Though she appears, for a time, to be “more normal than normal people,” her center cannot hold. To her young son’s confusion, she begins talking incessantly, her flow of words unstoppable, directed at anyone and anything “be it a man or a woman, a child, or even her dog.” Even alone she whispers constantly to herself, prowling “around the house as if she were wearing invisible armour, the hinges of which caused these strange sounds.” She is institutionalized and treated with electroshock therapy but her armor remains. Widmer devotes less than two wrenching pages to her hospitalization and treatment, but the single sentence about her return is all the more powerful for its laconicism:

“And so my mother got up, packed her nightdress and toothbrush in her little case, took her coat with the fur collar from the hanger and went home where her child, me, was still, or again, in the doorway and wet himself when she appeared at the open gate.”

Not even the convulsions of history can penetrate Clara’s emotional armor. They roll past her as she throws herself into cultivating her yard according to the Wahlen Plan mandate (the Swiss equivalent of a victory garden) with the same fervor she once lavished on Edwin and his orchestra: “Hitler attacked Russia and my mother planted onions. Hitler laid siege to Moscow. My mother pulled out turnips. Rommel’s tanks chased Montgomery’s across the Sahara. My mother stood in the smoke from a fire that put an end to old branches. . . .” Late in life, Clara develops an adventurous streak and travels around the world on her own, yet she can’t escape her demons and commits suicide in her eighties. Despite the richly imagined context of Clara’s story and the affection palpable on every page, her grown son has come no closer to understanding his mother’s mysterious core.

Although Clara was married for almost two decades, her husband, the narrator’s father, is mentioned only twice in *My Mother’s Lover* and even then simply in passing. Widmer’s subsequent novel, *My Father’s Book*, fills out the shadowy figure who seems hardly to register on Clara’s consciousness. Karl Widmer is an unworldly and intellectually voracious man whose fiery temper is balanced by his essential good nature and extreme absent-mindedness. Poignantly, the figure of Clara is presented here with more depth and complexity than in her own book, as if the son had to imagine her through his father’s eyes to see through her mostly impassive exterior.

My Father’s Book, too, draws heavily on historical and biographical facts. Widmer once wrote of his father, a prominent translator and *homme de lettres*: “My father translated half of French literature into German, and he loved books. More than life itself, so it seemed to me at the time. Today I think he loved life even more, but couldn’t quite cope with it, and

therefore loved books above all else. A second-best solution.” Walter Widmer’s fictional counterpart, Karl, also lives primarily through the great works of French literature he translates—Stendhal, Flaubert, Rabelais, Alain-Fournier, Zola, Balzac, Maupassant, and Diderot, whom he treasures most—and dies in his fifties of a heart ailment exacerbated by a life of chain-smoking. Karl is an inveterate idealist who venerates the *Encyclopédistes* and the rationalism of the *dix-huitième*. He becomes a Communist for a time, but is too impolitic for the Party. What he loves, he loves ardently. He only occasionally registers the fact that his beloved wife’s tendency to withdraw is a sign of unhappiness, and even then, too late.

According to tradition in Karl’s remote ancestral mountain village, each person receives a coffin at birth. It was stored outside one’s home, or that of a relative if one moved away, and the care one took of one’s coffin was a clear indicator of character. On his twelfth birthday, as was another custom, Karl hiked back to the village to undergo an initiation ceremony in the white Black Chapel, so named because of its black interior. After the ritual he received a black-bound white book—white because of the empty pages—into which he is to write down each day’s events throughout his life. A white book’s secrecy was sacrosanct and only to be read by another after the owner’s death.

On the day after his father dies, the narrator returns from a fruitless attempt to retrieve his father’s coffin in the village, which is now easily accessible by paved roads, only to find that Clara has already disposed of Karl’s book along with his manuscripts and unpaid bills. The narrator, who had only glanced through it the night before, resolves to rewrite his father’s book, now in the readers’ hands. In *My Father’s Book*, Widmer not only recalls the events and circumstances of Karl’s life, but he is also able to communicate a sense of his father’s internal life by quoting imagined passages from the imaginary book.

