

The New Criterion

March 2013

A monthly review *edited by Roger Kimball*

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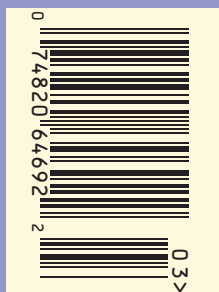
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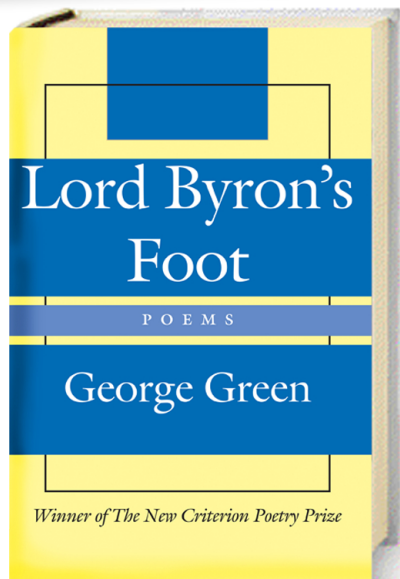
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Notes & Comments: March 2013

The Met gets spooked

We are not quite sure what level of donation entitles one to receive the Metropolitan Museum of Art's seasonal pamphlet, but the Spring 2013 edition of *Met Museum Presents* is certainly something special. The main attraction for this spring is "an unprecedented Museum artist residency" of one Paul D. Miller, aka DJ Spooky, That Subliminal Kid.

Possibly, Dear Reader, you had, like us, been hitherto ignorant of Mr. Spooky and his works. The Met describes him as "a composer, multimedia artist, writer, and DJ." Truth in advertising ought to have required a heavy disclaimer. A little investigation reveals that Mr. Spooky is not a composer, artist, or writer in any ordinary sense of those terms. He barely qualifies as a DJ, though he does preside over events where people are subjected to noise at least partially contrived by him. His chief distinguishing feature is command of an academic polysyllabic patois of inadvertently comic pretentiousness, reminiscent in some ways of Walt Kelly's P. T. Bridgeport.

The philosopher Harvey Mansfield once observed that "environmentalism is school prayer for liberals." That was a couple of decades ago, when the obeisance to "the environment" was but a gleam in the eye of sanctimonious hucksters who saw plenty of gold in the green movement. It is now a lavishly funded international consortium whose shibboleths are as eagerly embraced by corporate manufacturers as they are parroted by oleaginous politicians

and canny "performance artists" happy to bask in the glow of unearned moral rectitude. So it is not really surprising that Mr. Spooky's "unprecedented" residence at the Met should revolve around "Art & the Environment." On March 23, for only \$30, you can witness "Of Water and Ice," a "multimedia concert of compositions based on water and arctic rhythms," a piece specially commissioned by the Met. The very next day, you can drop in on Mr. Spooky as he "shares his experiences from the North and South Poles in a conversation with Museum curators." Then on May 9 you can listen to Mr. Spooky and the professional environmental alarmist Bill McKibben talk about "climate change and its effect on our planet, our environment, and our culture." In case you had anxiety about the matter, rest assured that "the panelists share a deep concern for the environment, and marshal their individual and collective creativity to effect positive and sustainable change."

It would be cruel to subject such declarations of environmental angst to much scrutiny. They are not quite meaningless. But their meaning is a matter of quasi-religious emotive discharge, not ideas. That "deep concern for the environment," a "creativity" that is "collective" as well as individual, and change that is—Oh, glorious buzzword—"sustainable"! These verbal emissions do not communicate so much as they anesthetize, suspending consecutive thought with the narcotic of moral smugness.

The Met has even more on the docket from Mr. Spooky. But his true awfulness is only hinted at by the Museum's anodyne text. Mr. Spooky is one of those performers who likes to deploy the specialized vocabulary of science and philosophy in order to make it seem that his pompous version of aleatoric art is full of deep significance. His "concerts" are really just randomized noise, but they come with a filigree of verbal static from the likes of Johannes Kepler, Douglas Hofstadter's *Gödel, Escher, Bach*, etc. Mr. Spooky likes to cite Wagner and the idea of *das Gesamtkunstwerk*, the "total work of art." But what his performance reminds one of is not Wagner but a demotic parody of Hermann Hesse's "glass bead game," that future amusement of an exhausted civilization in which "the total contents of culture" are scrambled together in a nihilistic effort to produce the simulacrum of meaning.

Mr. Spooky is not the only preposterous figure on offer this spring at the Met. On the contrary, the Museum's members-only pamphlet is full of alarming exotica. Consider, to take just one more example, Dan Deacon, "electronic composer and party instigator." On April 27, Mr. Deacon will bring what the Met calls his "fluorescent creativity" to the Museum for a "music/video piece" (a "once-in-a-lifetime performance") that "explores Dan's commitment to civic responsibility[!] through the lens of innovative multimedia performance." If that seems a bit rich, ponder Mr. Deacon's statement that "it's impossible to think about the land without the history of it, and that's a mixture of guilt and shame." Is that so, Dan? Is the history of "the land," e.g., this land, the United States, "a mixture of guilt and shame"? What happened to pride in great achievements, civil, economic, political, and cultural? We acknowledge that the preening antics of hipsters like Messrs. Spooky and Deacon are things any self-respecting cultural organization should be ashamed of endorsing, but that is not the sort of guilt he was talking about.

This installment of *Met Museum Presents* is short but profoundly depressing. Here we have a premier cultural institution, an institution

that was created to preserve and transmit the artistic treasures of the past, and what does it offer us? Rebarbative, politically correct nonsense from the dregs of our increasingly senile avant-garde. Performers like Mr. Spooky and Dan Deacon are a dime a dozen these days. No college campus or trendy art emporium considers itself quite complete without the presence of such figures. But institutions like the Met should be—and until quite recently had been—largely resistant to such toxic ephemera. Like other great custodians of culture, the Met was created to protect civilization, not violate it. Now we get Mr. Spooky and Dan Deacon. Shouldn't there be a sort of Hippocratic Oath for great cultural institutions? "First do no harm." The really melancholy thing is the realization that long though the road is to civilization's heights, the journey back down is frighteningly swift and nearly irretrievable.

Tanenhaus's original sin

If "the Environment" names a primary sacrament and object of veneration for the church of politically correct self-congratulation, its demonic opposite is the allegation of racism. Just as one can never be sufficiently green and sensitive to "the Environment," so one can never be sure one has escaped the unforgivable sin of racism.

What is racism? It is too important a weapon in the armory of leftist ideology to be defined. Definition would limit its deployment, and the whole point of blanket condemnatory terms like racism is that they be all-purpose, unlimited badges of ostracism. "Racism" occupies a place in contemporary left-wing ideology much like the place occupied by "bourgeois" in Marxist ideology. Its very vagueness is part of its attraction. To call something "bourgeois" was to place an unredeemable deprecatory minus sign in front of the offending person, group, or institution. Likewise "racism" and its cognates. To say someone or something is "racist" is to pronounce anathema upon it. No more need be said.

Sam Tanenhaus, the editor of *The New York Times Book Review*, provides a vivid illustration

of the use and abuse of racism in “Original Sin: Why the GOP Is and Will Continue to Be the Party of White People,” his long and tendentious cover story for the February issue of *The New Republic*. Or perhaps we should say the new *New Republic*. For Tanenhaus’s essay helped inaugurate the magazine’s rebirth as a boutique leftist organ under its new owner, the Facebook millionaire Chris Hughes. As Martin Peretz, owner of *The New Republic* for thirty-five years, banefully noted in an op-ed piece for *The Wall Street Journal*, Tanenhaus’s essay demonstrated that *The New Republic* had “abandoned its liberal but heterodox tradition and embraced a leftist outlook as predictable as that of *Mother Jones* or *The Nation*.” “Original Sin” is a curious, not to say obnoxious, literary production. It is part of a much larger, and distinctly non-literary, effort to discredit and ultimately to destroy not just the GOP but the tradition of Constitutional restraint and limited government which have provided the party’s intellectual foundation. The theme of Tanenhaus’s essay is announced in its subtitle: the GOP is inextricably the party of white guys, i.e., racists. Its deeper purpose, however, is signaled by its arresting title: the racism of the GOP is not remediable. Original sin is not the product of something one does but something one is: being human, in the case of Christian theology, being Republican if you are Sam Tanenhaus.

What makes “Original Sin” so odd is its historical legerdemain. When it comes to racism, the elephant in the room for Democrats is the unhappy historical fact that the Democratic Party was the party of slavery in the nineteenth century, the party of segregation for much of the twentieth century, and the party of multicultural neo-segregation today. Tanenhaus does not put it quite like that, but his essay slyly acknowledges the first two items. When it comes to contemporary realities, however, he argues that conservatives, by opposing identity politics and supporting the ideal of limited government, have slid under the wheels of history. The changing demographic complexion of America, he says, has consigned the GOP to bitter irrelevance. Searching for an intellectual paterfamilias for this drama, he settles on Lincoln’s great antagonist John

C. Calhoun. The reasoning goes something like this: Calhoun supported states’ rights and limited government. He worried about the tyranny of the majority. He also supported slavery. Conservatives support states’ rights and limited government, they worry about the tyranny of the majority, ergo they are racists.

What can one say? The philosopher Sidney Hook was right that “as morally offensive as is the expression of racism wherever it is found, a false charge of racism is equally offensive, perhaps even more so, because the consequences of a false charge of racism enable an authentic racist to conceal his racism by exploiting the loose way the term is used to cover up his actions.” This is not the first time that Sam Tanenhaus has endeavored to provide an epitaph for the GOP and conservatism. Back in 2009 he wrote a long essay, which he later expanded into a book, pronouncing “The Death of Conservatism.” Months later, the Tea Party reinvigorated the conservative base and turned the mid-term election into a rout for Democrats.

Tanenhaus ends by trumpeting the “profound historical irony that the party of Lincoln . . . has found sustenance in Lincoln’s principal intellectual and moral antagonist.” What’s really ironical, however, is that Tanenhaus should have settled on Calhoun as the GOP’s new house philosopher. As Steven Hayward pointed out on *Power Line*, “In recent decades it has been liberalism that has embraced Calhoun’s doctrine of the ‘concurrent majority’ most robustly, in such things as the specially-carved majority-minority districts to elect minorities to Congress (mostly black) who, by the very nature of these districts, marginalize themselves.”

But historical accuracy is not part of Tanenhaus’s brief. Like “The Death of Conservatism,” “Original Sin” is an attempt at political demolition masquerading as journalism. It tells us a lot about *The New York Times* in its present configuration that the editor of its book review should be the author of such an intellectually dishonest, politically mischievous, and morally repellent essay.

Swimming with “Leviathan”

by Kenneth Minogue

Thomas Hobbes’s *Leviathan*, published in 1651, has long been recognized as (in Michael Oakeshott’s words) “the greatest, perhaps the sole, masterpiece of political philosophy written in the English language.”¹ It certainly provoked violent opinions, both then and now. In Hobbes’s own time, his minimalist account of Christian belief advanced in the second half of the book (often omitted by careless modern readers) led to accusations of atheism, and *Leviathan* was solemnly burned in Oxford soon after his death. Luckily, he had been on good terms with Charles II, whom he had tutored in mathematics when the Prince had been in exile in Paris. In our time, Hobbes has been written down as a cynic about human nature and an absolutist in politics. *Leviathan* thus remains, in one degree or another, a scandalous book. That, as Samuel Pepys complained back in 1668, often made it expensive to buy.

In 1667, however, Hobbes, then aged seventy-nine and afflicted with palsy, translated his argument into Latin, the lingua franca of educated Europeans at the time. The Latin version was last reprinted in Molesworth’s edition of the Hobbesian canon, but that was in 1839. This version, much corrected, has now been edited and translated by Noel Malcolm in two annotated volumes (along with a further volume of introduction) as part of the Clarendon

1 *The Clarendon Edition of the Works of Thomas Hobbes: Leviathan*, edited by Noel Malcolm; Oxford University Press, 1756 pages, \$375.

edition of Hobbes. Malcolm’s introduction explains the immediate context of the entire Hobbesian enterprise, and the three volumes constitute one of the most remarkable adventures in scholarship that our time has to offer. A short review is no place to tangle with the minutiae of such scholarship (even were I capable of doing so), but it is important to understand why such an enterprise is more than academic eccentricity. What led Hobbes to write *Leviathan*?

I do not think we can understand him without recognizing that he sought to understand the conditions that made possible the unique modern civilization of which he was part. The power and range of that civilization were becoming evident in his lifetime. Europe had already become the modernity in which we now live and which today dominates the world. The grander achievements which have transformed our lives—trains, planes, mobile phones, medicine, photography, wheelie bags, and the rest—were still far in the future, but it was clear that the remarkable European individualities that had emerged out of the medieval world were opening up a new kind of human possibility. Most human beings have lived within one encompassing culture, but these early modern Europeans already lived in several quite distinct imaginative worlds. Hobbes, as a translator of Thucydides, was already imaginatively as well as linguistically part of the world of classical Greece, just as his education in Latin thought and philosophy made him part of the Roman

world. As a Christian, he also inhabited the Judaic world of the Old Testament. And as he moved through France and Italy in early travels, and wrote about optics for example, he was participating in the birth of a new world of scientific theorizing about nature. One derivative of this exploratory passion has led to us recently celebrating putting man on the moon, but that achievement is merely one more outcome of the enterprising passions of modern individualists as they opened up both the natural world and the historical past as revelations of the human condition. In the seventeenth century, much even of the world itself was unknown, and it took many intrepid voyages of exploration to convert the planet to which we cling into our familiar mapped and studied “world.” It takes an even more remarkable investigative energy to invent, for example, such an inquiry as archaeology, or the activity of fossicking through the abandoned rubbish of earlier times in a search for clues that might help us to understand the lives of long-forgotten peoples.

The question thus becomes: How could so vibrant a society be sustained? For the birth of modernity in Europe was also a time of such destructive political conflict as threatened the collapse of the whole enterprise. The divergent judgments, appetites, and ambitions of Europeans, indeed perhaps of all human beings, made even peace itself difficult to sustain. It is not quite that they were essentially selfish, but certainly that they were most of the time to be found pursuing their own interests. Above all, many had competitive ambitions for self-glorification. They were certainly marked by what would later be termed a “will to power.” And in the emerging world, such pride found expression in the ambition of many believers, especially those with strong convictions about the true form of Christianity, to impose such convictions on society itself. As Malcolm notes: “the growth of religious ‘enthusiasm’ (a term which Hobbes was one of the first to use in the English language) [involved] . . . sectarians who claimed special knowledge of God’s designs, and an indefeasible warrant for their

own actions.” Some believers claimed direct revelation from the divine, and few themes produce so many passages of savage irony in Hobbes as his treatment of “such private men as pretend to be supernaturally Inspired.” The consequence, Hobbes feared, would be “the Dissolution of all Civill Government.”

Christian enthusiasts were a threat to civil peace throughout Europe, but they were far from being the only projectors of ideal forms of society. Proposals for arguably better forms of social and political life emerged from many of the new enterprises which were then coming into being. It was part of the openness of European life, for example, that education was based on the polytheistic Latin texts of the Roman past, some of which taught hostility to the very institution of monarchy. This led Hobbes to remark in *Leviathan* in his discussion of liberty: “I think I may truly say, there was never anything so dearly bought, as these western parts have bought the learning of the Greek and Latin tongues.” Again, some reformers sought to make English life conform rather more to currently successful modern European states such as Holland or Venice. Hobbes regarded one of the greatest dangers to peace as resulting from the admiration of foreign models of government.

Hobbes drew the conclusion that there were two quite distinct issues arising in the politics of his time, and that his contemporaries generally failed to distinguish them. The central problem was how to deal with the wars and conflict that had arisen out of disagreement about substantive practices of politics and religion. A secondary concern was how social and religious life in each state ought to be structured. Most later political philosophy has been concerned with just such issues of truth, liberty, justice, rights, and so on, but Hobbes took the view that this was putting the cart before the horse. The fatal mistake was to muddle these two issues, so that questions of the substantive structure of the state were advanced as demands that must qualify the decisions of the sovereign power whose business was to determine the prior issue of civil peace. Hobbes had no doubt that peace must come before any desirabilities of substan-

tive justice. And the only solution to securing peace was the creation of a sovereign power.

The need was for a final word on disputed questions, and without an agreed set of judgments that only a sovereign power could generate, no viable state could be sustained. And indeed, European experience had already recognized such a necessity by generating a set of sovereign rulers as a counterpoint to the rising individualism of modern Europeans. These sovereign powers had already become fluent legislators, transcending the more consultative practices of many feudal monarchies. They could not only create new laws appropriate to modern conditions, but could also sustain moral and legal continuity by repealing the legal arrangements inherited from earlier times—arrangements often now thought to be frustrating enterprise. Repealing old laws was no less important than making new. *Leviathan* is thus an argument that develops the underlying rationality of what was actually happening.

The common mistake of contemporaries, Hobbes judged, was the attempt to demand that sovereign rule must incorporate some of the conditions that one or other group in society might favor. Above all, reformers were keen to entrench some of the conditions of liberty within the actual definition of sovereign power. For all his reputation as a cynic and an absolutist, Hobbes certainly valued liberty greatly, but some of his sharpest remarks are provoked by simple people who thought that one or other constitution might be a better guarantee of liberty. He is derisive about the city of Lucca which had “liberty” inscribed on the turrets of the city. The point about living in a state—any state—he insisted, was that it involved subjection to the laws of the sovereign power and service to the Commonwealth. Variations in different European states he thought were distinctly secondary. Hobbes was extreme largely in his clear logic of subjection to a sovereign, and on the practical superiority of vesting such power in one man as monarch.

Sovereign power lies with whoever has the last word in civil disputes, whether it be one man, the few, or the many. Other hold-

ers of sovereignty were certainly possible, but Hobbes judged that its ideal form was that of the monarchies many Europe states had inherited from earlier times. As he crisply observes in the Latin version (as translated by Malcolm), “a Monarch cannot disagree with himself, out of envy, or interest; but an Assembly may: and that to such a height, as may produce a Civill Warre.” This natural advantage of the monarch as a single individual makes monarchy the most suitable form of sovereign power. And as we have noted, this natural advantage cohered with the developing monarchical realities of most European regimes. Individualists were already flourishing in peaceful conditions under such rule. Still, the powers Hobbes accorded to monarchy caused great dismay to his many critics. As John Bramhall observed “he maketh the power of Kings to be so exorbitant . . . to render Monarchy odious to mankind.”

It is in pressing hard on the logic of subjection that Hobbes has acquired his reputation as an absolutist. Notionally, sovereignty is instituted when individuals in the state of nature, which is a state of war, covenant to subject themselves to a sovereign power in order to be protected from insecurity. And it follows that a subject is obliged to obey absolutely anything the sovereign may command unless such a command threatens the individual’s self-preservation, for that value is at the heart of the entire transaction. Hobbes knew that the individualists of his time could not be ruled by fear, as in a despotism (however important the motive of fear might be in leading to the covenant). He also knew that his contemporaries were far from sharing in the patriotic virtue of the Romans. His problem was to discover a new moral basis for civil peace, and he found it in the moral relationship of authorization: *Auctoritas* was freely accorded to rulers as the moral basis of sovereign power. The state thus conceived was a free association of individualists responding to the realities of social insecurity and isolation. In this way, Hobbes generated a new political form in which the multitude become one actor in the person of the sovereign.

Hobbes clearly assumed that a single monarch presiding over any European state could

only rule it in terms of general laws. Men in a Commonwealth, we learn, have “made artificial chains, called civil laws, which they themselves, by mutual covenants, have fasted at one end, to the lips of that man, or assembly, to whom they have given the sovereign power; and at the other end to their own ears.” He thinks that a monarch presiding over such a society would be unlikely to want to oppress his subjects. Nevertheless, the sovereign has a total right to dispose of the subject as he wishes, and thus cannot act unjustly towards such a subject. On the other hand, any challenge to the vital interests or self-preservation of the subject restores to the subject the right of self-preservation as in the state of nature. Right may thus collide directly with right. Such is the logic of absolutism, but Hobbes takes it to be an unusual situation. And Hobbes is explicit that under a rule of law, the subject may, for example, sue the sovereign in terms of the Sovereign’s own laws if the laws should validate such a possibility.

The point about subjection to a European monarch thus conceived is that the subjects are free to conduct their lives as they chose within the limits established by the civil ruler. Their freedom resides in the silence of the law. The consequence of a covenant of submission, Hobbes tells us, is that the subject is a servant, but a servant is to be distinguished from a slave who is accorded no freedom and thus has no obligation at all. And the point is perhaps to be emphasized, as Malcolm does, that in translating *Leviathan*, Hobbes does not employ *subditus*, the Latin term for a subject, but *cives*, or citizen. Subjection is a function of will and situation, not at all a matter of status, and generated in this way, it is quite distinct from the “top down” systems characteristic of despotism.

What then is the Hobbesian theory of the state? It is distinguished from more conventional modern conceptions by leaving aside all substantive considerations of justice or rights—how the state ought to be constituted. Its essential character is to distinguish all constitutional aspirations from the prior

question of getting a state into being in the first place. His aim is above all to distinguish statehood from constitution, the civil association from any concern with how that association is actually ordered. The state, in other words, must be distinguished from any particular opinions dominant within it. Failure to meet this condition would generate in some degree or another an ideological version of statehood. Hobbes’s great admirer Michael Oakeshott poses the same problem in *On Human Conduct*, and solves it by distinguishing “enterprise associations” (based on one or other enthusiasm within the state) and “civil associations.” The essence of the state itself may thus be found in civil associations, whose entire point lay in associating individuals together on the basis of nothing more substantive than an obligation to conform their conduct to a system of law. In Hobbes, the basis of statehood similarly lies in the recognition of the conditions declared by the sovereign. Any actual state, of course, will contain both types of allegiance.

Such a state might well seem to have few reserves of loyalty on which to depend. In fact, these states proved to be remarkably resilient. As Europe became dominantly a set of commercial states in the centuries after Hobbes, critics suggested that such a social order must collapse because of the supposedly selfish interests of the individualists. As economic structures became evident, ideologists appeared who wanted to supply resources of enthusiasm that might become a form of constitutive loyalty—nationalists, egalitarian communities, racists, along with others. In fact, however, these European states exhibited the most remarkable unity and cohesion, something recognized in the commonest complaints made about them in earlier centuries—namely that they were imperialistic. The great—and disastrous—moment of their most prodigious cohesion was the moment when these states entered into the First World War. It was, perhaps, their last fling. There can be little doubt that the state in more recent times has become something much more casual. The very concept of treason hardly survives. Today, even more than

in Hobbes’s time, sovereignty is commonly rejected as an expression of selfish particular interests, and today’s aspirations for political salvation have been invested in the power of international organizations.

Hobbes juxtaposed the demands of freedom against the passion for justice, and he lost. The most powerful enthusiasm of all has turned out to be the supposedly critical belief that our loyalties must not be constrained by the merely accidental fact of being born into

some specific society. We must make our own judgments of rationality, and we may appeal beyond the state, to rights, international values, and external bodies. Modern democracy tends to play down the importance of sovereignty. Remarkably, however, it is in these European states, with their Hobbesian echo of pure statehood, that legality and decency survive, and to which the refugees move, in flight from a world that often seems to echo the state of nature Hobbes so much dreaded.

The pen is mightier

by David Pryce-Jones

Evelyn Waugh was one of those characters that English literature throws up now and again, who put a special stamp on the times, like Dean Swift or Dr. Johnson. About the best that most writers can expect from posterity is cultural embalming, probably in the form of a monograph written by some academic paid to read books nobody else is reading. Almost fifty years after his death, Waugh remains a presence because the spirit of comedy in his books is pure and irrepressible. A reissue of his fiction by Little, Brown and Company attests to the lasting nature of his works.¹ Indeed, Captain Grimes, the Emperor Seth of Azania, Basil Seal, Mr. Todd, William Boot, Mr. Joyboy and Aimée Thanatogenos, and Apthorpe command their place in the British psyche along with Mr. Pickwick and Jeeves.

Literature, for those who embarked on writing careers in the 1920s, was often more a means to enter society than a genuine vocation. A white tie and a tailcoat were as much tools of the trade as a typewriter. So equipped, the talented young with ideas for a masterpiece in their heads were able to meet the right people

in the right houses. Waugh fitted naturally into this coterie, and he was to immortalize the particular house of Madresfield as Brideshead, and its owner Lord Beauchamp as Lord Marchmain. Waugh explored all the possible uses to which the private joke can be put in fiction and in life. The private joke and the hope to write a great novel were similar defining characteristics of Cyril Connolly, a close contemporary, born within a few weeks of Waugh in the autumn of 1903. His review of *Decline and Fall* in the *New Statesman* reads as though he wished he had written this novel. The Waugh–Connolly relationship was unsettling and competitive because each wanted the good opinion of the other and was determined to have it. Friendly or otherwise, it was Waugh’s private joke to attach the name of Connolly to comic characters. A sub-plot in *Sword of Honour* turns on a contraption called Connolly’s Chemical Closet. *The Loved One* was Waugh’s private joke about America, and Connolly devoted a whole issue of *Horizon*, the magazine he edited, to it.

The ways of the world of course put Waugh to the test. He steered clear of the Spanish Civil War, did not visit Berlin or Moscow, converted to Catholicism through the Jesuits, and did not care whom he mocked, writing sentences like “As that great Negro Karl Marx has so nobly written . . .” and “Women of Tomorrow Demand an Empty Cradle.” My father, Alan Pryce-Jones, had almost certainly stayed at Madresfield and put on his white tie and tails for the same occasions as Waugh.

1 Fifteen books by Evelyn Waugh were reissued by Little, Brown and Company on December 11, 2012: *Decline and Fall* (1928), *Vile Bodies* (1930), *Black Mischief* (1932), *A Handful of Dust* (1934), *Scoop* (1938), *Put Out More Flags* (1942), *Brideshead Revisited* (1945), *The Loved One* (1948), *Helena* (1950), *Men at Arms* (1952), *Officers and Gentlemen* (1955), *The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold* (1957), *Unconditional Surrender* (1961), *Sword of Honour* (1965), and *The Complete Stories* (1999).

He, too, aspired to write a great novel, and meanwhile invited Waugh to contribute to *Little Innocents*, an anthology of childhood reminiscences that he edited in 1932. Ten years later, in the review that Alan wrote of *Put Out More Flags*, he spoke for quite a number of readers when he wondered, "Doesn't Mr. Waugh overdo it a little?" Waugh then referred to "the man Jones," until Alan converted to Catholicism and was rewarded with an inscribed copy of *Helena*.

Waugh was not going to be told what to think and what to do, and he seized on people who should have known better than to let their opinions make fools of them. Attaching the nicknames Parsnip and Pimpernel to an easily identifiable W. H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood, he put them down because they had been professional anti-fascists who had run away to the United States the moment there was real fighting to be done. His friend Henry Green was ridiculed because war work for him involved joining "a group of experimental novelists in firemen's uniform" who were to be seen squirting a little jet of water into a burning London club. Closely modeled on Lady Diana Cooper, one of the famous beauties of the period, Mrs. Stitch is a forceful character who makes and breaks careers whimsically. Readers in the know could enjoy these private jokes and the accompanying quarrels and gossip; everyone else had to make of it what they could.

The publication in 1945 of *Brideshead Revisited* was a turning point for Waugh. The book sold half a million copies in the United States and gave him independence. Ironically, the evocation of a past that was truly over and done with allowed Waugh to live as though it were still present. Successful Englishmen have kept alive a time-honored ideal of living in a handsome country house amid books and pictures of their choice, and Waugh could realize it. The novel's subject, its aura of nostalgia, was open to misrepresentation. Sure enough, Edmund Wilson wrote a long review in *The New Yorker* that branded Waugh as a hopeless reactionary. During a prolonged stay in the Soviet Union, Wilson had picked up tips on how to wage the class war. The snobbery asso-

ciated with the fictional Lord Marchmain and his family in *Brideshead*, Wilson wrote more in anger than sorrow, was "shameless and rampant." The book was mere romantic fantasy, a Catholic tract. Edmund Wilson seems not to have noticed that Anthony Blanche, the flamboyant character who deals in reality, finds the entire Marchmain family "sinister." The individual distress of each of them becomes a collective failure. The great houses of the family are sold or degraded. The plot could almost be summarized as a warning against the abuse of privilege that aristocrats are prone to. Those who might replace them are Rex Mottram and his Conservative friends, but Waugh reduces them to figures of farce. Their cross-talk about Hitler on the eve of the World War runs for a couple of pages that seem lifted from one of his earlier comedies. "The communists will tear him limb from limb"; "He'll scupper himself"; "He'd do it now if it wasn't for Chamberlain"; and so on.

A minor character in *Brideshead Revisited* is made to stand for the Common Man. Hooper is a sallow youth with a flat Midland accent who says "rightyoh," and observes the universe in a "general, enveloping fog." The worst of it is that Hooper is no romantic. Knowing nothing about past heroes and victories, he cannot possibly understand why England is a country worth fighting for. The older Waugh got, the more he detected a Hooper in everyone, and the greater the disappointment that he couldn't help giving vent to. "I am by nature a bully and a scold," he said of himself. Gilbert Pinfold, his fictional alter ego, is "bulging with wrath that was half-facetious, and with half-simulated incredulity . . . he was absurd to many but to some rather formidable." Pinfold's distress arose just like Waugh's, from "plastics, Picasso, sunbathing and jazz—everything in fact that had happened in his own lifetime." Christopher Sykes was a close friend and admirer of Waugh. In the biography that Sykes wrote, he considers that Waugh, rejecting so much that was going on around him, ought to be described as an anarchist, even a revolutionary, and in a wonderful understatement muses, "He was never much influenced by the common desire to be liked."

By the time I came to know Waugh, I was at Oxford. Intellectual activity in the university was restricted to discussing which elements of Left-wing doctrine would bring about utopia. Indoctrination had replaced education. Waugh's eldest daughter, Teresa, was also an Oxford undergraduate, and she arranged for a dozen of her more passable contemporaries to lunch with her father in the Randolph Hotel. I imagine that Waugh felt as cautious about us as we felt about him. During the meal there was a lot of embarrassed silence until the subject of homosexuals fathering children cropped up. Then Waugh boomed across the crowded dining room, "Lord Beauchamp had six, Oscar had two, and even little Loulou Harcourt managed one." Later that term, Teresa invited me for the weekend to Combe Florey. After a three-hour drive, we reached the house. A window on the second floor opened with a rattle, and Waugh leaned out shouting, "Go away!" When he's like that, Teresa said, we had better go—and so we drove back the three hours to Oxford. For a party to celebrate Teresa's marriage, he engaged a military brass band that played music like the Post Horn Gallop to which it was impossible to dance. As midnight struck, Waugh stepped into the center of the room, clapped his hands, and said at the top of his voice, "It's over." About that same time, I was invited to the wedding reception in the House of Lords of Waugh's eldest son, Auberon, always known as Bron. Waugh was standing by himself in an inner courtyard, a compact overweight figure with a tailcoat and top hat. Fury and the wish to be elsewhere were visible in his features. "My name's Waugh, Evelyn Waugh, father of the bridegroom," he said. "Who are you?" I explained that we had met before, and he started back: "I used to know your poor dear father" (who still had another forty years to live).

Earlier, during military service in Cyprus, Bron accidentally shot and nearly killed himself. Visiting him in hospital, his father said, "It is a soldier's duty to die for his country." A journalist in his turn, Bron adopted his father's playacting in every respect as though he had no emotional independence of his own. I came to miss his regular portrayals of me as a Welsh

dwarf who stole rolls of wire from the tips in the valleys and had somehow escaped from the coalmines. His father's exaggeration was under better control. *Face to Face*, for instance, was a television program with a huge audience. Its star interviewer was John Freeman, a member of the socialist elite. He was determined to make a fool of Waugh, and Waugh knew it. During his appearance, he wore one of his favorite black-and-white checkered suits with a flower in the buttonhole, and added to the posture of defiance by smoking a cigar while denigrating the modern world, and television in particular. "Since you object so much to television," Freeman asked, finally falling into the trap, "why do you appear on it?" Releasing another vast puff of cigar smoke, Waugh went for the kill: "For the same reason as you, Mr. Freeman, for the money."

I have to confess that my Oxford brainwashing persisted for some time. Mea maxima culpa—in my essay about the revised edition of *Brideshead Revisited*, I called Waugh "a social Philistine" and repeated clichés that Edmund Wilson had popularized. A number of prominent Lefties congratulated me. Waugh sent a mutual friend to tell me that he felt hurt that the boy Jones could do such a thing, but he was generous enough to let it go at that. Soon afterwards I became literary editor of *The Spectator* and asked him to review a novel by Muriel Spark. He answered, "I like to write for *The Spectator* when there is some writer who seems to be getting too little or too much praise, or when there is an expensive book on Victorian painting or architecture which I want for my library. I don't do routine reviewing any more." When he did contribute, his copy was handwritten without a single erasure.

The final edited version of *Sword of Honour* is a personal statement large and grand enough to have a universal dimension. A fictionalized version of Waugh himself, Guy Crouchback, its hero, discovers his responsibilities to other people and to God. The name Crouchback derives from the cross that Crusaders once had stitched on their tunics. Volunteering for military service as war is declared, Guy stops at the tomb of one such knight, an exemplary

predecessor: “Sir Roger, pray for me, and for our endangered kingdom.” The Hitler–Stalin Pact at the end of August 1939 inspires love of country, sacrifice, and honor, and Waugh gives Guy a noble expression of this spirit. “The enemy at last was plain in view, huge and hateful, all disguise cast off. It was the Modern Age in arms. Whatever the outcome there was a place for him in that battle.”

When he enrolled, Waugh was already thirty-six, and so was Guy—old enough to be known by his fellow officers as “uncle.” Waugh attributes to Guy his own complete experience of the war. Both trained as commandos, both were fearless. Parachute jumps provided a thrill akin to mysticism. Like Waugh, Guy was present at the fall of Crete, and English literature has nothing comparable to the first-hand description of that disastrous battle. Both saw service in Egypt and then with the British Military Mission in Yugoslavia. In a private joke that he did not pass on to Guy, Waugh maintained that Marshal Tito was a woman.

The assumption underlying Guy’s frame of mind is that England has the moral strength and the armed might to win the war on its own. This is a delusion. In reality, the political and military conduct of the war is all too often incompetent or just plain wrong. Furthermore, the alliance of Britain with the Soviet Union makes nonsense of Guy’s prayer over Sir Roger’s tomb. A brother officer tells Guy that the more men there are to shoot at Germans the better, but this truth does little to console him. As things go wrong, Winston Churchill comes to sound “painfully boastful” while Tito, by comparison, appears a highly skilled politician who can run rings round an old boy who knows nothing except parliamentary politics. Modeled on a famously dashing soldier whom Waugh knew and admired, the character of Ivor Claire seems to Guy to be “quintessential England, the man Hitler had not taken into account.” Disappointingly, however, he abandons the men under his command in Crete to be taken prisoner and shamefully saves himself. Not helping matters, a fool of a general “helped drive numerous Canadians to their death at Dieppe,” while another loses his life stupidly

in the belief he’s “biffing” Germans. Corporal-Major Ludovic is the most ambiguous figure Waugh ever conceived. He shoots the cowardly Major Hound in Crete but saves Guy’s life. Home again, he writes aphorisms that a fashionable editor given the name Everard Spruce publishes in a monthly called *Survival*. (I happened to be present when someone asked Cyril Connolly what he thought about being caricatured as Spruce, whereupon he pulled out of his pocket a letter from Waugh that he was carrying around like a *laissez-passer*. Passionately refuting any such identification, the letter was a rite of passage in this relationship, and of course a lie.) As if cowards were not bad enough, intelligence agents and a homosexual diplomat are traitors engaged in a Communist conspiracy. A few years later, Philby, Burgess, and Maclean proved that what had seemed another unlikely private joke had been reportage.

“Quantitative judgments don’t apply,” is the guidance Guy receives from his father and repeats to himself. Waugh lets it be understood that in the sight of God it is enough to save one’s own soul; the collectivity is beside the point. Guy is redeemed by an act of charity and forgiveness towards the wife who ran away and had a child in a meaningless affair with an unsuitable man. He accuses himself of feeling an “indefinable numbness” where others are concerned, but in Yugoslavia he finds himself in a position to help defenseless Jews: “He was Moses leading a people out of captivity.” One of the Jewish women trying to flee puts an end to the crusade against the Modern Age. “It seems to me there was a will to war, a death wish everywhere. Even good men thought their private honour would be satisfied by war,” she says. “God forgive me, I was one of them,” is Guy’s reply.

“Do you think things will ever be normal again?” one of the other minor characters asks at the end of *Sword of Honour*. What has been lost is beyond recovery. George Orwell was a very different character, but his *1984* is also a vehicle of regret and elegy; both writers speak like nobody else to a country in decline. Air-strip One is fate. A glass paperweight carries a

charge powerful enough to evoke England as it was when normal. By coincidence, Orwell was born in the summer of 1903 within weeks of Waugh and Connolly; the latter thought him a revolutionary in love with the past. Wounded in Spain, Orwell was unable to fight the war against the hateful Modern Age in arms, but nonetheless he too was a Crusader. In the blitzkrieg of 1940, he hoped the British army in France would be cut to pieces rather than surrender. Waugh wrote to Orwell that he admired *1984* and thought conditions by then might well be as described. The book had failed to make his flesh creep, he went on, because through the Church some would still save their souls. This reputedly uncharitable man asked if Orwell would welcome a

visit from him and some friends. And on his deathbed, the reputedly socialist and secular Orwell jotted down notes for an article on Waugh that he never had time to write. One of these final notes concludes that Waugh is about as good a novelist as one can be while holding his opinions.

I saw Waugh one last time, at a wedding in a small Catholic chapel in the country. He and Christopher Sykes came in together and sat side by side near the front. Corresponding to a recent Vatican decree, the service was in English, not Latin. Waugh waved his ear trumpet, that brilliantly symbolic prop, and he interrupted loudly and often: "What's going on?" and "Can't understand a word." A few weeks later, he died.

The biggest loser

by Barry Strauss

When I was an undergraduate, one of my teachers used to talk only half-seriously about “Great Losers in American History,” beginning with Aaron Burr. It’s not a theme that George Patton would have warmed to. As the general said to the troops, “Americans love a winner and will not tolerate a loser.” No doubt that’s true—and not just in the U.S.—when it comes to choosing leaders. Yet even Americans evince a certain fascination for failure. Ahab or Gatsby or Willy Loman, anyone?

When the defeated goes down fighting, moreover, when he insists on the grandeur of his deeds or ideas, then he may even have a certain attraction that a winner lacks. A Francophile like Patton needed no introduction to the glamour of Napoleon. For that matter, I doubt if an orator of Patton’s caliber could have entirely resisted the glory of one of the charter members of any list of “Great Losers in Ancient History,” Demosthenes.

An Athenian statesman, Demosthenes (384–322 B.C.) devoted his career to convincing first his countrymen and then the rest of the Greeks to band together and fight the rising power first of Philip II of Macedon (382–336 B.C.) and then of his son Alexander the Great (356–323 B.C.). It was a grand effort and it failed. Macedon won; Athens and its allies lost.

Winston Churchill has often been held up as a modern Demosthenes and so he was, when it comes to speechmaking and statesmanship. There is, however, one big difference:

Churchill won. There are other differences as well. Churchill was physically robust and the product of aristocratic self-confidence. Demosthenes was frail and famously overcame a speech defect to become a great orator. Moreover, neither Philip nor Alexander was Hitler. This means that the choices faced by Demosthenes do not seem as stark as those that faced Churchill. Yet the world sometimes ends not with a bang but a whimper, as the poet says. Not all enemies of freedom are monsters—sometimes they are even heroic in their own way. That makes it all the more important to understand Demosthenes and what he was fighting for.

Demosthenes lived long after Athens’ golden age of power and self-confidence, a period under Pericles (ca. 495–429 B.C.) that ended when Athens lost the Peloponnesian War in 404 B.C. The long cycle of wars among the Greek city-states left them all tired by the mid-fourth century B.C. Enter the vigorous, energized kingdom of Macedon, led by the dynamic and ruthless king Philip.

Nowadays Macedon is an integral part of the Greek nation, but in classical Greece the Macedonians were peripheral. The Macedonian elite spoke Greek as did many ordinary Macedonians, and they had much in common with their cousins to the south. There were, however, some big cultural and political differences. The main one was that Macedon was a kingdom while the states that had long dominated the Greek peninsula—Athens, Sparta, Thebes, and Corinth—were all city-states.

They thought of Philip and his kingdom as outsiders and were not eager to be dominated by them.

By Demosthenes' day, most Athenians preferred staying home and getting rich to chasing dragons abroad. They remained unconvinced for years that Philip represented a threat to their freedom and independence until finally the shadow of his growing power became obvious. Then they finally took Demosthenes' advice, but it was too late. Philip conquered Greece. At the decisive Battle of Chaeronea (338 B.C.), 1,000 Athenians were killed and 2,000 made prisoners, out of an Athenian contingent in the Panhellenic army of 8,000 men (6,000 Athenian citizens and 2,000 mercenaries). Other Greek losses were also substantial.

Philip is said to have danced a drunken jig of joy after the battle to the zippy tune of Demosthenes' full name in Athenian decrees: "De-mo-sthe-nes De-mo-sthe-nous Pai-a-neus," that is, "Demosthenes, son of Demosthenes, of the county of Paiania." Fortunately for Demosthenes, Philip proceeded to treat him and Athens relatively leniently. He made Athens give up most of its power abroad but left it alone at home. Philip needed Athens' navy and its prestige for his upcoming war. In his mind, Greece was just the beginning. His real target was Persia. Persia ruled the largest empire the world had known to date. One man had founded it—Cyrus the Great (r. 559–530 B.C.). The empire was past its prime, and Philip believed that he was the one man who could grab it.

Shortly afterwards, Philip was assassinated and his son Alexander took the throne. Alexander the Great went on to fulfill Philip's dream and conquer the Persian Empire. Alexander died young, however, and Demosthenes convinced the Athenians and a coalition of other Greeks to revolt. Once again, they lost. This time, the conquerors imposed harsh terms on Athens and demanded Demosthenes' head. He fled and then took his own life.

It's a sad story, or it might be, if that were all there was to it. But Demosthenes wasn't just a great loser. He was a magnificent loser. He left behind a glorious body of oratory. A

master speaker, Demosthenes provides one of history's greatest examples of the art of persuading a free and democratic people.