In one passage, the reader learns that the Germans are advancing through Europe, and Karl, until now unfit for service, is called up along “with a few other oldish men with weak

hearts” to protect Basel from the Wehrmacht. In the barracks at night, he dutifully makes his daily entries in which mundane events alternate with, and are far overshadowed by, vivid meditations on things literary, fitting for a translator of Rabelais and Diderot:

“19.5.40 *Letter from Clara*,” my father wrote, once he’d saved the quill from the hobnailed boots of a comrade racing to the toilet. “*Kitchen duty for insubordination (the corporal asked me—it was to do with the dismantled gunlock I wasn’t able to put together again—whether I thought he was stupid and I said yes). The Germans still aren’t here yet. General mobilization nonetheless.—In the ancien régime, ladies’ vaginæ could speak, too. Not just their mouths. Often the gentlemen would sit with their countesses and ducal lovers, having tea, and chatting to one another about an especially good bon mot of Madame de Pompadour or the Pope’s last bull, while, simultaneously, from beneath their skirts—many-layered mountains of material—came a chattering and sniggering, the sense of which they didn’t quite catch. At any rate, there was almost constant chat from down there. The many different materials muffled the voices, but people sometimes thought they would hear their names, without knowing what the braying laughter beneath all the other skirts was all about.—The light! The light of the dix-huitième, you don’t get light like that nowadays.*”

Although barely fifty pages longer than *My Mother’s Lover*, *My Father’s Book* is a far more expansive work, an encapsulation of twentieth-century Swiss life through an idiosyncratic prism. This sense of breadth comes not only from the contrast of Karl’s engagement in politics and his ludicrous stint as a soldier with Clara’s extreme introversion, but also from his appetite for life and the arts, which Widmer evokes beautifully. Painters, writers, and publishers, many of whom became major figures in German culture in the decades after the war, put in cameo appearances in this novel, as does Edwin Schimmel.

Like two halves of a folding screen, these two novels complement each other, clarifying opacities and illuminating blindspots of the particular points of view. Although each

is complete in itself, when read together they add up to more than the sum of their parts. The omissions in the one are almost as eloquent as the detailed portrayals in the other.

In 1992, Widmer published a prologue of sorts to this two-part family story told from the son’s point of view. Still untranslated, *The Blue Soda Siphon* is the most elaborately constructed of the family novels. It is divided into two parts. In the first, the narrator dreams of a glowing blue soda siphon that had sat on a shelf in the parlor of his childhood home. He then goes to a movie but emerges from the cinema fifty years back in time to Basel of the early 1940s. The adult Urs revisits the setting of his childhood, sees his young mother and father worried sick over their son’s disappearance, and finally seeks out his present wife, now a two-year old dawdling in her garden. All the while, he registers the discrepancies between the past and his memory of it and how much the familiar differs when seen through the eyes of a child or of an adult. In the second part, the child Urs is transported forward in time through the same cinema to 1990s Basel. He sees his future wife as a fifty-two year old along with his daughter who, in the logic of time travel, is a few years older than he. In Widmer’s hands, this is more than a gimmick; it is a chance to play with shifting perspectives, a fictional version of the Doppler effect, which he explicitly invokes. The same people and places are seen in entirely different lights. The novel’s first section (in which the adult revisits his childhood) is dominated by blues, and the second (in which the child stumbles into his adult world), is punctuated by shades of red.

The cumulative effect of reading Widmer’s three novels is a giddy sense of literary vertigo. Clara, Karl, and the narrator are the same, yet significantly different when seen from varying standpoints of age and time. They become ever more complex, contradictory, and compelling, and they force the reader to reevaluate not just what Widmer “sees,” but how he is looking at them. You could call it the Widmer Uncertainty Principle in which the act of observing changes the observed, the observer, and the reader in a fundamental way.

Eugene D. Genovese, 1930–2012

by Robert L. Paquette

On September 26, Eugene Dominick Genovese, one of the most influential—and controversial—historians of his generation, passed away at age eighty-two. During the latter stage of his career he had publicly renounced Marxist atheism and returned to the Roman Catholic Church that had nurtured him in his youth. No scholar studied more deeply the history of the master-slave relation in the antebellum South. His masterpiece, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made*, which in 1975 received the Bancroft Prize, the most prestigious prize in the field of American history, will stand the test of time. During the mid-1970s, with Gene's stature in the academy on the rise, I entered the graduate program in history at the University of Rochester to obtain a Ph.D. under his supervision. At Rochester, he and I entered into a friendship that remained unbroken for more than thirty-five years. Few people knew him better than I did.

Gene, I know, would not have wanted anyone to fuss over or enflower him with praise upon his death. He knew the end was coming; his restored faith had fortified him; he reached the end with courage and grace; and he respected the time and lives of others. "No tears; let's get it over with," he would have told the attendants who gathered at the Cathedral of Christ the King in Atlanta. "Go get yourself a drink." Gene loved to argue, especially on politics, and those of us who regularly engaged him in sometimes heated debate knew that, on occasion, one way to

gain advantage was to have at the ready lines from Gene the scholar with which to confront Gene the partisan. This is such a moment: "Respect for the dead signifies respect for the living—respect for the continuity of the human community and recognition of each man's place within it," Gene wrote in the most compelling analysis of African-American Christianity ever written. "The slaves," he continued, "understood their responsibilities." Dear Gene, we understand ours as well.

Over the years, a number of persons have asked me, "What was it like to work with Gene Genovese?" "Boy," they say, "I hear he was one tough SOB." Truth be told, many graduate students started dissertations under Gene's supervision; I dare say only about five of us ever finished. One story will have to do. My introduction to Gene the teacher was a seminar on the Old South. I forget at what point in the semester he returned our first graded papers. On mine, he had splashed so much red—his favorite color at the time—I thought he had opened an artery over it. On the very first page above the title he had written in bold red: "Too pedantic, too polemical, too passive." That was his only line of praise.

Yes, indeed, Gene set the bar high, and he never apologized for doing so. No one who knew Gene at whatever stop on his intellectual odyssey could ever accuse him of proselytizing in the classroom. He had unyielding respect for history as a profession,

and defended it, like Horatius at the bridge, from capture by ideologues pretending to be scholars. Whether you shared Gene's politics or not, whether he liked you or not, success in his classroom meant that you had to labor tirelessly to meet exacting demands. For Gene, an institution of higher learning was not about safe spaces in which allegedly aggrieved adolescents told their personal stories to touchy-feely professors who craved adoration and wanted to reduce their work load. When you entered Gene's classroom, you entered an arena, and the way you survived gladiatorial combat in front of the emperor was with the trident of argument and the net of evidence.

During his last major public appearance in 2010, to receive the Jeane Kirkpatrick Award for Academic Freedom from the Conservative Political Action Committee, Gene sounded a clarion call to arms: "The decline of academic freedom has proceeded along with a breathtaking collapse of academic standards and of a respect for learning." He then proceeded, interrupted repeatedly by ovations, to connect international politics to the "class, race, gender, multicultural swindle" that was infecting higher education. He bristled at cheap moralizing and pounced on those who sought to confuse their political commitments with their professorial obligations. In criticizing the New Left for assorted sins, he once said something to me to the effect that no political movement worth its salt could abandon the search for truth without making the gravest miscalculations. Gene was, as Princeton's Robert George and others have noticed, an inveterate truth-seeker, and one of his most enduring contributions to the pursuit of truth will be his essay "The Question," published in 1994 in the left-wing magazine *Dissent*. "For many years I have lived in dread of having to answer The Question," he began. "Curiously, no one has asked it" The question to which he responded with the harshest self-criticism in openly breaking with the left was this: What did those on the left know about the unsurpassed

horrors, the record body counts, of Communism, and when did they know it?

The New York Times, in noticing Gene's death, quotes him in 1996 as saying, "I never gave a damn what people thought of me. And I still don't." Well yes and no. Gene was a complicated man: tough on the outside, soft on the inside, caring to friends, unsentimental in his scholarship. Stubborn (at times beyond belief), he could seem an immovable object. Fiercely loyal to his small circle of close friends whose opinions did matter to him, Gene felt betrayal keenly and the pain tended to make him close the shutters into reclusiveness. A marvelous host and a great raconteur, he shunned the limelight, drawing a bright shiny line between honor and reputation. Reared in a working-class Sicilian-American home in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn, he possessed strong tribal instincts that persistently informed a conservative sensibility. It richly colored his portrayal of particulars, yet the corpus of his scholarship also reflected deep engagement with the transcendent and the transhistorical. Unbowed and unbroken by the academy that had ultimately turned its back on him and then savaged him—more so his beloved wife Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, a prominent intellectual in her own right—Gene ended his life praying to his Lord on bended knee.