Demosthenes' speeches should be a part of everyone's education. They are eloquent and powerful. They display a sophisticated, even breathtaking grasp of strategy, revealing the deep influence on him of Thucydides. Demosthenes' description in "On the Crown" (330 B.C.) of the day he roused the Athenian assembly to action before Chaeronea is one of the most vivid and powerful pieces of political oratory ever written. He writes that, when the news came to the Athenian Assembly that Philip and his army had come south, the herald asked, as usual in that democratic body, "Who wishes to speak?" But no one came forward, not even the most prominent or accomplished. Demosthenes writes:

But, it seems, the call of the crisis on that momentous day was not only for the wealthy patriot but for the man who from first to last had closely watched the sequence of events, and had rightly fathomed the purposes and the desires of Philip; for anyone who had not grasped those purposes, or had not studied them long beforehand, however patriotic and however wealthy he might be, was not the man to appreciate the needs of the hour, or to find any counsel to offer to the people. On that day, then, the call was manifestly for me.

Demosthenes could be scathingly funny. He complained that the Athenians fought Philip the way a barbarian boxes. They never anticipated or parried a blow but only reacted when it was too late. He says:

You take your marching orders from him; you have never framed any plan of campaign for yourselves, never foreseen any event, until you learn that something has happened or is happening.

As Philip complained, Demosthenes' speeches were soldiers. The king should have known: Demosthenes' *Philippics* or speeches about Philip, have given the language a word for "violent denunciation."

Demosthenes' speeches are his finest legacy. They sizzle. His career, by contrast, was convoluted, at times humdrum, and sometimes ugly. Yet familiarity with his career is essential because it demonstrates what it takes to convince people that even a seductive threat to freedom is still a threat. The process is difficult and infuriating and it would drive the best of us half-mad, yet, somehow, Demosthenes did it.

To the benefit of readers, Ian Worthington has recently written a very fine introduction to Demosthenes' career.¹ He knows the subject well. As a classical scholar and historian, Worthington has written widely and with authority, including translations of Demosthenic speeches and a biography of Philip of Macedon. His is an erudite but readable biography of Demosthenes. It is sober, balanced, and analytical, which makes its bottom line all the more impressive.

Demosthenes was no saint. He could be petty and vindictive and he took bribes. To be sure, in Athens it was not a crime to take a bribe; it was only a crime to take a bribe and use the money against the best interests of the Athenian people. As Worthington demonstrates, Demosthenes was an opportunist. Then again, he was a politician. Politics isn't philosophy. Demosthenes played rough but the game had rugged rules.

As Worthington argues, Demosthenes cannot be blamed for faulty strategy against Philip. Macedon was too strong, the Greek city-states too divided and worn out from their many wars. Demosthenes probably did the best anyone could have in trying to stop Philip. Philip was not to be appeased. He was brilliant, talented, power-hungry, and determined. He had money and resources. He was a smooth talker and a cunning diplomat. By reforming the old hoplite phalanx and adding Macedon's traditional strength in cavalry, Philip created a combined-arms military that was all but unbeatable in battle. To this he added the Greek world's latest scientific advances in siege warfare. He was a powerful warrior.

¹ *Demosthenes of Athens and the Fall of Classical Greece*, by Ian Worthington; Oxford University Press, 416 pages, \$35.

By the same token, Philip was no monster. He unified Greece—something that won him the admiration of many a scholar in the nineteenth century during the glory days of national liberation and unification. Philip admired the culture of the Greek city-states and had no intention of destroying it or ruining them. He wanted to curtail their independence sharply and subject them to Macedonian rule. In the short run, they lost the freedom to make their own foreign policy. In the long run, Macedon's influence went deeper and was more insidious.

Philip no doubt believed sincerely that Greece could be prosperous and cultivated under Macedonian leadership. Perhaps he was already thinking of the spread of Greek culture in the former Persian Empire that took place in the years after Alexander's conquests (in some ways more a byproduct than a conscious policy). But what couldn't endure the Macedonian conquest was the Greek culture of freedom and independence.

Courtiers often live good lives, and surely more glamorous lives than do the citizens of republics, but they lack the simple freedom of a citizen, the freedom to say what they think, the freedom to say no. Demosthenes knew that Philip's friends lived comfortably, and Athens under Macedon might have been even happier than it was in its own cantankerous independence. It would never be free, though, and without freedom there could be no failure, and without failure, there could be no tragedy—that most profound product of the ancient Greek soul.

Philip was no democrat which meant that there could be no democracy either. Once he controlled Greece, he or his successors would eventually find it easier to deal with Athenian oligarchs than with Athenian democrats. There were indeed oligarchs in Athens and their numbers were likely to grow with the power of Macedon. Demosthenes knew all this.

Demosthenes failed but he bought time for democracy. He died in 322 B.C. but Athenian democracy survived at least for another sixty years, albeit with short intervals of Macedonian-imposed oligarchy. If the Athenians had

simply rolled over in the face of Philip without fighting, the pro-Macedonian party would have come to power much sooner in Athens and weakened democracy from within. Thanks to Demosthenes, Athens went down fighting, and it kept fighting for generations longer than it might have otherwise. Athenians knew it and they honored his memory.

Worthington quotes the Athenian decree establishing posthumous public honors for Demosthenes and privileges for his descendants. The text resolves that Demosthenes “performed the best public actions in the cause of liberty and democracy.”

Worthington understands the case against Demosthenes. He looks down wryly on the

abuse of Demosthenes’ name by various politicians who have appropriated it. But his balanced and reasoned argument makes the case for Demosthenes’ shining legacy:

in our world of ordinary people standing boldly, defiantly and bravely against tyrannies and totalitarian regimes, one cannot help but liken some of them to Demosthenes.

That’s what it comes down to in the end. That “great loser,” Demosthenes, fought for freedom and failed. Yet his words remind us what the fight is for and his deeds show us that although those who fight it may lose, they are no losers.

T. S. Eliot & the roots that clutch

by Jim McCue

T. S. Eliot made two visits to the Somerset village of East Coker, where his remains are now interred. On June 18, 1936 he wrote to his friend Polly Tandy, “By foot to the pretty village of East Coker, the only blemish of which is a memorial stained glass window, the ugliest I ever saw, Faith Hope & Love with malignant faces, Love a little higher than her villainous sisters by reason of standing on the family arms incorrectly inscribed, which has been put in only this year by an American cousin.”

Gradually, he developed a fascination with the local history and his family’s ties to the place, and on March 31, 1937, writing to John Hayward, he signed himself “Your oblgd obt servt | Th. Eliot | of Somerset.” On August 5, he reported to Lady Richmond, wife of the Editor of the *Times Literary Supplement*: “I walked from East to West Coker in great heat.” Three years later, he remembered that walk in *East Coker*, the second of his *Four Quartets*, in the line “Into the village, in the electric heat.”

East Coker is a version of pastoral poetry, yet it is infused with the realism of the most modern and urban of poets. Where Gerard Manley Hopkins saw “Flesh and fleece, fur and feather,/ Grass and greenworld all together,” Eliot saw “Flesh, fur and faeces,/ Bone of man and beast, cornstalk and leaf.” The great heat in the “open field” could be any summer from the village’s thousand-year history, but the adjective “electric” is charged with modernity. Past and present are held in the static of an electric field.

This is no costume-drama, tucking the present-day out of view. It acknowledges the factory and the by-pass, the passing van, the London underground, the photograph album, and the Stock Exchange Gazette. Above all, as a poem published in March 1940, it knows and dreads what is to come: “All the last three Quartets are in a sense war poems—increasingly,” Eliot said in 1958. “*East Coker* belongs to the period of what we called the ‘phoney war.’”

The next Quartet is named after the Dry Salvages, a perilous outcrop of rocks off Massachusetts, around which Eliot had sailed in his youth, and it acknowledges his American upbringing. The entwining of American and British roots was never more important than when *The Dry Salvages* was written, in 1941—the year the U.S. entered the war. Churchill himself was half-American, and after his speech on “Their Finest Hour” in June 1940, Eliot wrote to Hayward that it was a pleasure “to reflect that the Churchill family, in earlier times, had an association with the county of Somerset.”

A few days earlier, Churchill had told the House of Commons that he believed that the British people would prove themselves “once again able to defend our Island home”:

We shall defend our Island, whatever the cost may be. We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender.

From this speech, in the same month, Eliot took the title *Defence of the Islands* for some lines displayed in an exhibition of war photographs that toured the U.S. The change from “Island” to *Islands* is tiny but telling. The fight for our island is the struggle of one country against another. But Eliot’s islands are the unsubmerged havens of civilization, proud outposts of decency remaining firm when so much was eroded.

His lines celebrated “many centuries of patient cultivation of the earth” and paid tribute to the civilians preparing to defend against invasion, “for whom the paths of glory are the lanes and the streets of Britain.” These were Churchill’s fields and streets, but also “the deep lane/ Shuttered with branches” of *East Coker*.

Eliot was writing in defense of not a patch of land, but a way of life, so the British Quartets are named after places which, in all their modesty, embody values. They are not famous public monuments, but private places of retreat and meditation—places that may have been knocked about a bit, but which have seen a lot, and have endured. *East Coker* is a poem of resilience in times of dissolution.

There is a time for building
And a time for living and for generation
And a time for the wind

It is also a reminder of Ecclesiastes:

A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and time to pluck up that which is planted . . . a time to mourn, and a time to dance . . . a time to love, and a time to hate; a time of war, and a time of peace.

The whole of history is there, and the whole of a man’s life, but Eliot’s “time for the wind” is closest to “a time of war” because of the common expression “the wind of war.” In 1940, Europe was reaping a whirlwind.

Stephen Spender recorded Eliot’s conversation over lunch on September 11, 1939: “He said it was very important that one should,

at all costs, go on writing now. He agreed that the problem was to write about a smaller theme—perhaps family life—which had all the implications of what is going on in the world outside.” And this is what we see: rather than writing about the world at war, Eliot scales down:

a time for the wind to break
the loosened pane
And to shake the wainscot where the field-
mouse trots
And to shake the tattered arras woven with a
silent motto.

This has its literary ancestry, with, for instance, Tennyson: “The blue fly sung in the pane; the mouse/ Behind the mouldering wainscot shrieked.” But it is rooted in observation and experience, too. Eliot to Hayward, February 27, 1940: “*Fieldmice*. They *did* get into our country house in New England, and very pretty little creatures too: we always restored them to the Land, and only slew the housemice.”

Although not himself a family man, Eliot is remembering family life, and the “silent motto” in the tattered arras memorializes more than one man can remember. It invokes the Eliot family motto *Tace et fac*, “keep silent and act,” used by Sir Thomas Elyot as far back as the sixteenth century. The derivation of “motto” from the French “mot” makes “silent motto” equivalent to *Verbum infans*, the “silent Word,” the infant Jesus, incarnation of the Word of God, lying in the manger. In “Gerontion” Eliot had written of “The word within a word, unable to speak a word,/ Swaddled with darkness.” In the first Quartet, he speaks of how “Words, after speech, reach/ Into the silence.”

So the “silent motto” involves not only his ancestry, his sense of place and displacement, and his family, but his religious yearnings and his sense of what he is trying to do as a poet. Whereof we cannot keep silent, we must find ways to speak.

Throughout Eliot’s work there is a sense not only that he was writing with conviction, but that he was saying things that had

in time of war. But “See them dancing” is followed two lines later by the old spelling “daunsinge,” indicating that this is a transition not into fairyland but in time, as we slip under the unassertive spell of the “weak pipe and the little drum.” (“Weak” and “little” are essential to the feeling that Britain can stand up to a bully, because there are forms of strength not synonymous with size.) In the description of the pairing of the dance, the words too are paired—“Two and two,” “Round and round,” “Rustically . . . rustic,” “Lifting . . . lifted,” “Keeping . . . Keeping,” “living . . . living”—before a shift to another kind of natural pairings of words: “rising and falling,” “Eating and drinking,” “man and woman” (repeated from the beginning of the passage, so coming full circle). And then just as natural, not to be feared, “Dung and death.” Without sounding like a metronome, the lines mimic the balance and harmony they describe, and there are masterly small entwinings too. For example, in the couplet “Earth feet, loam feet, lifted in country mirth/ Mirth of those long since under earth,” the rhymes do a little jig of their own. The first line has the internal rhyme “Earth . . . mirth” from first word to last, and the second line reverses the same rhyme from beginning to end: “Mirth . . . earth.” So the couplet runs from Earth to earth. Dust to dust. In my end is my beginning. In addition to which there is the echo between one line and the other of “loam” and “long.”

Or look at the lines “In daunsinge, signifying matrimonie —/ A dignified and commodious sacrament.” Here, the “mo” sound in “commodious” is picked up from “matrimonie,” so pairing the lines, and “dignified” is a fruitful conjunction of “dance” and “signified.”

Kipling, Eliot was to write the following year, aims “to give at once a sense of the antiquity of England, of the number of generations and peoples who have labored the soil and in turn been buried beneath it, and of the contemporaneity of the past.”

All this makes for a satisfying poetic vision, so it is a shock when, in Part II, Eliot declares: “The poetry does not matter./ It was not (to

start again) what one had expected. . . . Had they deceived us/ Or deceived themselves, the quiet-voiced elders?” The phrase perfectly catches a certain familiar way of talking patronizing guff, but “the quiet-voiced elders” refers also to those whose voices have been quieted by time—and it was one such voice, that of the sixteenth-century preacher and martyr Hugh Latimer, which first asked, with Christ-like impertinence: “Have you thus deceived me? or, have you rather deceived yourselves?”

Part of the reason why Eliot is pivotal to understanding the twentieth century is that whenever you ask whether he is one thing or the other, he turns out to be both. He had the perspective of an Anglo-American at the time when one superpower was taking over from the other (as a Chinese-American might see more than the rest of us today). A living embodiment of the Atlantic alliance, he lived through both world wars, and was moved by each to write great poems, yet he was “neither at the hot gates/ Nor fought in the warm rain.” He was the most radical of poets, yet meticulously observant of decorum. His writing was outrageously new, yet he thought of it as traditional. And just when people were beginning to accept his skeptical and apocalyptic outlook as appropriate to the age, he became not just religious, but an Anglo-Catholic (neatly splicing another division). Rather than settling into the role of elder, however, he asks in *East Coker* whether the wisdom of experience is “merely a receipt for deceit,” because in some ways the future will be quite unlike the past. Instead of “the knowledge of dead secrets,” he muses, “The only wisdom we can hope to acquire/ Is the wisdom of humility.”

In 1930, he wrote to John Hayward: “it has taken me nearly forty-two years to acquire a faint perception of the meaning of Humility—the first of the virtues—and to see that I am not a person of any great importance.” Reading this, we can either be cynical and take it as false humility, or we can accept that he knew perfectly well what he had achieved and how important his poetry was to others,

but knew also that eminent men of letters too “go into the dark.”

In the big scheme of things, none of what matters *matters*, since we are all heading into the dark, and so is our civilization. Good writers come and go, but so in the end do great writers—even the very greatest. And the memorial libraries, and the universities. In the biggest scheme of things, eventually everything we know will be

Whirled in a vortex that shall bring
The world to that destructive fire
Which burns before the ice-cap reigns.

From that perspective, it is impossible to find a scale of values. “I quite agree that ‘real culture is something that has to be produced again and again,’” Eliot wrote in 1941 in response to a circulated paper, “but the same thing is true of real potatoes: out of the same soil, fertilized by the excrement of men and animals (some of which have eaten potatoes) and by decaying vegetation. . . . Soil and vegetables are two different things, but what I mean by culture is neither one nor the other, but that which includes both.”

Growing, then, was a form of recycling, not the limitless expansion it has come to mean. It is only recently that language has begun to speak of a farmer not only growing vegetables but “growing” the farm. The political imperative of “growth,” however, leads to failures to appreciate the things that can’t be counted, such as harmony, taste, village life, or the way “signifying” moves perfectly into “dignified.” Perhaps before we grow any bigger, we ought to have the humility to ask how big our boots really are, and what claims we have on the world, on the past which we trample, and the future which we have already mortgaged. Are we ploughing enough nourishment back into the soil?

“The historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence;” Eliot proclaimed in 1919. It “compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of

Europe from Homer . . . has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order.” This poem “about” a little Somerset village includes small local observations of things which we can still see when we walk through the lanes. But it is not a provincial poem, in space or time. For if Homer gave a timeless resonance to Troy, Eliot did so for East Coker. You don’t have to have been there at the era described, or ever to visit afterwards in pilgrimage to understand why at a particular moment in history—perhaps intensified by war—a particular place becomes of permanent value. This can be because of historic events themselves: think of Waterloo or Bunker Hill. Or it can be through artistic genius: think of Constable’s paintings of Suffolk or Wordsworth’s excursions in the Lake District as vivid examples of art that teaches us how to see and value something.

Eliot admitted that many other English villages might have served for what he had to say, except that his feelings were deeply stirred by his own family connections, centuries deep. And in making this village stand for a way of life—then fighting for its survival—his art made it significant to what A. E. Housman once called “the mind of Europe.” The 204 lines draw upon dozens of other writers, from Plato to Kipling, and from at least eight different nations. Reciprocally, *East Coker* has been translated into some twenty languages, as people far and near have responded personally to the power of a poem supposedly “about” this tiny place.

Now, South Somerset Council proposes to build thousands of houses on the outskirts of East Coker. Such growth would diminish the village to a suburb of Yeovil.

Houses rise and fall, crumble and are extended
Are removed, destroyed, restored, on in their
place
Is an open field, or a factory, or a by-pass.

From the longest, darkest perspective, it doesn’t matter. But in the meantime, if we care about what is dignified, and what it signified, saving East Coker is once again a test of our values.

New poems

by *Wilmer Mills, David Solway*
& *Michael Spence*

Rauch

When I die and breathe my last,
It won't be in or out.
I'll *take* my final breath,
Hailing the silence of glass,
Glass that isn't a solid,
But slowly cooling back
From molten silica,
The unheld breath of time.

Once dead, I'll see the moon
As close as my hand, like this.
Who cares if there's any water
Trapped inside its rocks
Like all the water trapped
In Bible stories, water
God brooded over, parted,
Walked on, turned to wine?

I'll see the story of time
Made clearly visible;
I'll see my final breath
Annealing, a miracle
Of clarity, of silence
Of water's opposite,
A perfect silence drawn
From my blood, my noise.
Amen

— *Wilmer Mills*

After the storm

Walking past the farmer's fields, you are struck
by the watermelon smell of mown grass
not noticed before. One thing is always
like another thing, not to supplement
but to vary, to give us reason to
demand no less. The clouds have polished up
the sky like pewter plate, the air so still
you might be thunder-deaf, and in the lull
you hear the trees raining from their leaves.
The light is buttery with promises
and the far meadow peppered with grackles,
and all is well being what it is and
isn't, as if impossible to tell
the dogrose from the raspberry flower.
A runnel of bells trickling from the broke-
down barn is like a distant carillon.
Then all is quiet once again until
a quarrel of crows and squirrels over
granaries of pine cones breaks the silence,
which is not like breaking bread but breaking
bone. For even when one thing is not like
another, it is like another thing
that grates against the need to celebrate.
Walking past the farmer's fields, you remark,
despite the red slash of a sudden fox
and the cry of an unseen creature in
dark wood, which is not like milk in the pail
but blood in the ear, something tells you still,
amid the difference and because of it,
you must love the world better than you do.

—*David Solway*

Combined campaign

The captain told us charity began
Aboard his aircraft carrier: the place
We had to call home. *We're in a race*
With all the others—when we get every man

To voluntarily contribute, we'll win
The plaque for Most Generous Ship in the Fleet!
Department heads like mine would repeat
This lofty goal at every briefing to ensigns

Like me: we had to raise the largest pile
And put the Old Man on its top. Like a prayer
I kept reciting, I urged my men to care
For “all of those less fortunate”—the smile

I gave them felt sincere. As we got close
To complete compliance (Comp-Comp), the mood
Grew buoyant as a following sea. Then rude
As a reef on no one's chart, a sailor said no.

A sailor in my division. Seaman Ames
Told me he didn't believe in charity:
We gotta help ourselves up, don't we?
That's what it says in the Bible. Back home,

They say begging breaks a man like a dry stick.
He looked like one himself—tall and thin,
Stiff as he sat in my office. I tried to pin
The “teamwork” ribbon on him; I tried the gimmick

Of saying this could hurt his career. He blinked
At that: *I thought they said United Way*
Was voluntary. You're gunna force me to pay?
I told my boss, the First Lieutenant. His face pinked

Down to the silver oak leaf on his collar.
What's wrong, ensign? Can't you motivate
Your own men? Try again and make him donate
His fair share. It's only a few dollars,

For Christ's sake. But Ames refused once more.
I'm only one guy—what's the big deal? I want
Them all to leave me alone. He looked more gaunt
Than he had the last time; he said other sailors

Were screwing with him about this Combined Campaign.
I'm so pissed off, I'll never give a thing
To it now! I told the First Lieutenant, who hung
His head and said to his blotter's coffee stains:

Did the iron fist in your velvet glove just turn
To rust? He waved me away without looking up.
When the Donors' List was posted, I saw the ship
Had reached Comp-Comp. That day I went astern

And found Ames leaning on the taffrail,
Spitting into our wake. I asked what made
Him change his mind. *The First Lieutenant paid*
For me! He scowled and stood straight as a nail:

Take my name off that list! It makes me look
Like I broke! I said I'd see, but we both knew
We'd lost. On the hangar deck, they mustered the crew
To applaud the captain as he raised his plaque.