Gene befriended serious thinkers from across the political spectrum, learned from them, and relished the rough-and-tumble of engaging the best of them. He admired, for example, the intelligence and integrity of the University of Chicago free market economist Wilson Allen Wallis, who as president of the University of Rochester surmounted a series of hurdles to bring Gene there. As chairman of Rochester's history department, Gene tried against the odds to recruit to the department the erudite Paul Gottfried, a prominent conservative critic of Straussians. A few years later, Genovese rose to denounce the exclusion of right-of-center intellectuals from the Ivy League by citing the case of the "brilliant, erudite, and gifted" Straussian Thomas Pangle, who had been denied tenure at Yale. In the same letter to *The New York Review of Books*,

Gene had taken the gloves off, challenging Alfred Kazin, a darling of the Manhattan literati, for contributing to the smear campaign that had destroyed the candidacy for the chairmanship of the National Endowment for the Humanities of M. E. Bradford, an unreconstructed southern conservative.

A leftwing colleague sent me Gene's obituary from *The New York Times* with the comment that it contained the "worst summary of *Roll, Jordan, Roll* I have ever read." Be not surprised. The piece also included the obligatory cheap shot, a quote from the progressive historian Eric Foner on paternalism, the animating feature in Gene's interpretation of the world masters and slaves made together in the Old South: "[P]arents do not normally sell their children, the historian Eric Foner wrote in 1982." Well, one might respond that if Professor Foner had checked out his Bible lately, the most frequently mentioned means of enslavement in the text is the buying and selling of children. And further, only after the eighteenth-century advent in the West of a full-blown capitalist system, which broke human communities out of Malthusian cycles, was the buying and selling of children put beyond the legal pale throughout the world.

But let me move on to clear up confusion. At one level of analysis, paternalism—some variant of government by the father—can be found in every slave society in history and in many other societies based on other forms of coerced labor. Servitude, after all, inheres in the human condition; paternalism is an extrapolation from the family metaphor. For Gene, the Old South produced a historically unique system of social relations, a modern slave society whose specific circumstances gave it its uniqueness. What circumstances did he have in mind? Resident masters; relatively small slaveholdings; evangelical Protestant Christianity; the early creolization of slaves such that, more than a half century before the ending of the Atlantic slave trade to the United States in 1808, the majority of slaves in the United States were native-born; a slave population reproducing naturally at a rate unprecedented in any slave society in world history; and the control of state power

in a democratic–republican polity by a regionally powerful class of slaveholders.

On one side of the dialectic of resistance and accommodation, masters embraced paternalism because—like all ruling elites across the globe—they were trying to translate power into authority, to convert brute force into moral force. Gene knew his Rousseau: "The strongest is never strong enough to be always the master, unless he transforms strength into right, and obedience into duty." Gene preferred Machiavelli:

"You must understand," said the Prince, "that there are two ways of contending, by law, and by force: The first is proper to men; the second to beasts; but because many times the first is insufficient, recourse must be had to the second. It belongs therefore to a prince to understand both, when to make use of the rational, and when of the brutal way . . . for that one without the other will be of little duration."

Many proslavery Southerners, as Gene discovered, ultimately aspired to create a slave-based civilization for the ages.

Gene entitled a subsection of *Roll, Jordan, Roll* on slave funerals, "Let the Dead Bury the Dead" words drawn, slightly tweaked, from Matthew 8:22. Throughout history, slaves have represented, in theory, the uprooted and deracinated—the socially dead. As Gene pointed out better than anyone else, slaves in the Old South struggled to bury their loved ones in their own way, thereby asserting their humanity, redeeming themselves from social death, and binding themselves together, despite their enslavement, in dignity as a human community. But it also seems to me that Gene was using the words to make a much larger point in rejection of the abolitionist claim that Jesus' command to an unsteady disciple represented discontinuity, a transforming break with the past. Jesus, after all, was not counseling his followers to betray the Fifth Commandment. Gene, a traditionalist at heart, was thinking about the past in relation to the duties of the living, the human condition, and the Christian insight that

we are all deeply conflicted human beings with multiple identities that can yield divided loyalties as we endlessly wrestle with the burdens of the past in conducting our daily lives. Gene's greatness as a historian derived in large part from his great respect for tradition as deeply buried deposits of wisdom that must be endlessly rediscovered. He sought truth in the past to prudentially guide the living. He did so through

meticulous research, by poring over mountains of sources, and by weighing evidence with a brilliant mind, according to the highest standards of the profession, to produce judgment that was both deeply considered and honest. His scholarship was intended not to separate us from our obligations to the living, but rather to inform them. If, in the beginning, Gene bowed to no God but truth, he ended his life bowing to both.

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