—*Michael Spence*

Reconsiderations

Not the greatest generation

by James Bowman

As something of a student of postmodernism, albeit in an unserious, postmodern way, I had always supposed that its roots lay in the writings of the French literary theorists, especially Foucault and Derrida, and gained a pop cultural boost in the form of “camp” as first described by Susan Sontag in 1964 with its un-modernist emphasis on artifice derived from Oscar Wilde. That may be true, but a recent dip into a now nearly-forgotten author of the 1940s and ’50s has persuaded me that the phenomenon has an American precursor. I don’t suppose that anyone today reads any of the thirty-odd novels, mostly science fiction and futuristic fantasy, of Philip Wylie (1902–1971) or, indeed, his many volumes of social criticism apart from 1942’s *Generation of Vipers*, revised and reprinted in 1955. That book’s survival is most likely a result of its coinage of the term “Momism” to describe what Wylie regarded as Americans’ excessive reverence for motherhood and all that once went with it—which, I suppose, also makes him one of the precursors of second-wave feminism.

You might also find in this book an anticipation of the New Atheism of the last dozen years or so—not only in its general if discreet godlessness but also in the author’s absurd degree of bumptious self-importance. The latter is an anticipation of Vidalism, or an intellectual posture combining as twins what are really two opposite conceits, namely that “the truth” as our would-be hero sees it is completely obvious and, at the same time, is

seen only by himself. Thus Wylie writes that “in our years of peace the seeds of war did not lie dormant; they grew grotesquely everywhere in the land and only the blind failed to see the crop. Unfortunately, practically all men were blind.” A few pages later he writes: “I am going to try here, by various means, to set forth an old and basic idea in such a way that it can be understood by that travesty of wisdom and catastrophe of misguidance, the modern educated man.” A few lines further up the page he writes that “man, except for his possibly fatal accretion of machinery, has really advanced almost not at all in the *last* one thousand years.”

I suppose the reader of 1942, as of today, automatically makes an exception of himself when an author treats him as a member of the vast, almost universal class of fools and barbarians out of which he himself has, by force of intellect, emerged. But it must have been hard even then, as it is impossible now, not to be aware that much of Wylie’s own writing makes little or no sense. Perhaps the incomprehensibility of his allusions to “science” and “psychology” were thought to betoken genius. Even the one thing he is remembered for, his attack on “Momism,” is couched in terms that the oldest man in the world, as Huck Finn says about one of Uncle Silas’s sermons, couldn’t understand. To him, the word means that “the Oedipus complex had become a social fiat and a dominant neurosis in our land. . . . As a way of life, it is shameful in grownups of both sexes; as a national cult,

it is a catastrophe.” The Oedipus complex as a national cult? I must have suffered from a lapse of attention when that happened.

Like the later feminists, Wylie saw the loathed figure of “mom” as a diabolical conspiracy of the patriarchy. “When we and our culture and our religions agreed to hold woman the inferior sex, cursed, unclean, and sinful—we made her mom. . . . While she exists, she will exploit the little ‘sacredness’ we have given motherhood as a cheap-holy compensation for our degradation of woman.” Yet he does not scruple to use words like *gynocracy* and *matriarchy* to describe the social attitudes of a large class of middle-class females who had learned—Wylie apparently knew not how—to expect a certain deference from their male relations in honor of their role as progenitrix. Lest we doubt him, he offers with equal assurance an item of evidence—nay, “Supreme Evidence”—for this civilizational catastrophe unique, apparently, to the United States of America. It is that he once worked behind the fabric counter at a department store and watched women fighting over the material during a sale.

Of course you could say that his building on this slender foundation a vision of national and cultural disaster makes the most of his material, but it’s also one of the ways in which the book offers an object lesson in the perils and shortcomings of the writerly writer’s great god of originality. Wylie is so original that he’s almost unreadable. He makes Martin Amis’s *War Against Cliché* look hackneyed, but he achieves this remarkable feat at the cost of writing long passages of near-gibberish. Originality is fatiguing and creates a mentally debilitating friction in the reader—presumably because if no one has ever written something before there’s probably a good reason why not. If a writer wants to be read for pleasure, he had far better make himself the master of cliché, like Homer or P. G. Wodehouse, than its rebellious servant.

But the style is also part of Wylie’s assault, by way of what he gives the pseudo-scientific name of “the law of opposite-ness,” on what he may have been the first to

identify as 1950s-era “conformity.” Whether original with him or not, this dubious bit of social observation has of course now entered the American mythology and, along with the opposition to it, has become such a cliché itself that it is easy to forget how daring Wylie must have seemed to his fans of sixty or seventy years ago for taking on, as he says, “the unfree, prejudiced, anti-rational, and altogether baboonlike hunger for headless conformity which this book was written to decry.” At least no one could accuse Wylie of being a headless—or, indeed, a heedless—conformist. Herewith, for example, a few instances of his more original thinking:

On professors:

Educated businessmen, like women in what they call their thinking, together with all manner of other educated scientists, statesmen, and soldiers, cannot hold intelligent discussions any more, but rave like gibbons, because the technique of sensibleness has been hidden from them in words like “a priori,” “ad hominum [*sic*],” “de facto,” “post hoc sed non propter hoc,” and “reductio ad absurdum.” We have hidden away logic—common sense, that is—in Latin, because, no doubt, we are afraid to teach it in English.

On politicians in the era of Truman and Eisenhower:

The withered emasculation of our democratic statesmanship is the withered emasculation of America. The witch-hunting savagery of pompous male sluts in our national halls is that quality of all the people. The petty greed and relentless solicitation of these quasi males is our own. The sacrifice of power, of dignity, of responsibility, of national security, and interest to a little patronage or the achievement of a trivial local profit is the measure of our universal loss of aim, purpose, moral worth, view, vision, integrity, and common cause.

On Washington:

Washington itself . . . might be abolished where it is, and transferred to a new place. Sensible

men everywhere in this land might well hope—and earnestly pray—that an enemy bomber flight would reduce it to sudden rubble and compel the move. The mere necessity of a physical regeneration of the government plant would so illuminate the present multiboggles and sophisma of our central government that changes for the better might be expected on a new site. . . . The loss of the physical city of Washington would be a benefit not only to government, but to aesthetics, because it is unquestionably the ugliest city of any pretensions that a human civilization has yet raised up to scar and blemish the countenance of the planet.

On hats:

Hats . . . have a remarkable effect upon the common man. They have it, because headdress has always been a sign, with him, of special merit and personal unction. Hats are therefore magical, still. People putting on hats put on the qualities symbolized by the hats, or try to, or assume that they have done so. Thus a cardinal, getting a red hat, assumes that some of the magic of hatism has entered into him, and becomes, because of the red skimmer, either holier, or harder to know, or more oracular, or more venal and lascivious on the ground that the red hat gives him special hellroom.

There follow several more pages on “hatism” and how it goes to show that “the exalted common man is slave of instinct, slave of the herd, slave of superstition, slave of magical gadgets, the embodiment of evil, and the testing ground of every mass folly the devil can invent.” Bet you didn’t know that.

To the most recent reprinting of *Generation of Vipers* (2007), the Dalkey Archive Press of Champaign, Illinois has added a “Preface” by one Curtis White, an Illinoian academic with, apparently, some local reputation as an essayist and author of “experimental fiction.” Professor White for some reason feels the need to assure readers they need not mind about the fact that, substantively, Wylie was wrong about virtually everything which he spent so much energy and literary artifice in

asserting with the self-assurance that is now all that remains of him:

Unlike the prophet/poets, who imagine that the divine Logos or the muse is speaking through them, the prophets/novelists do not need an association with a superior principle, a God, in order to claim legitimacy. For the novelist, language is self-authorization. The only authority this language has is not its Truthfulness but its continually renewed forcefulness.

To Curtis White, who is said by Wikipedia to have forsaken experimental fiction for “social criticism” (though society has apparently not yet noticed), Wylie is a kind of Nietzschean superman, forging his own truth out of error and falsehood and willing it into existence through sheer mental energy. With a preposterousness worthy of Wylie himself, he writes that

Wylie’s purpose is not to be “right” any more than Jesus’ purpose was to be lawful. His purpose is, as he says, to “bash the phony ikons.” It is anger, not facts, that makes him write. Never once does Wylie use the phrase “in a recent study” produced by the Center for Whatever. For Wylie, rightness or wrongness is not the point (especially if rightness is the domain of economists, demographers, and statisticians). What Wylie does seem to understand is Nietzsche’s liberating claim that “if one is sufficiently rich for it, it may even be a joy to be wrong.” Like Nietzsche, Wylie is “much too right.” A good fact checker would delete half of this book without ever suspecting that its greatest virtue might be that it is richly wrong.

Generation of Vipers provides plenty of evidence that Wylie himself would not have disagreed with this extraordinary defense of his method. Thus when he writes that “The American attitude toward sex is exactly that of priests engaged in human sacrifice,” his use of the word “exactly” amounts to a defiant recognition that the engine of assertion is not to be shut down by any mere consideration of the author’s proud, flamboyant, self-advertising *wrongness*.

Yet the book does have a certain historical interest to it, which is ironic given its almost insane anti-historical bias. It was written out of an unspoken intellectual consensus that the pre-war—which in 1942 would still have meant pre-World War I—dispensation was no longer tenable, and that the various alternatives to it, such as Marxism, fascism, and modernism, were also wanting in some way so as to make this kind of fulmination not only possible but necessary. It was, perhaps, the moment at which the intellectuals parted company from America's mass man, who has got a bad press from the intellectuals and their sycophants in the media ever since.

Wylie also anticipates the recent assault on what his contemporaries (but not himself) had already started to call "American exceptionalism," writing, "Acting on the assumption that we are different and better, we, the American people, educated or unlettered, hold to the asinine premise of 'thank God I am not as other men,' above all other postulates. But we are as other men, exactly." This is by way of justification of his contention, during wartime, that "owing to the basic flaw in the modern approach to consciousness, no list of parallels between Germany and, say, the United States, however long and explicit, would convince one single American that Americans need to worry themselves about such immediate future possibilities as Iowa pogroms, the national glorification of instinctualism, the enwhorement of American womanhood, Boston church raids, and a federal Gestapo."

Below, in a note appended to the 1955 edition, he adds: "These matters (with the possible exception of Iowa pogroms) have come to be the occasional worries of some millions of Americans." I guess that's as close to vindication as he feels he has to get.

But it is also of a piece with the book's attacks on history. Do you think you are special? Do you think anything has changed?

Nonsense! "A few suits of clothes, some money in the bank, and a new kind of fear constitute the main differences between the average American today and the hairy men with clubs who accompanied Attila to the city of Rome." We are all, that is, just the same as we were millennia ago, and all that we pay so much attention to in what we think differentiates us from our most remote ancestors—the story, that is, of their long evolution into us—is an illusion. We're *really* just the same. "For," he writes, "civilization is a subjective quantum, and our common people are not much more civilized today, in any important sense, than the Moors, or the Mongols, the Tartars, Huns, Etruscans, Mayans, or the Iroquois."

There is a further irony in the fact that what amounted to one of the first American attacks on the mass man as he was conceived by so many later writers of the 1950s and 1960s ends with a paean to, of all things, "democracy" and "freedom" as envisaged by the still-sacrosanct Founders—even though "At the moment [that is in the America of 1942; revised, 1955] we are living in a dictatorship." In the end, *Generation of Vipers* is itself an example of American exceptionalism, insofar as it is a very American attempt to replace history with science, but one which proves ironically to have had its "science"—which is a synthesis of Freudianism and Jungianism leavened with a Nietzschean approach to truth—overruled by history rather than the other way round. Wylie, mostly unread and mostly unreadable, nevertheless remains a curiosity, and a window into the mind of a certain class of Americans who, in or around the middle of the last century, were grappling with the same intellectual truth-problems that Europeans treated rather differently. In retrospect, however, both came independently to the same conclusion: that the truth belonged to those who shouted loudest that there was no truth.

Theater

Art & science

by Kevin D. Williamson

To cast Scarlett Johansson as Maggie in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* is to risk turning the carefully balanced play into a mere star vehicle, and Rob Ashford's production at the Richard Rodgers Theater walks right up to that line—right up until the moment at which Maggie (and Miss Johansson's turbocharged take on the character) disappears from the stage for a good chunk of the play. And then the play becomes something else entirely, something like one of those clockwork models of the universe that so fascinated the philosophical cosmologists in the years before Galileo: wheels within wheels, everything turning in a kind of perfect balance. Of course, these are wheels of misery, despair, and dishonesty, and the play is a kind of perfect model of an imperfect world.

But what an awful bunch of people these Pollitts are. Brick, once a promising young athlete who later fell into a desultory career as a sports announcer, is mourning the loss of his boyhood friend Skipper, with whom he had a bond that exceeded the bounds of friendship but fell short—if only barely—of a fully consummated homosexual romance. He is estranged from his wife in part because of self-loathing over his own sexual ambiguity, a situation that Maggie compounded by initiating a sexual relationship with Skipper, the subsequent trauma of which was the proximate cause of his death. There is something mysterious in that: Maggie presents herself (and is presented by Tennessee Williams) as the victim of Brick's indifference and cruelty, but it was her betrayal that rendered her domestic

situation irresolvable. But that is of course precisely the sort of inexplicable thing that people sometimes do, and it is to Mr. Williams's credit that Maggie's casual disregard for her own happiness and that of her family never seems like a mere plot device, an explaining away of Brick's semi-psychotic funk. There is a largeness to the character of Maggie; she subsumes her words and deeds rather than being merely composed of them.

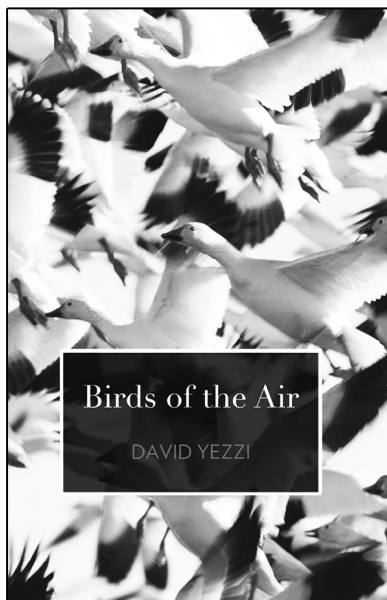
Brick is portrayed by Benjamin Walker, who is known to the wide world mainly for two portrayals of American presidents, the title role in the musical *Bloody, Bloody Andrew Jackson* and in the film *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter*. The less said about the latter, the better. My opinion of the former has risen since I saw it two years ago (see "The Devil and Mr. Jackson," *The New Criterion*, January 2011). I find myself listening to some of the songs (and I never have felt inspired to purchase a copy of another musical cast recording), and wishing that I had seen it more than once, which is rare. The thinness and condescension I objected to in the play remain objectionable, but perhaps not as objectionable as I had thought. I am starting to doubt that it is possible to make a work of art about American politics that is too shallow, and in fact Broadway probably would require a radical downward revision of its intellectual standards (such as they are) if it wanted to compete with Washington in the category of banal pageantry. Mr. Walker's Andrew Jackson was a swaggering rock star (in fact, the musi-

cal's best and most clever song is called "Rock Star"), but the dipsomaniacal Brick is a very different proposition: a man living life after swagger. Mr. Walker is intelligent and sensitive in the role, and his portrayal of Brick is rigorously unglamorous. It is easy to make a drunkard Byronic and romantic, or, short of that, comical. Instead, this Brick's drinking is a relentless meat-grinder of the soul, ruthless and unsparing. It is a very fine performance.

Overall, the production is better than average, and Miss Johansson is better than average in it. She is occasionally histrionic, but then Maggie is a self-consciously theatrical character. Her accent is impossible to place—indeed, the entire show is marred by the hodgepodge of its performers' deracinated and occasionally cartoonish accents—and there is something about her peculiar vocal emphases that makes it seem as though she uses the phrase "no-neck monsters" (her epithet for her uncharming nieces and nephews) many more times than Tennessee Williams wrote it. Surely that is not the case, but she leans so heavily into the syllables that it seems that way.

The discovery of the evening for me was Ciarán Hinds's performance as Big Daddy. Mr. Hinds manages to be a familiar face from cinema without calling to mind any particular role; he is something of a rent-a-European, his curriculum vitae heavy on priests, lords, and tastefully accented villains. He is probably most familiar as Aberforth Dumbledore, and gave us a very good Julius Caesar in HBO's *Rome*. Here he is bulked up in what I assume is a fat suit (or a very, very committed regimen of cheeseburgers), and his performance is appropriately large. Mr. Hinds is Irish, but his accent and the rhythm of his speech were more convincingly southern than any other on the stage that evening. (Miss Johansson is Manhattan born and bred, but Mr. Walker was raised in Georgia.) There is something puzzling about self-made men such as the cotton mogul Big Daddy: Many of them are angry. There is something about the process of building a fortune out of nothing that in certain men causes pride to evolve into contempt, and then into a kind of objectless rage. Mr. Hinds portrays Big Daddy as a kind of Delta Donald

NEW FROM THE POET DAVID YEZZI



Now available from Carnegie Mellon and distributed by UPNE

Sad and serious, attentive to meter and balance yet no slave to form, the dramatic monologues, rough laments, strict rhymes and accomplished syllabics in this third volume from Yezzi go far beyond expectations: it should impress not just those who follow "formal" poetry generally, but almost anyone who has an abiding love for the poetry of Robert Frost.

Publishers Weekly
Starred Review

Severe grace and elegiac intensity inform the deft lyrics throughout but particularly "Tomorrow & Tomorrow." Somber and replete with an elegant pathos, this travesty of *Macbeth* lingers in my mind after the second reading.

Harold Bloom
Yale University

David Yezzi's poems—these vivid remembrances of things past, these depictions of "the mess that's me"—are essentially short stories, tales of naughtiness in nursing homes, of the griddle wizardry of short-order cooks, of a love affair wrecked by a second-rate production of *Macbeth*. While Yezzi's verse may be formal and polished, his voice is always intimate, often slangy, and extraordinarily confiding.

Michael Dirba
Pulitzer Prize-winning critic
for *The Washington Post*

Trump, a man who is constantly boasting of his wealth and accomplishments but shoveling all of that cash and cotton into a hole that he cannot fill. He is a man with a palpable desire to hurt something, for no particular reason. It has always seemed to me that Big Daddy's interest in his son's sexual estrangement from his wife is not entirely paternal, and Mr. Hinds emphasizes that subtly. He does not quite leer at Maggie, but he does not quite not leer, either. I wonder how Burl Ives did it.

The main target of Big Daddy's abuse is Big Mama, played by the lovely Deborah Monk, last seen on Broadway in *Curtains*. Ms. Monk has a way of making a great deal of smaller roles alongside showier performers (see, for example, her fearsome resolve in the face of a full Pacino onslaught in *The Devil's Advocate*, that B-best of B movies.) Here she is not quite right, a bit too comical. She might have been better paired with Burl Ives.

The story of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* is on the surface about heirs scheming to control Big Daddy's fluffy white empire after the ailing patriarch is gone, a subject that is perhaps less resonant in these days of negative net worth. But of course Maggie and Brick and Big Mama, to say nothing of the rival Gooper wing of the family, already have their inheritance from Big Daddy—have had for years—and it is a bitter one.

The name "Gooper" sticks in the throat, incidentally. But then the playwright named himself "Tennessee," so I suppose a little eccentricity in nomenclature is to be expected.

"Asher Lev" is not a name that sticks in the throat, but it is one that sticks in the mind. *My Name Is Asher Lev* is the quintessential sophomore novel, by which I do not mean a second novel (it was Chaim Potok's third) but a novel of the sort that gets assigned to high-school sophomores. Chaim Potok's main competition in the category of sophomore novels is Chaim Potok—his first novel, *The Chosen*, has been practically inescapable for many years. Mr. Potok was something of an evangelist, bringing modern Jewish American culture to the world beyond Brooklyn. (Far beyond Brooklyn, in fact: Mr. Potok once lectured at

my high school in West Texas, in a community in which the entire Jewish population could have gathered comfortably in the high-school auditorium. And probably did on that day.) The glory of American Jewish culture is of a mainly quiet sort, at least in the popular imagination, a tradition venerating scholarship and scholars and books. I remember a Jewish professor of mine reading to the class from the Torah and kissing the book before he put it down, a gesture with which I was not familiar, but one that has stayed with me. We were, he later explained to us with a Hebrew phrase now lost to me, to become people who had "eaten the book"—in that particular case not the Torah but about six shelf-feet of Conrad and Hardy, a heavy meal indeed.

While watching Aaron Posner's stage adaptation of *My Name Is Asher Lev* at the Westside Theater, I found myself longing for a few quiet hours with the book. Really, any book might have done. What I really wanted was for Ari Brand to STOP SHOUTING AT ME.

Mr. Brand is not a bad actor, but he is a very, very loud one. The material is very novelistic rather than dramatic: A young man decides to study painting against the wishes of his religiously conservative parents, and by turns alienates and mystifies his family as he progresses as an artist. Exciting stuff, to be sure, but not stuff especially well-suited to the stage. Mr. Brand and Mr. Posner apparently mean to overcome that dramatic deficit by shouting at the audience: losing a little on the margins and making it up on volume.

The small cast includes Mr. Brand as Asher Lev, Mark Nelson in all the other male roles (his father, his uncle, the rabbi, his art teacher), and Jenny Bacon in all the female roles. (Yes, a lady named "Bacon" in a play about Hasidim.) Mr. Brand is Asher as a small child and Asher as a grown man, and he does not seem to change very much as he goes from one to the other.

Asher's gift for drawing is originally welcomed with delight by his family: He sketches a picture of his mother that has her comparing him to Marc Chagall. But Asher does not want to be Marc Chagall: He wants to be Picasso. Not a great Jewish artist, but a great artist who is an observant Jew. When Asher's obsession

with drawing begins to distract him from his studies, his father intercedes, gently at first and then with more force, finally exploding in rage when Asher begins copying nudes and Christian devotional images.

There is a great deal of humanity in the play, as there is in the novel. There is no villain: Asher's father is bewildered and sometimes angered by his son's strange passions, but he is a loving father, a devoted husband, and a sincere servant of his community, one who sacrifices his own comfort to minister to Russia's Jews after the death of Stalin opens an opportunity for him to do so. Even the conservative rabbi—an obvious candidate for villainhood if Hollywood were writing the script—is a humane and cultured man, one who gives his blessings to Asher's continued studies under Kahn, a Jew who is not observant but is nonetheless admired by the rabbi. And even in the end, when the rabbi feels he must exile Asher for the good of the community, he does so with genuine regret. Mr. Nelson is very fine in all of the roles he plays, but he is best as the rabbi, combining gravity with tenderness.

The play's climax comes when Asher returns from Paris to have his big show in New York. "No nudes?" his father asks. "No nudes." Instead, he has found an image to express his mother's anguish, torn in different directions by her husband, her son, her faith, and her own ambitions. It is of course a crucifixion.

Asher's parents leave the show, confused and insulted. Asher finds it impossible to make them understand what the image means to him, and that his love of great Christian art does not constitute a rejection of his own faith or family. And therein lies the great weakness of both the play and the novel: *My Name Is Asher Lev* is the story of a young man trying to reconcile two religions—Judaism and Art. Kahn frames Asher's artistic training as a conversion experience, leaving one tabernacle for another. But even entering into the alien world of the Brooklyn Hasidim, it is difficult to imagine a world in which any conflict between religion and art is taken that seriously. Not because we fail to take religion seriously:

In Brooklyn, in San Antonio, in Clearwater, we take religion seriously. But we don't take art seriously. Angels dancing on the head of a pin is one thing, but what's all this talk about *art* and *truth* and *being true to yourself as an artist*? It all sounds a little absurd. But there was a time when art was taken seriously as a vocation. It is easy to forget.

Forgetting is what *The Other Place* is all about. It is a very cleverly structured play: In the beginning we find neurological researcher Juliana Smithton (Laurie Metcalf) pitching her firm's new treatment for dementia. She is at a Caribbean resort, and she is infuriated by the presence of a young woman in a yellow bikini in the audience. She picks on the poor girl, suggesting that she is a prostitute. But Juliana is having a rough time of it: She is sick, probably with cancer. She is enraged and despairing that her formerly supportive husband has suddenly decided to divorce her, having made the classic move of initiating an affair with the pretty young receptionist at his office. And Dr. Smithton is engaged in painstaking negotiations with her estranged daughter, hoping to reconnect with her and finally meet her grandchildren. Things are very tense indeed.

The second act reveals that none of the foregoing is true. Juliana's husband, Ian (Dennis Boutsikaris), is not leaving her; he is devoted to her, and in love with her, and is not having an affair with his secretary. Juliana has not been in touch with her daughter, who probably is not married and probably does not have children, and is in fact much more likely to be dead. And she does not have cancer: She is herself in the first stages of early-onset dementia.

A play about a grievously ill woman told mostly through the narration of an icily acerbic intellectual flailing Cúchulainn-like against the rising tide of her helplessness: *The Other Place* very much calls to mind Margaret Edson's 1999 Pulitzer Prize winner, *Wit*. But it is a very different sort of play. *Wit* is a one-act character study—the death of Dr. Vivian Bearing is a foregone conclusion, but the trajectory of Dr. Juliana Smithton is not. (Those aristocratic anglophilic names really pile up quick, don't

they? This column is starting to read like a paperback romance.)

Laurie Metcalf turns out to be a terrific actress. This was not necessarily expected: She is after all best known for her work in television's long-running white minstrel show, *Roseanne*, and for *Desperate Housewives*. It is not that she has not done theater before, it's just that nobody has seen her: Her *Brighton Beach Memoirs* survived all of a week, and her *Broadway Bound* was canceled before opening. She had originally been cast in David Mamet's *The Anarchist* (reviewed in these pages in January), but Debra Winger ended up in the role. She is wonderfully forceful here, very witty, simultaneously fierce and brittle. Again recalling *Wit*, the play has the feel of something that started as a one-woman show that had supporting characters grafted onto it out of structural necessity. It is a lopsided show, but a very powerful one thanks to Ms. Metcalf's performance and the disciplined writing of Sharr White.

I am not one much for disease pageantry, and *The Other Place* does wallow a bit more than I would have liked for it to have done. But I suspect I am in the minority in that opinion: My companion for the evening was weeping freely by the time the curtain came down, and continued weeping inconsolably all the way down to Seventh Avenue. She was not the only one.

It is a real accomplishment to bring forth genuine emotion in an audience—a rare and wonderful thing. I found the play less inspiring of pathos than of *terror*. Aristotle was right when he argued that pity derives from encountering a kind of pain that we might expect to experience ourselves. But *The Other Place* changes the direction of that vector: Not *that poor woman could be me*, but *I could be*

that poor woman. If you want to spend the next two weeks fearing that you've lost your mind every time you can't remember your Gmail password, by all means go see this play. And that, I think, is the real genius in Sharr White's script. Juliana and her colleagues have the power to manipulate life on the molecular level; they are people of vast skill, vast power, and vast intellect. Juliana is first and foremost a brain, her brainpower directed at preserving the power of other brains. Dementia is nothing new ("Last scene of all/ That ends this strange eventful history/ Is second childishness and mere oblivion"), but dementia on the mass scale of contemporary life is a new phenomenon, indeed. Like so many of the terrors of our time, it is the result of our figuring out how to beat things like pneumonia, malaria, and heart failure—to say nothing of drought and famine—that we live and live to discover new horrors. Prostate cancer is what happens to men who are lucky—live long enough, and you will get it. While other playwrights obsess over sex and politics (or sexual politics, or, I suppose, political sex), Mr. White has done us the courtesy of working out a disciplined theatrical treatment of something that is in fact new, and particular to our time and place. The random and inevitable cruelty of biology is the last fact of life.

Brick's alcoholism and Juliana's dementia explore some of the endless ways that life can go wrong, with or without our deserving. Asher Lev's vocation and the love of his family explore some of the ways, less diverse, alas, in which life can go right, with or without our deserving it. Each of the plays has its defects, but each is also a welcome reminder that theater can still do what theater is supposed to do, that there is a good reason to be awake in the dark.

Art

Lois Dodd in Portland

by Karen Wilkin

“Lois Dodd: Catching the Light,” on view at the Portland Museum of Art, Maine, is a disarming show.¹ The seemingly modest, straightforward paintings in this thoughtful survey (organized by the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, Kansas City, Missouri and largely chosen by the artist herself) draw us to them initially because of their comforting sense of familiarity. Dodd, like a musician with perfect pitch, never gets a tone wrong. Apparently without effort, she builds her pictures out of hues and values that conjure up particular seasons, times of day, and vagaries of weather. We recognize the mood and temperature of a crisp winter day, a voluptuous summer night, an equivocal morning in early spring, a sun-drenched autumn afternoon. If we know New England, Dodd’s austere clapboard houses and weathered barns (buildings in rural Maine, where she has spent summers for decades) have special resonance, but like her seemingly dispassionate accounts of northeastern landscapes, backyards, laundry lines, flowering trees, and garden close-ups, her Down East images also read as classic Americana that transcends geography. In the same way, while Dodd’s paintings of the interiors of her Lower East Side studio and the urban views from its windows may trigger instant recognition from her fellow New Yorkers,

1 “Lois Dodd: Catching the Light” opened at the Portland Museum of Art, Portland, Maine on January 17 and remains on view through April 7, 2013.

they require no particular knowledge of her sources to demand and hold our attention.

Such specificity—of place, of quality of light, of temporal details—is a major part of what Dodd’s paintings are about. She has long been dedicated to working from direct perception. Often this translates into classic *plein air* practice: a trek to the motif with a folding French easel and paint box, a struggle with wind and weather, and all the rest of it, including fastening canvases to trees and covering them with plastic between campaigns. (A delightful photograph in the exhibition catalogue shows the intrepid artist, folded easel in hand and a canvas stool slung over her shoulder, ready for all contingencies in a broad brimmed hat and a rain poncho.) In discussing particular paintings, Dodd will pragmatically note that the location was convenient to where she lives or reminisce gratefully about a day when the temperature was right and annoying insects were absent: Asked about the history of a luminous snow-filled landscape with dramatic shadows, she says, “It was very sunny and I was standing against the wall of a building, warm from the sun, so the paint wasn’t affected by the cold. Winter’s great—no bugs.” The selection of works in “Catching the Light” is notably wide-ranging—one or two pictures of a particular motif can stand for whole families of images—but we soon realize that the territory Dodd explores is circumscribed. If we spend enough time with her work, we begin to recognize a lexicon of places: her Lower East Side loft and its environs, her Cushing,

Maine, house and yard, her own outbuildings or those on the adjoining property, a house down the road, a close friend and neighbor's garden, woods and fields a short walk away, the hilly landscape of New Jersey, near the Delaware Water Gap. Most intimate, perhaps, are the interiors and the views out (or into) the window. Dodd seems to know her chosen scenes thoroughly, to have studied them all over a long time and to have found new ways of thinking about them or even of seeing them, in part because of long scrutiny. Each painting, however easily we recognize its starting point or whatever clues Dodd provides in her titles, seems freshly conceived. "When I first came to Maine," she says, "I thought I'd stay here a while, until I'd exhausted what there was to paint, and then I'd have to move on. But things change all the time. Trees grow or they fall down. It's never the same."

Whatever their nominal subjects or their place of origin, all of the works in "Catching the Light" have their basis in a direct confrontation with the motif, *in situ*. Even the largest, done of necessity indoors, begin with more modestly sized versions made on the spot; what's impressive is that the larger canvases somehow magically preserve the immediacy of the first, smaller works done entirely *en plein air*. It's a time-honored way of working, dating back at least until the late-eighteenth century, even though it took more than fifty years, until the mid-nineteenth century, for directly observed paintings to be seen as complete works of art in their own right, not merely as helpful studies for more ambitious efforts. (See Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot, the Barbizon School, and the Impressionists.) But also since the mid-nineteenth century, the tacit, "stop time" message of works of this type—"this is what this place looked like, at this moment, under these conditions"—has been increasingly associated with photography, despite the obvious fact that photographs are not necessarily truthful. The message of Dodd's paintings is more personal. She bears witness but in wholly pictorial terms: "I was there, at that moment, under those conditions, and this is how I responded to that very specific experience in the language of paint."

Dodd has been working this way since she first started going to Maine, in the early 1950s, as an eager young painter—she will be eighty-six this year—with a group of her New York artist friends and colleagues. "Alex Katz was painting outside," she recalls, "so I thought I would, too." Before that, she would draw from the subject and use the drawing as the basis of a studio painting. Of the works included in "Catching the Light," Dodd says, only the very earliest—a few loose-limbed landscapes, including one with cows and one with clam diggers, made between 1955 and 1961—could be described this way. "But," she points out, "I worked on them much longer than the paintings done outdoors." The fluent, cursive drawing that threads through these early paintings, loosely defining soft-edged shapes and establishing sinuous rhythms, reflects her awareness of Abstract Expressionism, particularly the paintings of Willem de Kooning, whom Dodd knew and whose work set a standard for much of her generation. But conspicuously absent from her early paintings is the sense of contingency and mutability, typically embodied by wet-into-wet, dragged paint handling, that was both characteristic of de Kooning's work and a hallmark of the aspiring younger New York painters in the 1950s who admired him. That approach was so common that Clement Greenberg coined a dismissive term for it: "the Tenth Street touch." Dodd's early work, by contrast, is clearheaded and firm, predicting, it seems, the lucidity and directness, the sense of a particular moment, and, above all, the Yankee plain-spokenness that would characterize her mature paintings (and the artist herself).

Clarity, a sense of specificity, and a powerful evocation of place, time, and season are what first attract us to Dodd's work, but she is anything but a literal or anecdotal painter. Her paint handling is broad and assured, her imagery economically simplified, her approach to scale often uninhibited, her palette always inventive. She evokes the hues of, say, a spring landscape under particular conditions of light, but she plainly doesn't feel constrained by "local color"—the naturalistic hues "given" by

any selected subject—nor does she resort to seemingly irrational, arbitrarily “different” chroma in order to escape from local color. Dodd transubstantiates her perceptions into paint very freely, intensifying some colors, reinventing others, and subtly shifting still others into new territory by heating them up or cooling them down. Yet while deploying this inventive palette, she manages to remain completely faithful to the spirit and feeling of her chosen subject, so much so that we are completely convinced by the apparent accuracy of her observations.

We’re convinced, too, by the compelling quality of immediacy and the deceptive casualness of Dodd’s paintings, which we interpret as by-products of their being provoked by what she sees. We feel, not without reason, that we’re being made privy to something she has just noticed, something ordinary, made significant by her awareness: her shadow on the grass, a shaft of light creating a clear reflection, a newly opened wealth of blossoms. “I’m not interested in still lifes,” Dodd says, “because I don’t like the idea of arranging things. I like to discover what’s already there.” Part of what she discovers is the inherent geometry of her surroundings; she seems to follow, without insisting on it too much, Paul Cézanne’s recommendation “to seek the cone, the cylinder, and the sphere,” ideal forms that underlie irregularities and imperfections. Unremarkable elements somehow reveal their perfect Platonic underpinnings, without losing their everyday functions: the rectangles of windows, the horizontals of clapboard, the right-angle oppositions of mullions, the unembellished shapes of New England architecture. In paintings of the natural world, tree trunks and branches, along with flower stalks and the shapes of petals and leaves, seen close up, function as less rigid versions of the “purer” man-made shapes that populate Dodd’s “architectural” paintings. In works of both types, a potent sense of logic derives from the trued-and-faired relationship of the elements of “discovered” subject matter to the shape and proportion of the support. At the same time, this subtle evidence of discipline creates energizing tension with the unstudied, unlooked-for quality of her choice of motifs.

“If I don’t have the geometry,” Dodd says, “I can’t go on.” Some of the most arresting paintings in “Catching the Light” seem to have been pared down to their geometric bones, although the geometry does not always seem Euclidian. A small 1983 painting floats a pair of stiff, angular, orange-red curtains on a clothesline against an expanse of snow, with the dark, flat rectangle of a building filling one corner. There’s a lot of white, but the building, its door, its shadow, and a bit of sky together present a range of murky mauve-browns, lavenders, and off-blacks. We briefly wonder if the brittle shapes of the flying curtains mean that they are frozen—all that snow, after all—but the thought doesn’t preoccupy us long. However truthfully Dodd responded to the generating event—and however much we recognize that starting point—the potency of the little painting, like that of many other, equally stripped-down works in the show, depends not on the accuracy of the artist’s observation, but on its abstract structure—the structure “discovered” by Dodd’s probing eye. Yet what she discovers can often be visually extraordinarily complex, as if she were fascinated by the multivalence of perception itself. A noteworthy number of works in “Catching the Light” deal with windows. Dodd is evidently fond of how they “select” and isolate a motif and how they offer passage into another space, but she seems even fonder of their power to reflect, both perfectly and imperfectly, disrupting spatial coherence and justifying a wide variety of touches and hues to evoke those reflections. She also occasionally includes mirrors in her interiors, playing fictive images against “real” views. In *Self-Portrait in Green Window* (1971, Portland Museum of Art), for example, we slowly decipher a minimally indicated allusion to the slender artist, wearing a striped shirt and big hat. The figure is dematerialized by strong sunshine, nearly conflated with the window mullion, and almost subsumed by reflected trees; a stalk of goldenrod, as narrow as Dodd herself, indicated both outside the window and reflected, further intensifies way space lurches and scales shift in this complicated image. Everything is held in check by the reiterated horizontals and verticals of the

window frame and sill, the mullions, and the clapboard siding, which create a discontinuous grid controlling the uneasily related visual phenomena in the reflection; in counterpoint, Dodd's palette—a range of greens from acidic to murky, with notes of lavender, plus yellows from lemon to ochre—sets up new activity that further enlivens the symmetrical composition.

Other paintings explore the destabilizing effect of seeing into the layered, defined spaces of a sequence of rooms or allow us the guilty pleasure of peering into illuminated windows. In *View Through Elliot's Shack Looking South* (1971, the artist and Alexandre Gallery, New York), the pale window frame is made congruent with the edge of the canvas, so that the events contained by the depicted panes start to read as a painting within a painting. At first, the loose suggestion of foliage and the triangle of a rooftop on the expanse of glass reads as a comprehensible reflection of a house among tall Maine evergreens, but that interpretation is stopped by a floating rectangle of brightly illuminated, crisply indicated tree trunks and sky. We are momentarily unable to decide what is where, and settle for enjoying the contrast of pictorial languages and touches, and the orchestration of heightened and softened colors, trapped by the rectangle of the window. Then, with concentration, attention to the broadly indicated shadows on the window surround, and a little help from the title, we work out that we are *outside* a building, looking through its dark interior to the sun-lit world beyond, visible through a window on the opposite site. Once we've cracked the code, we return to enjoying the sturdy geometric scaffolding of the composition and the free-wheeling paint handling within that framework. And then Dodd's spatial conceit reasserts itself.

A couple of New York city interiors, day and night, investigate similar clashes of logic, pitting the view from Dodd's loft against disjunctive, fragmented images captured by mirrors propped against the furniture. "What I was really interested in," she says, "was the big oval and the rectangle against the shape of the window." Important as their clear geometry is to the pictures, it's the irrational relationship of what the mirrors capture, the interrupted

view of the studio, and the exterior view that holds our attention; the geometry serves as a stabilizing influence, something to hold on to and orient us, as we navigate the abrupt shifts of the paintings. In Portland, the most eye-testing of these paintings is a Maine interior, *The Painted Room* (1982, Farnsworth Art Museum, Rockland, ME). An open window, with yellow curtains framing a leafy view, seems to hang, Magritte-like, against a broadly suggested forest of slim tree trunks that spring from a rosy ground plane. Then we notice a narrow suggestion of ceiling at the top of the picture and a light bulb that projects to create a fictional space in front of the window. Suddenly everything makes sense. The window takes its place in a wall on which a forest landscape is painted. The vertical folds of the curtain enter into a conversation with the repeated verticals of the trunks, and the staccato horizontals of the branches start a dialogue with the window frame and sill; the yellow of the curtains, a little warmer than lemon, challenges the dull rose, Pompeian red, and dusty neutrals of the eponymous "painted room." Once again, Dodd claims our attention by appealing to perception and then seduces us with solid pictorial invention, laced with a liberal shot of wit.

If this sounds as if Dodd's paintings of this type are elaborate visual games designed to perplex the unwary viewer, think again. For all their spatial pulse, her paintings of windows, reflections, and what we might call "multiple spaces" are as uncompromising and clean as her most elemental landscapes or views of bare-bones Maine buildings. She notices and points out to us things we might miss on our own, underscoring the likeness and unlikeness among disparate elements to create a "continuo" of geometric order that supports her painterly inventions. In *Red Vine and Blanket* (1979, Private Collection), Dodd rhymes the neat, repeated squares of a coverlet—that backyard clothesline, again—with the blocky, undisciplined patches of a scarlet autumnal vine, enriching the confrontation by twinning a multi-paned window and a checked shirt hung nearby, then contradict-

ing these crisp grids by swelling the laundry with a stiff wind.

Just when we think we have Dodd figured out, however, she surprises us. Nothing is ever quite what it seems. She may be a painter who works from the motif and strives to be faithful to perception, but echoes of her knowledge of the history of art resonate in even the most apparently straightforward of her pictures. J. M. W. Turner's views of the blazing Houses of Parliament haunt a lively painting of a burning building near her Maine house—a training exercise for the local volunteer firemen, Dodd reassures us. A confrontational view of a pale lavender staircase through an open door hints at Charles Willson Peale's full-length portrait of his sons on a similar stair. A series of exuberant female nudes in sunny gardens seems to pay homage to Cézanne, Henri Matisse, and perhaps Pablo Picasso, with economically modeled forms, fluid proportions, and expressive silhouettes but, unlike her distinguished male ancestors, Dodd is not reimagining Arcadia. Her unclothed women are not languorous nymphs waiting for shepherds to offer love poetry. They are active, self-sufficient, and purposeful. In *Four Nudes and Woodpile* (2001–02, Coldbeck Gallery, Maine), they saw, carry, and stack wood in brilliant sunlight. Dodd's forthright garden paintings similarly challenge tradition, in part through their scale. "I didn't want to be another woman painting flowers," she says, "so I made them big." And instead of treating flowers as still life components, decorously arranged in a vase, Dodd "discovers" her botanical subjects where they grow and presents them with large sweeps of her brush, uncut, alive and kicking, as vigorous specimens with generous leaves, large, distinctively shaped petals, and sturdy stalks.

Note to visitors of "Catching the Light": The Portland installation adds a group of Dodd's most direct, intimate studies, done on small aluminum panels between 2009 and 2012. Together, they offer a highly distilled crash course in Lois Dodd in miniature—everything from cloud patterns and night scenes to cast shadows, blooming trees, and a bonfire, evoked with stunning economy and specificity.

Hung in a narrow space near the exit, they could be overlooked. Don't miss them.

Exhibition note

"Drawing Surrealism"
The Morgan Library & Museum,
New York.
January 25–April 21, 2013

If memory serves correctly, it was the critic and artist Sidney Tillim who observed that the Surrealists couldn't paint well because they were too preoccupied by bad dreams. The point is sardonic, but not off base. In privileging imagery or, to use parlance particular to the style, *putrefaction* over aesthetics, Surrealism erred on the side of illustration—on rendering, instead of embodying, "bad dreams." Once an artist begins delineating visions gleaned from the unconscious in an insistently conscious manner, how genuinely surreal can they be? Notwithstanding exceptions like Joan Miró, whose forays into automatism were emboldened by an encompassing playfulness, the Surrealists employed paint not as a forum for possibility and pleasure, but merely as a means, often perfunctory in character, to otherworldly ends.

But what about the famously direct medium of drawing? Drawing lends itself more readily to quixotic musings—the route from the imagination to the page being less fettered by materials and more open to curious fancies and untested ideas. That's the impression left by "Drawing Surrealism," an array of over 160 works on paper by seventy artists. The usual suspects are present and accounted for at the Morgan: Salvador Dalí, René Magritte, Miró, André Masson, André Breton (the self-proclaimed "Pope" of Surrealism), Man Ray, and, alas, the overly prolific Max Ernst. Lesser lights and hangers-on are included, as are marquee names—Picasso, Kahlo, Pollock—and a host of artists operating outside the main Surrealist satellites: Adriano del Valle from Spain, Japan's Ei-Kyu, and Peru's César Moro. Leslie Jones, the curator of Prints and Drawings at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and

the exhibition organizer, extols Surrealism as “a dynamic international discourse.”

Welcome to the age of curatorial globalism. “Drawing Surrealism” is similar to “Inventing Abstraction,” a concurrent exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, wherein a bevy of inescapable figures is peppered with local heroes, dark horses, and bit players known primarily, if at all, to specialists of the genre. Though Jones pays due diligence to Paris and, later, Manhattan, where Surrealist methodologies informed the nascent New York School, the exhibition is centered less on artistic capitals than on “an approach . . . that can go where no other pictorial practice can.” Given Surrealism’s cultural reach, such a tack isn’t inappropriate. As an evocation of a particular community of artists, however dispersed, “Drawing Surrealism” is coherent and surprisingly fulsome.

The exhibition succeeds in reverse proportion to the significance of its contents. Most of the pieces are anything but major: they’re small in size, almost willfully slight and remarkably non-committal in their assault on the “reign of logic.” The medium contributes to the casual air, as does the march of time. History has a tendency of ironing out the kinks (and the kinkiness) of techniques and imagery that were, at one time, shocking or repellent. Perhaps Jones hasn’t been illogical enough in setting out the parameters of Surrealist strategies. The exhibition is fairly didactic, being arranged in discrete sections devoted to distinct approaches: among them, frottage, collage, decalomania, and *cadavre exquis*, the collaborative Surrealist parlor game. Does the Morgan show conjure up a milieu wherein (as a chapter heading has it) “works on paper [are] in service of the revolution”? Not a chance: a woozy mildness prevails.

Which is welcome given a context that was (in Breton’s words) “beyond all aesthetic or moral preoccupation.” Of course, how much viewers cotton to the visions of Pavel Tchelitchew, Federico Castellón, Leonora Carrington, and Alfonso Ossorio will depend on one’s taste for distant vistas populated by (as a friend bluntly put it) “icky tits-and-ass.” Overexposure to Surrealist imagery inevitably calls into question its conventions, and pinpoints how meager—how humdrum, really—the imagination can be. It’s worth recalling that Freud, the *sine qua non* of Surrealist thought, considered Dalí’s conscious mind more interesting than his unconscious mind, and that Alberto Giacometti broke with Surrealism because of its strictures, likening the school’s practices to masturbation. In the end, Surrealism proved a finite and unyielding ethos.

Surrealism found its truest expression in artists who stepped outside the purviews of self and followed the exigencies of their materials. The inherent disjunction of collage lent itself to provocative, often funny and, in the case of the unapproachable Joseph Cornell, tender ruminations on culture and memory. Early experiments in dripping and blotting will look dated (or easy) to contemporary eyes, but not so the pictorial freedom it allowed Miró, Masson, Arshile Gorky, Matta, Pollock, Richard Pousette-Dart, and, albeit through a long and tortuous process, Mark Rothko. The lone anomalous inclusion at the Morgan is Ellsworth Kelly who, even at his loosest, is a quintessential classicist. But credit Jones with rescuing Man Ray from his own dilettantism. She’s done an impeccable job of winnowing through the photograms and selecting a handful of exquisite apparitions. For those alone, “Drawing Surrealism” is a must-see.

—Mario Naves

Editors’ note: We are pleased to announce the publication of *All of You on the Good Earth* (Red Hen Press), by Ernest Hilbert, a portion of which first appeared in *The New Criterion*.

Gallery chronicle

by James Panero

How should we mark the 100-year anniversary of the Armory Show? This question inspired several galleries to reflect on the historic exhibition that opened on February 17, 1913 and introduced the latest in European modernism to the American public. A century ago, hundreds of thousands of visitors came to see the Armory Show during its barnstorming tour of New York, Chicago, and Boston. We might say the national discussion about modern art that began in 1913 has never ended and now continues through these latest exhibitions.

Writing about “The Armory Show at 100” here in December, I mentioned two museum shows that will bookend this Armory year. This past month, the Montclair Art Museum opened “The New Spirit: American Art in the Armory Show, 1913,” an exhibit that examines for the first time the American artists whose work filled two-thirds of a show that is now almost exclusively remembered for its European component.

Montclair also features a display of primary materials from the Armory Show, including letters and journals from the show’s organizers—the American artists Arthur B. Davies, Walt Kuhn, and Walter Pach. This material, on loan from the Smithsonian’s Archives of American Art, coincides with the launch of the Archives’ new website for Armory source material, armoryshow.si.edu. (Now it’s time someone used this research to create a virtual tour, similar to Google Art Project, that might allow us to wander through a digital recreation of the original show.)

Then, this coming October, the New-York Historical Society will mount its own major Ar-

mory retrospective. This exhibition will look at both the art and times of 1913 New York. It also promises a substantial catalogue with over thirty essays examining the Armory Show, its historical context, and everything in between. By the end of this year, we might just come to feel like the Ashcan painter Jerome Myers. At the time of his death in 1940, Myers lamented how the Armory Show “had unlocked the door to foreign art and thrown the key away.”

A pleasant surprise to come out of all these commemorations has been the chance to see the paintings of the Armory’s greatest booster, Walt Kuhn (1877–1949). A revelatory exhibition of his work is now on view at DC Moore Gallery.¹

Arthur B. Davies, as the president of the Association of American Painters and Sculptors, was the heart of the Armory Show. With his knowledge of European modernism, which directly influenced the show’s selection, Walter Pach was the brains. As the young secretary of the AAPS, athletic and intense, Kuhn was the muscle of the operation. He was the one who first hustled through Germany, France, and England and pushed for an ever-expanding European showing. “We are going to feature Redon big. BIG!” he exclaimed after seeing the artist’s Paris studio.

Back in the United States, Kuhn also took to promoting and publicizing the Armory Show everywhere he could. “Walt wanted to make sure that this thing was an intensely popular sort

1 “Walt Kuhn: American Modern” opened at DC Moore Gallery, New York, on February 7 and remains on view through March 16, 2013.

of show,” remembered Kuhn’s student Wood Gaylor. “His instructions to us when we were distributing posters was to put them in every gin mill on Second, Third, and Ninth Avenues and to cover not only the part of the town that would normally be interested but to get into the parts of the town that would not ordinarily think in terms of art exhibitions.”

Kuhn magnified the ambitions of the enterprise. Leading up to the opening, he organized a grand “beefsteak dinner” for the New York press that resulted in a run of advance articles. He also ensured that a great deal of favorable press was mixed in with the critical denunciations, making the Armory Show an unavoidable sensation. “Don’t disappoint me on this,” Kuhn exhorted. “Our show must be talked about all over the U.S. before the doors open. . . . We want this old show of ours to mark the starting point of the new spirit in art, at least as far as America is concerned.”

Like both Davies and Pach, Kuhn exhibited his own art in the Armory Show. His painting *Morning* (1912), a radiant, pointillist landscape that I hear is scheduled to travel later this year to the N-YHS, was reproduced on one of the Armory’s postcards and received its fair share of both praise and ridicule. One cartoonist mockingly called the work “Fourth of July in Egypt” and declared “the Mexican revolution has nothing on this painting.” (I await the dissertation on how the Armory affected America’s sense of humor.)

Born in Brooklyn, Kuhn wandered through both the American West and the academies of Europe in his early years, and his paintings similarly passed through several stages. Even by the time of the Armory Show, Kuhn had yet to settle on a signature style, and he kept little of his work from the period.

In the years after the show, Kuhn’s role in the exhibition came to overshadow his own artistic accomplishments, just as its influence also con-founded his own direction. Through the exhibition that he helped create, Kuhn suffered the fate of many American artists after being exposed to the latest innovations from Europe. Even in 1924, critics still lamented how Kuhn “does not appear to have recovered from that visitation” of 1913.

“How is all this going to influence your painting and mine?” the American modernist Maurice

Prendergast wondered to Kuhn at the time of the show. For Kuhn this question wasn’t answered until the second half of the 1920s. The great irony for the man who exposed us all to European modernism is that he eventually found his own artistic strength in the American vernacular and the influences of the Ashcan school rather than the pictorial innovations of Europe.

Like the American Scene painters who developed a native style in the 1930s, Kuhn turned to depicting circus performers, vaudeville actors, and other stock figures from American demotic culture. In the Armory Show, Kuhn had already proven his affinity for showmanship. Through the early 1920s, he even devoted himself to writing and producing vaudeville sketches. After a serious illness in 1925, which encouraged him to reevaluate his achievements, Kuhn finally discovered his own painterly voice in the theater.

The exhibition at DC Moore begins with *Vera* (*The Artist’s Wife*) (ca. 1918), a Matisse-like portrait, and quickly follows Kuhn through Cubist assemblies (*Man with Ship Model*, 1918) and Braque-like still lifes (*Adventure*, 1924). Then in *Superba* (1926), Kuhn arrives at something different. Here he depicts a sturdy brunette with silverfish skin in a blue leotard, hands on hips, staring back with “superba” confidence. The composition, paint handling, and attitude is what Kuhn carries over to his other figures in the show, like *Show Girl in Armor* (1943) and *Woman in Majorette Costume* (1944).

For *Roberto* (1946), Kuhn painted a well-known clown performer, but in other portraits he developed his own figures, designing the costumes for his models and even meticulously applying their makeup. The work moves between the particular and the universal. In *Trio* (1937), he both depicts three real-life clowns posing, arms folded, in a line and references the characters of *commedia dell’arte* and the performers who populated the *fêtes galantes* of Watteau.

And then there’s Kuhn’s powerful self-portrait. In 1932, Kuhn painted himself not as the square-jawed and brooding young man we see in earlier photographs but as a stern-faced clown. In 1937, one critic remarked how Kuhn’s realism “has survived all the varied forms of influence of the Post-Impressionists, the Fauves, and Cubists who were the shock troops of Modern Art

and the Armory Show which Kuhn, himself, helped organize.” In *Portrait of the Artist As a Clown (Kansas)* (1932), we see a figure, road-weary, who has nevertheless survived. As one critic put it at the time, after all his wandering, Kuhn finally came back home to convey “a remarkable serenity and authority of expression.”

This month the Armory Show inspires not only shows that look back but also exhibitions that consider its contemporary legacy. Francis M. Naumann Fine Art, which helped rediscover the archives of Walter Pach, has commissioned several contemporary artists to develop work based on the Armory’s most infamous painting, *Nude Descending a Staircase* (1912) by Marcel Duchamp. A show called “Decenter Armory,” at the Abrons Art Center of the Henry Street Settlement, aims to connect the influence of the Armory’s cubist paintings with contemporary digital art.

It also happens that the centenary of the Armory Show overlaps with what’s known as “Armory Week,” the time each March when several contemporary art fairs open in New York and are anchored by a big one on the Hudson, also called “The Armory Show.” This “Armory Show” has tried to make much of its connection to the 1913 Armory Show, even leading some to believe it is the same organization one hundred years on. “The Armory Show” of 2013 only encourages this false succession, just as it cleverly appropriated the 1913 name a few years back for what was then known as the Gramercy International Art Fair (at the time an underground initiative that started out in hotel rooms in 1994).

There is much that is good in some of the smaller satellite fairs that have been drawn into the orbit of “Armory Week.” Fountain Art Fair promises interesting artists and will go on view in the original venue of the 1913 Armory Show on Lexington Avenue and Twenty-fifth Street, which itself is worth a visit. Regarding the headline fair, as the trade show of our contemporary salon aesthetic, “The Armory Show” may borrow the name from 1913 but shares none of its independent spirit. The same goes for events like the Whitney Biennial, institutional endeavors that push a simulacrum of sensation and scandal without any of the 1913 Armory’s artist-led charge.

Art’s pioneering spirit has therefore again been pushed to the margins. For his annual group show in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, this year known as “Sideshow Nation,” the gallery owner Richard Timperio proved just how vital it is by lining his gallery with the work of over five-hundred contemporary artists. The contributors are all connected in one way or another, with the SoHo painters who came of age in the 1970s forming the core of the group. The show, now held over until March 24, looks especially strong and is a *Wunderkammer* of independent art, even if the selection would benefit by including more young artists and dropping its photographic entries.

I have written several times in this space about the small galleries of Bushwick. This neighborhood in north Brooklyn undoubtedly sends many readers looking for their compass and trail map. The area hosted an open gallery evening on the Friday of the Armory’s centennial weekend that again confirmed how central this peripheral neighborhood is to the arts of New York. The event known as Beat Nite, hosted by the curator Jason Andrew of the gallery Norte Maar, included ten small new galleries scattered across the neighborhood. A standout was Schema Projects, a new storefront created by the artist Mary Judge that focuses on works on paper. Another was Projekt 722—a nearby space that was off the official Beat Nite circuit but featured an astonishing solo show by the painter Amy Lincoln, whose meticulous landscapes and still lifes mix Henri Rousseau and American folk art with a hallucinatory palette.

Norte Maar offered a focal point for Beat Nite with its exhibition “Giacometti and a Selection of Contemporary Drawings.” Here Andrew secured the loan of Giacometti’s *Double Sided Drawing Featuring Double Portrait of Diego and Standing Man Arms Outstretched*, (ca. 1947–1950), which he suspended in the middle of the gallery, and smartly placed the work of ten contemporary artists around in counterpoint. The brooding portrait of Matthew Miller and the tense nude of Thomas Micchelli accentuated the agitated lines of Giacometti’s own work and brought out their formal similarities.

A new spirit of art is in the air. Like Davies, Kuhn, and Pach, one just has to go find it.

Music

New York chronicle

by Jay Nordlinger

The most anticipated new production on the Metropolitan Opera calendar was that of *Rigoletto*. I say “anticipated.” What I mean is, it was the most looked forward to and the most dreaded. It was looked forward to by those who think of the Met as Squaresville. Who want the company to get with the program, and be more like Hamburg, Lille, and other cool capitals. It was dreaded by those who want to stave off Europeanization for as long as possible. Who like that the Met is the last bastion of “traditional” productions, as they’re called.

In my January chronicle, I spoke of the Met’s new production of another Verdi opera, *Un ballo in maschera*. I said I liked it—that I enjoyed looking at it—but that it was not really a *Ballo*. If you’ve seen *Ballo* a hundred times, and know it well, this was a pleasant break away. But what about the newcomer? Had he truly experienced a *Ballo*, the way the composer and the librettist conceived it? I feel much the same way about the new *Rigoletto*. I liked it, I really did. I’m glad I saw it, and would happily see it again. But I’m not sure it’s a *Rigoletto*. The gap between the production and the opera—that is, between the production and the Verdi-Piave work—is wide.

The director here is Michael Mayer, of Broadway distinction. He sets his *Rigoletto* in 1960 Las Vegas—the time and place of the Rat Pack. Countess Ceprano (I believe) is Marilyn Monroe, or a Marilyn Monroe look-alike. The title character is not a hunchback,

but a man who walks around normally. That’s okay. But what is the handicap, or deformity, that shapes his personality? The misfortune of which he constantly speaks? We don’t see it. When the curtain opens on Act II, which shows the aftermath of a very Vegassy party, the audience laughs. Or at least it did on the night I attended. And Act II of *Rigoletto* is one of the darkest and most disturbing acts in all of opera. Act III is set in a strip club, complete with nekkid lady on a pole. Take that, squares!

Let me protest once more (maybe too much): I like this production, even aside from the naked girl. It is clever and I dare say thoughtful. The director is sincere in what he is doing; he obviously likes *Rigoletto*, and is not trying to mock or undermine it. But I wonder whether his production serves the opera. We can understand that opera-world professionals are bored, seeing the same operas, over and over. They need to jazz up their lives with “untraditional” productions. But, again, what about the newcomer, the person encountering *Rigoletto* for the first time? Moreover, if you want to set an opera in 1960 Las Vegas, why not write an opera set in 1960 Las Vegas, or get someone else to do so? Why transform a Verdi opera set in sixteenth-century Mantua? Is it because no one around today can compose? Some people say, “There are plenty of Mozarts, Beethovens, and Verdis around, but we are too blind or deaf to notice them. In fifty or a hundred years, they’ll be famous and herald-

ed, and boy will we have egg on our faces?” Could be. But I doubt it. Another thought: Directors love to update, but would they ever think of backdating? Will someone set, say, *Doctor Atomic* in sixteenth-century Mantua? Maybe have Oppenheimer toy with the musket or something?

Of course, the most important part of an opera performance is the music—the singing, the playing, and the conducting. I have a lot to say about the Met *Rigoletto*, musically, but I have a lot to say in this chronicle generally, and you will permit me to move on . . .

A concert by the American Composers Orchestra, in Zankel Hall, began with a work by Zhou Long. He came to this country in the 1980s. The work in question is *Bell Drum Towers*, which evokes a timekeeping method in ancient China. Zhou has written a winner: a delicate, impressionistic, mysterious piece. It is also a little jazzy (or do I think that simply because I’m an American?). The piece is exceptionally well orchestrated, with a slidey trombone and an interesting piano. At two or three different points, I thought the piece was on the verge of being too long—but then it would save itself, or the composer would, with something compelling. I believe I heard a technique from Strauss’s *Elektra* toward the end. In any event, it was a pleasure, and a relief, to enjoy a new work so much.

I had the same experience in the second half of the program, with Kyle Blaha’s *Tryptich*. This is in three movements (how did you guess?), and those movements are designated only by metronome markings. The first movement is dramatic and varied—cinematic, I thought. I was reminded of a western. The second movement, the slow movement, has sweet music interspersed with fierce. The last movement is rather like the first: cinematic and western-like, open and confident. I thought I heard a choo-choo, I swear. The music is driving by not annoyingly frenetic. I very much look forward to hearing *Tryptich* again, as well as *Bell Drum Towers*.

For concerts of new music, Carnegie Hall is using a slogan: “My Time, My Music.” Let me just say that Bach, Beethoven, and Ravel

are my music too. They are of their times, our time, and no time. Bruckner is as much my music as Birtwistle (at least). But I am scoring a cheapish point, and I know that businesses must have slogans.

A concert of the New York Philharmonic included Brahms’s Piano Concerto No. 1 in D minor. Conducting was Lorin Maazel; doing the solo honors was Yefim Bronfman. Maazel conducted the long orchestral opening at an unusually slow tempo. But the music had its due majesty and drama. When Bronfman came in, he played with exemplary equilibrium. He has the gift of knowing just what weight to apply to notes. The first movement, for the soloist, gets unpianistic—but it did not seem so in Bronfman’s hands. He is a tamer of unruly music, as he has proven in, for example, Tchaikovsky’s Grand Sonata in G major. In Brahms’s first movement, he took the leaps basically in time. That is, he did not have to adjust the tempo, as he leapt around the keyboard. His octaves were colossal, and they had no banging in them at all. On the podium, Maazel did some eccentric, or let’s say unconventional, things. There were Maazelian pauses and the like. But he was always interesting and musical—and one learns from him. At the end of the first movement, he proved once again that he is one of the great cutters-off of notes in history. This seems like such a simple act. For some reason, not every conductor can do it.

The middle movement, Adagio, is one of the most beautiful, and warm, and moving things Brahms ever wrote. Bronfman and Maazel did well in it, although it could have been warmer, and more religioso. As for the Rondo, it was fast, nimble, and commanding. This movement is a rare example of what you must call something like gargantuan playfulness. Bronfman had a few finger-slips, but this only confirmed that we were not listening to a studio recording. Nothing can duplicate the excitement of live. Honestly, this was some of the best piano playing I have ever heard. And, believe it or not, I will write the same sentence a little later in this chronicle.

The Metropolitan Opera brought back *La rondine*, Puccini’s operetta-like opera. In the starring role of Magda was Kristine Opolais,

a soprano from Latvia. The Baltic states are teeming with musicians. Opolais is married to Andris Nelsons, another Latvian, and an excellent young conductor. The soprano is a beauty, looking in this production a little like Elizabeth Montgomery, in *Bewitched*. And her singing? It ranged from adequate to excellent. In the main, she was elegant, mature, and accomplished. And her acting was better than the operatic norm. Her Ruggero, which is to say, her tenor, was Giuseppe Filianoti. And he sang very well—in the middle and lower registers. Up top, he struggled. Probably 98 percent of Ruggero's notes are in the middle. A mere handful are up top. Why do we care so much about the high notes? It is a cruel but stubborn fact of operatic life. In the pit was a conductor previously unknown to me: Ion Marin, a Romanian (as his name may tell you). He conducted intelligently, sensitively, and beautifully. He understood *La rondine*, its lilt and grace. He let the music float, as it does, but he also gave it the substance it must have, and has inherently.

Here is a touchy issue—one I can't remember addressing before: What do you do about a singer who lisps? There were at least two singers in the *Rondine* cast who lisped. While you want to ignore this, it is not entirely possible. Should a lisp disqualify a person from singing? Certainly not—people lisp, and singers are people. The great, immortal Olga Borodina lisps now and then. Yet it is a problem worth thinking about. Anyway, as I said, a touchy issue, and maybe we can think about it another day . . .

Did I mention Romanians? Radu Lupu, the pianist, played a recital at Carnegie Hall. He began with the four Schubert impromptus of D. 935. Then he played Franck's Prelude, Chorale, and Fugue. I will make some general remarks about his playing of these pieces. That which requires gentleness or reflection was wonderful. That which requires force, heft, or brilliance was less wonderful. Lupu was persistently modulated, subdued, polite. He was sometimes mushy or wispy. Here is a remark about a specific Schubert impromptu, the one in B flat: It needed more of a smile, some joviality. Lupu was sober.

There is a Cult of Lupu, a cult I understand, and one that I'm sort of a fellow traveler of. There is an aura around Lupu. He has unruly, genius-style hair, and a gray-white beard. He looks like a prophet. He carries himself very gravely. People hear profundity, even if the playing is not quite right. Image plays a role in music, as in other departments of life. Eye and ear conspire together.

On the second half of his recital, Lupu played Book II of Debussy's *Préludes*. And this playing was stunning, mesmerizing. Lupu put on a clinic of color, imagination, technique. He out-Frenched all Frenchmen. Honestly, this was some of the best piano playing I have ever heard. The entire hall was mesmerized, and the beard had nothing to do with it. Sign me up for the cult!

The Met brought back *Le Comte Ory*, the Rossini romp—one of many, to be sure. Our soprano was Pretty Yende, a South African new to the Met. If you're going to name your daughter Pretty, she'd better be: And this soprano is. She also knows what she is doing, vocally and otherwise. She sang brightly and flexibly. She did not keep a consistent tone from top to bottom, or bottom to top, but many fine singers have been inconsistent in this way. She has plenty of lyricism but a dose of power too. Her high notes were generally secure. She gave us a good, clear E flat, and she ended the opera with a wonderful, easy C. It would be unfortunate to send 'em home with a poor note.

Our tenor was the Rossini tenor of this age, Juan Diego Flórez. Before the curtain rose, an announcement was made for him: He was suffering from a chest cold, but would sing anyway. I'm of two minds about such announcements—two minds at least. If a singer is under the weather, maybe he ought to give an understudy a chance. Also, there is the issue of excuse-making. Then again, perhaps an announcement frees a singer, psychologically, to sing away. "They're not expecting my best," he thinks, "so I can just relax." In any event, Flórez sang basically like the Flórez we know, chest cold or not.

At the 92nd Street Y, Marc-André Hamelin played a recital. He is an old-fashioned

piano virtuoso, the kind to play transcriptions, the kind to write transcriptions—the sort of pianist who will give you a symphony or concerto for solo piano by Charles-Valentin Alkan. He also knows the value of Mozart (inestimable). At the Y, he opened his recital with a Bach transcription by Theodor Szántó: This was the Great Fantasia and Fugue in G minor, an organ piece (an organ piece and a half). You immediately noticed something about the piano—not about the playing, but about the piano itself: It was bright, live, and loud. These days, I’m always hearing pianos that are muted. This kind of piano is relatively easy to control (although you sacrifice a lot). A piano like Hamelin’s can be a beast with its own mind. I don’t know whether Hamelin chose this piano or was presented with it, but I was glad to hear it.

He played his Bach-Szántó well and arrestingly. I think the fugue should have had a stricter tempo, but Hamelin’s looseness was not fatal. I like that he is unafraid of triple-forte: The work ended with thrilling, deafening G major.

Later, Hamelin played several Debussy pieces, starting with *Reflets dans l'eau*. He played this more rhapsodically than a classic French Impressionist would. But then, Horowitz played his Debussy the same way, often. Hamelin’s least successful Debussy piece was *L'Isle joyeuse*, which was slightly clumsy. After intermission came a piece of his own: Variations on a Theme by Paganini. You know what theme. Hamelin’s take is a virtuosic, nutty joy. He ended his printed program with Rachmaninoff, beginning with the G-major prelude. I believe people should play this sublime composition straight—with minimal rubato. Rachmaninoff has baked all the wonderfulness in. Hamelin warped it a bit, I’m afraid. But he played the Sonata No. 2 commandingly.

His final encore was the “Minute” Waltz, souped up, weirdified. We can be glad that throwback pianists such as Hamelin exist.

Another pianist, Nicolas Hodges, played a recital in Zankel Hall. In the middle of his program were two pieces by Elliott Carter: *Intermittences* (2005) and *Caténaires* (2006).

The first piece is scherzo-like, and bursting with youthfulness. The second piece is a veritable showpiece, almost a throwback to the nineteenth century. Carter acts like a Paganini of the Piano. *Caténaires* has nothing but fast notes—a blizzard of notes—and conveys huge energy. I emphasize the youthfulness of *Intermittences* and the energy of *Caténaires* because Carter wrote these in the ninety-seventh and ninety-eighth years of his life. He died last November, just shy of 104.

Stay in Zankel Hall for a moment, for a recital by Dorothea Röschmann. I have called her a Schwarzkopf for our time. She is a German soprano who shines in Mozart opera roles and German art song—and in other areas of vocal life, of course. Her program in New York was composed of Schubert, Strauss, Liszt, and Wolf. All German-language. She sang with her typical intelligence and taste, along with her remarkable diction. The beauty of her voice seems almost incidental. I might remark a bit more on that diction: From Röschmann’s mouth, German seems the most beautiful language in the world. I once heard Marilyn Horne describe Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau as “the Bible,” where German is concerned. Röschmann is pretty Scriptural herself. Her pianist, Malcolm Martineau, was a worthy partner, as usual.

Did Röschmann do anything wrong? Was she a paragon? She was a paragon, yes, but there was one bad note: in Strauss’s “September.” I believe the soprano lost her place, did not quite know what she was singing. Some of the high notes were not perfectly pretty. And there was a speck of sameness about the evening: sameness of approach. Some of the Wolf, for example, could have used more bite. But if you’re going to have sameness, have Dorothea Röschmann’s sameness, by all means.

Ascend from Zankel Hall to the larger and main hall within the Carnegie building: There, Daniil Trifonov gave a recital. He is the 21-year-old Russian pianist who won the Gold Medal in the Tchaikovsky Competition two years ago. He opened his recital with a Scriabin sonata, No. 2, which is in G-sharp

minor—not an oft-used key. Trifonov played with amazing smoothness, limpity, and seamlessness. His arms seemed to have no muscle or nerves in them at all: They were wet spaghetti, and they were completely at his command. He tightened his arms only when he wanted to; it was purely voluntary, which is a rare and covetable gift. He handled the Presto of the Scriabin with gentle ferocity. As I was listening to him, I thought, “The judges at the competition in Moscow must have blinked in amazement.”

Next came the Liszt Sonata, which he played very well, of course. But his playing was also a little muted. Was it one of those pianos I have mentioned? The pianist could not seem to generate enough volume, and I saw him pound a black note toward the bottom of the keyboard with his fist—I swear. Liszt’s sonata missed some of its diabolicism and thunder. But I am holding Trifonov to a very high standard: He played the piece with daunting skill and artistry.

The second half of his program consisted of Chopin: the twenty-four preludes. He played them as though they were movements (many movements) of one work, and this approach was effective (rather than affected). I could pick at him: The E-minor prelude was a little fast. The B-minor prelude began with a bad accent. The A-flat-major prelude was a little mannered. But it would be far easier to praise. The G-major prelude, for example, was a lesson in limpity. The A-major prelude was beautifully sculpted, lovingly sculpted. The E-major prelude had its wonderful generosity. Throughout the twenty-four, the pianist had control of colors, dynamics, and most everything else. I should mention, too, that he is an exceptionally good pedaler, a significant tool in a pianist’s kit.

He sent the audience home with a circus act, Guido Agosti’s transcription of the Infernal Dance from Stravinsky’s *Firebird*. Like Hamelin, Trifonov enjoys throwing back. As

I said a few chronicles ago, the music world will enjoy listening to Trifonov for decades to come.

It will enjoy listening to Andris Nelsons for decades, too. He’s the excellent young Latvian conductor, married to Kristine Opolais, the soprano from *La rondine*. He conducted the New York Philharmonic, in a program of Dvořák, Brahms, and Bartók. His Dvořák was a tone poem, *The Noon Witch*. Nelsons was clear, alert, and natural. He phrased very well, letting the music have its tensions and swells. The orchestra played like a well-oiled machine (though not mechanically). The Brahms was the Violin Concerto, whose soloist was Christian Tetzlaff. The less said about this performance, the better. Tetzlaff was not himself. He could not play. He will be himself again, one trusts.

The Bartók was the Concerto for Orchestra, a famous test for an orchestra, yes, but also a test for a conductor—and Nelsons passed with flying colors. “Colors” is a good word, because the concerto is full of them, and they appeared in their glory. From the first notes, the disorder and horror of the Brahms were washed away. Restored were authority, confidence, unity. Bartók’s hit was fresh as a daisy, not hackneyed in the least. It was subtle, virtuosic, kaleidoscopic. Nelsons led the orchestra in an unassuming way, with no need to browbeat or show off. He knew what to do, and the orchestra knew what to do in response. I was not 100 percent admiring of the final movement—which I thought missed some of its excitement, its extremeness, you might say. “Sing out, Louise!” I wanted to call out. But the arrival of Andris Nelsons on the scene is very good news.

Several years ago, André Previn was asked, “When was the last time you were excited by a new piece of music?” In the 1940s, he said, when he heard the Concerto for Orchestra. I don’t know whether Previn had his tongue in his cheek. But, man, that was a long time ago.

The media

The naked and the famous

by James Bowman

Mark Roberts says he's "hanging up my birthday suit at last," according to *The Mail on Sunday*. The professional "streaker" who claims to have perpetrated 519 streaks during his career, including highly publicized ones at the British Open golf tournament, Wimbledon, and the Super Bowl in 2004, says he's giving up his main occupation of the last twenty years—he is otherwise unemployed, but has made some money as an underwear model and by publishing an autobiography—because his son's friends were laughing at him. "What's the problem, then?" asked dad, who says he got into streaking in the first place in order to make people laugh.

"Well, you're my dad," replied Mark Junior, aged nineteen.

"That really hit home with me," Mark Senior told *The Mail*.

The sentiment does him credit, of course, but it's still a little bit difficult to imagine that it took him twenty years and 519 public displays of his manhood before he realized that his chosen career might be a cause of embarrassment to his nearest and dearest—or that being a "dad" one's son can be proud of pretty much invariably involves keeping one's clothes on in public. Another reason why Mr. Roberts may have decided to give it up, however, is that exhibitionism has lately gone mainstream, leaving little room for freelancers and quirky outsiders like himself. One of the most talked about moments of *this* year's Super Bowl, played only a week before Mr. Roberts's announcement of his retirement, was a Calvin

Klein underwear advertisement that bordered on the pornographic.

Quasi-pornography during the halftime show by Miss Beyoncé Knowles was naturally less surprising. Highly sexualized images of a young woman (or even an old woman in the case of Madonna's half-time show last year) have become routine in that slot, at least since Janet Jackson's now legendary "wardrobe malfunction" in 2004—coincidentally the same year that Mr. Roberts and his wedding tackle made their appearance at the annual extravaganza. But this year's underwear model was a man, a Mr. Matthew Terry. Can there really be that many gay football fans? It's true that there was much twittering about the commercial by women who claimed to be drooling with lust over Mr. Terry's physique, but I wonder to what extent these women were only expressing a politically correct sort of concupiscence, designed to show that they could be as grossly inappropriate in publicizing desires as men so often are. Or is that an offensive thing for me to say? These days it's so hard to tell.

How a woman reacts to a sexually self-aware man may also be age-related. Here's what Jenny McCartney wrote in *The Sunday Telegraph* a week later about another underwear ad, this one featuring the soccer player David Beckham:

He is, of course, in great shape for a man of thirty-seven, or indeed any age: it is just that he looks too much as if he knows it. To find this a

drawback clearly marks me out as someone who is getting on a bit. How one views overt masculine posing is a generational marker that divides those of us who came of age before the internet from the spawn of Facebook: the web has decontaminated narcissism. Advertisers, should you wish to appeal to women born before 1975, just show us a picture of a good-looking man who doesn't look as if he is on first-name terms with the ladies at the local waxing parlor, and seems broadly unaware of his own appeal.

I don't know if this is true, but it makes for a persuasive theory. Still, the case of Mr. Roberts suggests that the public's interest in such displays may not be primarily sexual but more a case of feeling privileged to see what, in spite of Mr. Roberts's best efforts, is still normally unseen. It was appropriate, too, for the latter to share his epiphany with *The Mail*, a popular newspaper in Britain which has done much to perfect the journalistic formula for reporting on celebrity gossip. This is to justify the paper's full attention to such flummery by retaining on its news pages just enough of the robust conservatism of its editorial pages to lend to the routine doings of an eclectic bunch of celebs the hint of scandal.

Thus, for example, the paper's photos the same day of the glamorous star of *Zero Dark Thirty*, Jessica Chastain, are explained by the news that she is "dating" a hunky Italian—the word "dating" appearing in quotation marks because, well, we know what *that* means. Similarly, the capsule summary of a story about how Mr. Michael Lohan "has signed up to write a tell-all self-help memoir" in order to get in ahead of memoirs planned by his daughter Lindsay and his ex-wife Dina reads: "Will they ever shut up?" Not so long as not shutting up gets them so much publicity from *The Mail* and other papers, I think. Another story brings us the news of the *déshabillé*, ostensibly accidental, of the young starlet Miley Cyrus when she was photographed at what is described as a pre-Grammy party. "Displaying a hint of sideboob throughout the evening," the paper reported, "the actress nearly came a cropper when the risqué dress gaped open to

reveal a clear nipple cover." You can follow a link if you want to see that and other photos for yourself.

The association of Miss Cyrus's nipple cover—which in the photograph is pretty hard to distinguish from a nipple—with the Gramophone Awards was perhaps meant to remind readers of the "Wardrobe Advisory" issued by the producers of this year's ceremony:

CBS Program Practices advises that all talent appearing on camera please adhere to Network policy concerning wardrobe. Please be sure that buttocks and female breasts are adequately covered. Thong type costumes are problematic. Please avoid exposing bare fleshy under curves of the buttocks and buttock crack. Bare sides or under curvature of the breasts is also problematic. Please avoid sheer see-through clothing that could possibly expose female breast nipples. Please be sure the genital region is adequately covered so that there is no visible "puffy" bare skin exposure.

No wonder this year's Grammys had their second biggest audience in twenty years. Of course it is the job of CBS, like *The Mail* and other respectable news outlets, to keep the ancient proprieties alive—at least so far as to allow them to be outraged. Unsurprisingly, not everyone at the ceremony itself was equally attentive to this directive and *The Mail* was reliably on hand to identify the guilty parties. "Didn't you get the memo?" the paper headlined the next day: "Singers D'Manti, Kelly Rowland, and Alicia Keys defy sexy clothing ban in barely-there dresses at Grammy Awards."

In the news story below there were hints of an awareness that there might have been a reason why it was these mainly less-celebrated celebrities who chose to raise their profile by defying the ban, but of course it wouldn't do to say so outright. That would be to come a bit too near to acknowledging the media's own symbiotic relationship with the publicity industry and thus to defying the propriety or polite fiction that they are just reporting the news. There was no mention of any male self-exposure on this occasion, but the most

egregious example of the female kind—that of Katy Perry’s breasts—came with a priceless photograph of the famously gay pop star Elton John getting an eyeful of her magnificent cleavage as he danced with her. “Even Elton can’t stop staring!” *The Mail* headlined. “Katy Perry causes a sensation as she flaunts her breasts in plunging dress at the Grammys.”

The pleasure of seeing what used to be called decency or decorum violated is essentially an adolescent one, but also part of the legacy of the “youth culture” of 1960s, which is increasingly the only popular culture we have. In my other role as a film critic, I have to see an awful lot of rubbish, as you can imagine. Most adults don’t go to movies these days but, if they watch them at all, wait until they come out on DVD or instant download and see them at home. As a result, the first-run movie audience skews to the early teens and a vicious circle is set up: the more the paying movie audience is made up of kids, the more Hollywood makes movies for childish tastes; the more Hollywood makes movies for childish tastes, the more the paying movie

audience is made up of kids. At the same time, childhood is being prolonged into the twenties and even thirties, partly as a result of the education racket, so that the wider culture is more and more influenced by the childish tastes that were first identified with the popular culture half a century ago and have remained an indelible feature of it ever since.

Thus, on the discardable flap of my latest Netflix mailing, I noticed an advertisement for a new DVD of a movie I didn’t quite get around to seeing called *The Watch*. The come-on consists of a mock police-tape warning reading: “Caution: Ruder, Cruder & Lewder.” Wow! Sign me up! It occurs to me that discussions of vulgarity in the popular culture by high-minded types such as myself are likely to neglect the simple fact that “ruder, cruder & lewder” is not usually a negligent byproduct of the author’s higher artistic purposes but what he was going for in the first place. Vulgarity *is* his artistic purpose. It is not what he is sunk in but what he aspires to. Not coincidentally, he’s also catering for an audience that demands vulgarity. The interesting question is why does it do so? What’s the attraction?

I suppose it must have something to do with authenticity, which has learned to differentiate itself in artistic representation from inauthenticity primarily by a pose of defiance to the older social norms—in other words, manners—that it often seems we keep alive only so that they should be defied. Not far beneath the question of manners is the question of social class. The study of etiquette has historically been associated with the aspiration to rise into a higher class than that into which one has been born. Now that that aspiration has itself been discredited by the dominant culture, it has taken manners and respectability along with it into disreputability. Now people aspire to the manners of the *vulgus*, while they only advertise their lack of social nous by clinging to outmoded standards of decency and politeness.

To take an example from a movie that might seem to have been made for adults, at a key meeting in *Zero Dark Thirty* about the discovery of Osama bin Laden’s hiding place in

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Abbottabad, Pakistan, Miss Chastain—she whom *The Mail* informs us is “dating” that hunky Italian—answers the question of the CIA director played by James Gandolfini as to who she is by announcing: “I’m the motherf**** that found this place, sir.” Leaving aside the question of the physical possibility, let alone plausibility, of her character’s being the sexual actor she claims to be, we may wonder at the extent to which, now half a century on from when, as Philip Larkin poetically put it, “sexual intercourse began” (“Between the end of the Chatterly ban/ And the Beatles’ first LP”) and nearly as long since anyone can have been genuinely shocked to hear a woman use what we still coyly refer to as “the F-word,” the proclamation of one’s—shall we say?—association with theoretically transgressive sexuality is still a token of the authentic.

The converse is also the case, as I pointed out last autumn (see “The Dignity of Scandal” in *The New Criterion* of September 2012) apropos of John McWhorter’s damning Mitt Romney as inauthentic for using such antiquated euphemisms as *golly* and *gosh* in place of more vulgar expletives. You would think that a linguist would be particularly alert to the irony of the fact that *golly* and *gosh*, being rarer, are now more shocking to him than those quondam obscenities that today have become, willy-nilly, so much a part of everybody’s daily life. But the inversion of cultural norms is now as familiar to us as the naughty words themselves, so that it’s not surprising if we hardly notice either anymore.

Jessica Chastain’s claim to be a “motherf****,” in other words, is just pro forma, a way of identifying herself by her manners, even at the heart of the official culture as a CIA agent, as standing among the theoretical rebels against that culture and therefore partaking of their greater authenticity—in the view of officialdom itself as much as anybody else. Being patronized as a woman in a traditionally male occupation gives her the opportunity to claim a superior status as a victim and an outsider to the “system” while still functioning within it and, indeed, doing so more successfully than any of the men. That may be why the film’s director, Kathryn Bigelow, felt that she had to

include the scenes of torture—during which Miss Chastain’s character is a mostly impassive observer rather than a participant—that have occasioned so much criticism of her and it in the media.

Her heroine has to be not just a motherf****, that is, but a *bad* motherf****, lest anyone should suppose her to be so culturally behind the times as to cling to a vestige of that modesty and delicacy which in olden days were thought by the unenlightened to be characteristic of womankind. It is the male torturer (played by Jason Clarke), not she, who says he has to give up the job because he has seen too many naked men. Clearly, Mark Roberts can no longer expect to get a frisson of aggressive male pride (if that is what he used to get) out of eliciting a reaction from the likes of her.

Yet when the Navy SEALs in the movie take off for action on the Northwest Frontier, there is never any question of her joining them—perhaps not only out of deference to historical fact but also as an acknowledgment, like her standing aloof but watchful during the torture scenes, that even in our era of rebellion against traditional norms there remain some boundaries, some limits to the feminist imperative to abolish all customary and legal distinctions between the sexes. If so, it constitutes a rare case in which Hollywood’s cultural advance lags behind that of the Joint Chiefs of Staff of the Defense Department, who in January proclaimed it as their intention to admit women to combat units of the armed forces for the first time.

No one can have supposed this development genuinely to have been, as it was officially supposed to be, a voluntary move on the Chiefs’ part—any more than anyone, even its most impassioned advocates, can have supposed it to be an enhancement of our country’s military capabilities. General Dempsey, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, frankly admitted under questioning that standards of fitness would have to be lowered to accommodate our new breed of woman warriors. But the same liberation from antiquated notions of decorum which has made media models

and celebrities out of self-consciously vulgar, foul-mouthed, and exhibitionist females can hardly be expected to pull up short of the killer kind.

Returning for a moment to Jenny McCarthy's look to the Internet for something to blame for the decay of such notions, there certainly must be some responsibility there for what looks like the opposite: namely, a recrudescence of sexual judgmentalism in the Internet phenomenon known as "slut-shaming." Claire Cohen in *The Daily Telegraph* writes of how publicizing and passing around on the Internet photos of women who have too obviously been engaging in the sort of sexual acts that would once have been shameful is now a practice migrating from teenagers to adults and from men to women—just as if such acts still *were* shameful. She is frankly baffled.

I'm not trying to claim there's a conspiracy of female in-fighting, here. But, simply, how can we expect men to respect women's sexuality, when we're so ready to devalue one other? It just adds fuel to the notion that female sexuality is something to be ashamed of; something to

be pilloried and—most alarmingly of all—used as a weapon.

The implication is what an unsisterly and unfeminist thing it is to be cruel in exposing another woman's sexual behavior. But people don't seem to know what they want. Feminism first cleared away as politically incorrect manners and chivalry, which was the foundation of much of modern relations between the sexes and which first taught us about the special respect (or "honor") due to female privacy. Now people like Claire Cohen have the nerve to complain in the name of feminism about people's unmannerly behavior. Similarly, the same feminists who demand that women should be treated identically with men when it comes to serving in combat complain about the rise in rough treatment in the services. But if women are not to be afforded special protection in the one case, it's got to be hard to explain why they should be afforded it in the other—especially to the tough motherf*****s whom we once prized among our military men but who are now told that they owe the title as courtesy to women. Perhaps manners, like shame, are not so easily forgotten as we once imagined.

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Books

Liar, liar

by Marc M. Arkin

Even by modern standards, the years that marked the administrations of Presidents Washington and Adams—from 1788 to 1800—were a time of ferocious partisanship in American political life. The nation was torn between those championing ties with Great Britain—tarred by their enemies as monarchists—and those seeking shelter under the wing of France—accused by their opponents of advocating a degree of popular rule that would inevitably lead to despotism. Known as Federalists and Republicans respectively, the factions ranged against one another in bitter combat. Everyone knew that nothing less than the fate of republican government for all ages hung in the balance; otherwise reasonable men were certain that conspiracies lurked in every corner and no one's motives were to be trusted.

In Virginia, men toasted “A speedy Death to General Washington.” Influential newspaper editors such as James Callender, Philip Freneau, and Benjamin Franklin Bache warned their readers that the corrupting hand of monarchy lurked behind every Federalist move. Bands of Republican militia drilled openly from Baltimore to Boston, readying themselves to repulse the Federalist threat. During the critical days of 1798 and 1799, armed mobs roamed Philadelphia, then the nation's capital, spurring President Adams to smuggle arms into his quarters for self-defense. John Jay was burned in effigy, Hamilton was stoned in the streets of New York, and, in the halls of Congress, Representatives Matthew Lyons

and Roger Griswold took after one another with spittle and fire tongs. Partisanship reached such a fever pitch that, as Thomas Jefferson famously observed to a friend, “You and I have formerly seen warm debates and high political passions. But gentlemen of different politics would then speak to each other, and separate the business of the Senate from that of society. It is not so now. Men who have been intimate all their lives, cross the streets to avoid meeting, and turn their heads another way, lest they should be obliged to touch their hats.”

Although Jefferson lamented that this state of affairs was “afflicting to peaceable minds,” in fact, he had already positioned himself at the center of a web of intrigue devoted to advancing the interests of the rapidly coalescing Republican party and to destroying its Federalist enemies. His machinations were key to solidifying the loose factions of the early Republic into the party organizations we think of today. A man of indirection, Jefferson operated through a network of personal contacts, sympathetic newspaper editors—some secretly subsidized by Jefferson himself—anonymous articles, dinner parties, and diplomatic back channels. His correspondence is studded with phrases like “do not let my name be connected with the business” or “for myself, it is better that I should not interfere.” Yet, at the very same time, for much of the 1790s, Jefferson served in high executive office in the very Federalist administrations whose policies he was attempting to subvert. It was a pattern that permeated his life.

The outlines of Jefferson's public career are almost too well-known to need repeating. Born in 1743 to Virginia gentry—his mother was a member of the powerful Randolph clan—Jefferson lived most of his eighty-three years at the center of American public life: at twenty-five, a member of the Virginia House of Burgesses in the heady days when the colonies were on the cusp of revolution; at thirty-three, a delegate to the Second Continental Congress and author of the Declaration of Independence; at thirty-six, the wartime governor of Virginia; and at forty, a member of the post-war Confederation Congress. He then served as an American envoy to Paris during the tumultuous years from 1785 to 1789, as the country sought to establish its footing among the Atlantic powers.

Returning to the United States and its newly adopted constitution, Jefferson became the nation's first Secretary of State under President Washington, Vice President in the succeeding Adams administration (having narrowly lost the presidency to Adams in the electoral college), and ultimately the third President of the United States, serving for two terms until 1809. In his long retirement, Jefferson played the elder statesman to his Republican successors and to a steady stream of visitors, as well as in a long-running correspondence with his fellow revolutionary John Adams. At the same time, he founded the University of Virginia and designed its most famous buildings, all the while running his plantation and serving as pater familias to a huge troop of grandchildren, great-grandchildren, and assorted kin. Jefferson died, theatrically enough, on July 4, 1826, the fiftieth anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. A man of legendarily polymath interests ranging from architecture and philosophy to horticulture and French food, Jefferson has always stood larger than life in the pantheon of American presidents.

And yet, Jefferson has also labored under what Charles Francis Adams, a grandson of John Adams, described as “a vapor of duplicity, or, to say the least, of indiscretion, the presence of which is more generally felt than it is seen.” It is a truism, seemingly de rigueur in

every discussion of Jefferson, that he was the most elusive member of the founding generation, a man of contradictions, an “American Sphinx,” to use the phrase of biographer Joseph Ellis. Possessed of an aristocratic temperament, associations, and personal habits, Jefferson positioned himself as the guardian of the many against the few. As governor of Virginia during the Revolution, he quailed before British gunfire, yet he wrote of violence with bravado and insouciance—“a little rebellion now and then is a good thing” and “The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants. It is its natural manure.” An opponent of slavery early in his career and the author of the familiar phrases of the Declaration of Independence—“all Men are created equal” and “are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights” among which are “Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness”—Jefferson owned more than 600 slaves over his lifetime, kept meticulous accounts of his profits per slave (calculating a 4 percent capital increase per year on the births of black children), and financed the rebuilding of his beloved Monticello with a \$2,000 “slave equity loan” from a Dutch banking house. In his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, composed with a French audience in mind, Jefferson expatiated at length on the mental and physical inferiority of black people, while simultaneously embarking on a forty-year-long liaison with one of his slaves, the mulatto half-sister of his late wife. This, if early accounts are to be credited, resulted in enslaved Jefferson lookalikes waiting on table at Monticello's famous dinner parties, to the discomfiture of unsuspecting guests.

It comes as no surprise to people of adult years that a man can be inconsistent in his personal life, can believe one thing and do another. And if the private story were the end of the matter it would be unremarkable. But, Jefferson's double-sidedness carried over into his public life, reaching beyond his conduct during the administrations of his predecessors into his own presidency. A vigorous critic of the censorship embodied in the Federalist Alien and Sedition Acts, he engineered a

campaign of intimidation through impeachment against his political adversaries in the judiciary and even mulled over a libel trial against an unfriendly newspaper editor. An opponent of large government, he presided over an unprecedented—and sometimes illicit—expansion of executive power during his two terms in office. Although believing the Louisiana Purchase to be outside the constitutional powers of the federal government, he nonetheless went forward when it appeared that Napoleon might back out before the constitutional niceties could be observed. As to the war powers, which Article I of the Constitution lodges in Congress, Jefferson launched naval action against the Barbary Pirates and only afterward asked Congress to ratify the forcible measures already taken. Although conciliatory to his opponents in his first inaugural address, Jefferson replaced some 46 percent of the incumbent office holders in his first year in office, most of them Federalists. This should place him alongside Andrew Jackson who is ordinarily thought to have initiated the spoils system some thirty years later. As John Meacham puts it in his generous—indeed, overly generous—recent biography, Jefferson exhibited more than the usual human capacity for self-deception.¹

Meacham's book stands in the line of recent popular biographies seeking to capitalize on the public's fascination with the Founding Generation. In this light, it has much to recommend it. My next-door-neighbor at work tells me that the book makes excellent reading on the treadmill at the gym. Meacham makes judicious use of recent Jefferson scholarship and provides a thoughtful account of the road to independence. He adroitly weaves fascinating details of material life into the narrative. For example, on July 4, 1776, the day the Continental Congress ratified the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson somehow managed to purchase seven pairs of ladies' gloves and a thermometer; when he moved into the White House, there was a presidential privy on the

lawn. Meacham is especially good at portraying the aristocratic precincts of colonial Williamsburg and the lavish world of Monticello. By and large, the book neither flinches at nor overplays Jefferson's rather tangled personal life, beginning with a failed attempt to seduce a friend's young wife, through his happy marriage which ended when his thirty-three-year-old wife died from extended childbearing (six children plus a miscarriage in ten years), to the imbroglio with the married Maria Cosway while he was the American envoy in Paris. Considering the likely interests of his audience, Meacham provides an extensive—and evenhanded—treatment of Jefferson's long-term ties with Sally Hemmings and her family, accepting the current academic consensus that Jefferson fathered her seven children, starting while she was a teenaged household slave in Paris.

For any serious Jefferson biographer, the primary task is to make sense of Jefferson's contradictions. As Meacham recognizes, scholarly opinion has long divided into two camps, Jefferson-as-champion-of-liberty and Jefferson-as-hypocrite. In recent years, as research has turned up everything from the genetic background of the Hemmings family to Jefferson's effort to rewrite history posthumously, the Jefferson-as-hypocrite faction has been in the ascendant, casting Jefferson in what Meacham terms "an overly harsh light." In Meacham's eyes, the key to understanding Jefferson is his pursuit of power, an insight that is not overly helpful. Thus, for Meacham, Jefferson was a "good-hearted, fair-minded student of how best to accumulate . . . and use [power]." He argues that Jefferson can best be understood as a man "devoted to an overarching vision, but [who] governed according to circumstance." Acting with the support of "allies who believed him to be an unshakable advocate of liberty under the law, Jefferson felt himself free to maneuver in matters of detail." Accordingly, "[w]here some saw hypocrisy, others saw political agility" or, as Meacham delicately puts it, "tactical flexibility."

Meacham takes pains to paint Jefferson not as a dreamy philosopher, but rather as "re-

¹ *Thomas Jefferson: The Art of Power*, by Jon Meacham; Random House, 800 pages, \$35.

flective, yet practical, confident yet realistic.” Repeatedly, he tells the reader that for Jefferson “politics was informed by philosophy, but one could achieve the good only by putting philosophy into action. To do so required the acquisition of power.” Political opposition to his programs simply indicated that Jefferson “had been guided not by dogma but by principled pragmatism.” Driven into a corner by one of Jefferson’s more spectacular intellectual tacks—shifting from a strong nationalist position during the Confederation Congress to advocating state nullification of federal legislation during the Adams administration—Meacham sums up by saying Jefferson “was not intellectually consistent, but a consistent theme did run through his politics and statecraft: He would do what it took, within reason, to arrange the world as he wanted it to be”; he was “driven to control and exert power over the world around him.” The same might be said for Vladimir Lenin. The fortunate difference is that Jefferson did not have the apparatus of the modern state at his disposal.

In fact, the picture of Jefferson that emerges from Meacham’s pen is rather less than the sum of its parts. While almost all the details are in place—many of them in the extensive endnotes—Meacham tells the story largely from Jefferson’s perspective, and Jefferson was nothing if not a master of self-justification. Or, as Meacham remarks in one of those revealing notes, Jefferson had a “tendency to cast reality in congenial ways at the price of strict accuracy.” Take, for example, the biography’s treatment of the trade embargo during Jefferson’s second term. Jefferson, whose grasp of economics was always a little shaky, thought to punish the great Atlantic powers by refusing to allow American ships to trade with them. Almost universally, historians conclude that the embargo was a complete disaster—it crippled the mercantile economy of New England and literally reduced the region’s seafaring population to starvation. Putting that “congenial” face on matters, however, Jefferson wrote to Lafayette of the embargo’s “very happy permanent effect” of enhancing “domestic manufactures.” Despite the very real

suffering he caused, Jefferson only staved off hostilities until his successor took office. Although recognizing these issues, Meacham accepts Jefferson’s perspective that while the embargo was perhaps not a good idea, it was “the least bad” available choice given that the country was unprepared for war. What Meacham omits—at least in the text—is that this unreadiness was in large measure due to Jefferson’s policies of the previous four years, which reduced defense expenditures from \$6 million to \$2.1 million and docked all but six of the Navy’s frigates, even as tensions rose.

Meacham similarly treats Jefferson’s covert maneuvering in the 1790s—surely a significant window into the man’s character—as genuinely necessary to protect the republic from its monarchical enemies. Yet in Ron Chernow’s telling of the same events in his biography of Washington, Jefferson comes off as a bit of a conspiracy theorist crackpot; in a crucial confrontation, Washington tells him point blank that the monarchists are not hiding under the presidential bed. In the same vein, Meacham downplays the Machiavellian side of Jefferson’s conduct. In early 1793, Congressman William Giles of Virginia introduced a series of resolutions into the House calling for an investigation of Hamilton’s conduct as Secretary of the Treasury. To compare accounts once again, Meacham, on the one hand, mildly points out that a draft of these resolutions “attributed to Jefferson” demanded that Hamilton should be removed from office for maladministration. On the other hand, the historian Joanne Freeman firmly writes that not only did Jefferson secretly draft the resolutions, but he then tried to obscure his involvement in the process when he edited his papers for posterity.

Perhaps this is the most telling concern with the book: Protests to the contrary notwithstanding, Meacham seemingly takes the Jeffersonian sources largely at face value. Yet, as Professor Freeman has demonstrated, this is something that the biographer does only at his peril. In the guise of a “calm revisit” at a distance of twenty-five years, the retired Jefferson carefully arranged his papers—including memoranda of his private conversations called “Anas”—to present and justify the Republican

view of the 1790s. To give his account credibility and to blacken his opponents, Jefferson removed or obscured evidence of his involvement in political intrigue. Yet, as far as this reader can tell, Meacham altogether fails to confront Jefferson's effort to revise the historical record, something that casts doubt over the Jeffersonian version of the story and surely provides grist for the mill of his detractors. When all is said and done, Jefferson remains as much of a cipher at the end of this genial but superficial book as he does at the beginning and, in the polarized world of Jefferson studies, no one has switched sides.

Wilde style

Roy Morris Jr.

Declaring His Genius: Oscar Wilde in North America.

Belknap Press, 264 pages, \$26.95

reviewed by Brooke Allen

On a recent road trip across the West I found myself passing through Leadville, Colorado, elevation 10,152 feet—the highest incorporated city in the U.S. Now a quiet little burg inhabited mostly by mountain climbers, cross-country skiers, and hipsters, Leadville still shows traces of what it must have been in its heyday during the 1880s, when it was a bustling silver mining center with a population of 40,000, the second largest city in the state after Denver. The nightlife of nineteenth-century Leadville, with its numerous bars and its “French” section of town boasting a legion of prostitutes, has dwindled to a few bedraggled watering holes, including a well-preserved saloon with memorabilia celebrating famous inhabitants like Doc Holliday, the Unsinkable Molly Brown, and Baby Doe Tabor.

I was astounded when a local history buff in the saloon informed me that in 1882 the twenty-seven-year-old Oscar Wilde had paid a visit to Leadville, lecturing in the Tabor Opera House on modern aesthetics. What madness was this? Why on earth would the rough miners and gunmen of Leadville care

about “The House Beautiful,” Wilde’s standard lecture on his American tour? What could they have made of the egregious fop with his flowing locks, bearing his signature lilies and sunflowers? More interestingly, perhaps, what did Wilde make of Leadville? How did its particular beauty—bleak, wind-swept, but undeniable—accord with his highly civilized, highly European aesthetic theories?

The answer is provided in Roy Morris Jr.’s enlightening and entertaining new book, *Declaring His Genius: Oscar Wilde in North America*. Wilde arrived in Leadville after several months of traveling and lecturing across the U.S., and was as bemused by his surroundings, and by his audience, as one might imagine. “After Wilde invoked the name of the Renaissance goldsmith Benvenuto Cellini,” Morris writes, “the miners wanted to know why Wilde hadn’t brought him along. When Wilde said that, regrettably, Cellini was dead, they wanted to know who had shot him.” “I spoke to them of the early Florentines,” Wilde wrote home to a friend,

“and they slept as though no crime had ever stained the ravines of their mountain home. I described to them the picture of Botticelli, and the name, which seemed to them like a new drink, roused them from their dreams.” It was all going very well, Wilde said, until he “unluckily described one of Jimmy Whistler’s ‘nocturnes in blue and gold.’ Then they leaped to their feet and in their grand simple way swore that such things should not be. Some of the younger ones pulled their revolvers out and left hurriedly to see if Jimmy was ‘prowling about the saloons’ or ‘wrestling a hash’ at any eating shop. Had he been there I fear he would have been killed, their feeling was so bitter.”

The tone of gleeful enjoyment is characteristic of this period of Wilde’s life and of the ready-for-anything spirit with which he tackled a lecture schedule that must have been punishing even for someone so young: 140 lectures and 15,000 miles in 260 days. In Leadville, not content with simply lecturing the hoi polloi on art, he ventured into the mine itself, lowered (inside a bucket) into the number three shaft.

Once there, he was handed a silver drill and opened, with much ceremony, a new vein of ore. "I brilliantly performed, amidst unanimous applause. The silver drill was presented to me and the lode named 'The Oscar.' I had hoped . . . they would have offered me shares in 'The Oscar,' but in their artless untutored fashion they did not. Only the silver drill remains a memory of my night at Leadville."

Who was this young cynosure? When he arrived on American shores in January of 1882, Wilde had not yet written the immortal works on which his fame now rests: *The Importance of Being Earnest*, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, *An Ideal Husband*, *Lady Windermere's Fan*, *A Woman of No Importance*. In fact, as a columnist for *The New York Times* pointed out, "Nobody knows what he can do beyond writing poetry and posing as a leading figure in a limited circle." His genius had so far declared itself only in the area of self-promotion, of which he was a master, one of the earliest examples of someone who is famous for being famous: "Not to know Mr. Wilde," stated the Prince of Wales (the future Edward VII), "is not to be known." Fame and notoriety, then as now, are sometimes hard to differentiate, and Wilde cultivated both indiscriminately. "One should either be a work of art, or wear a work of art," he declared, and followed his own prescription with a dash of provocation: on his American tour he was, in Morris's words, a "vision of intentionally affected preciousness in satin knee breeches, black silk stockings, crushed-velvet coat, frilly lace collar, pale-green cravat, and patent-leather dancing slippers with silver bows on top." Gilbert and Sullivan had lampooned him in the character of Bunthorne in their operetta *Patience*; Wilde played up the connection. Yet the Americans found him, in person, more "masculine," according to their lights, than his appearance might lead them to believe: "His firm handshake, boundless energy, unquenchable good humor, and unexpected ability to out-drink any and all challengers quickly won over his American hosts, who were naturally predisposed to appreciate rugged individualism in even its most exotic forms."

A former student, at Oxford, of Ruskin and Pater, Wilde preached the gospel of art for art's

sake and set himself up as the prophet of the Aesthetic Movement. At his first American lecture, at Chickering Hall in New York, he stated his objection to the idea of a moral purpose in art: "It is not an increased moral sense, an increased moral supervision that your literature needs," he informed the crowd. "Indeed, one should never talk of a moral or an immoral poem; poems are either well or badly written, that is all. Any element of morals or implied reference to a standard of good and evil in art is often the sign of a certain incompleteness of vision, often a note of discord in this harmony of an imaginative creation, for all good work aims at a purely artistic effect." The lecture was a success, and as Wilde made his way to the reception the orchestra struck up "God Save the Queen"—"apparently without intentional irony," Morris comments.

Newspapers were guardedly enthusiastic, though they were free with the then-standard coded references to homosexuality: a reporter for *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, for instance, wrote insinuatingly that "The pallid and lank young man, Mr. Oscar Wilde, will find in the great metropolis . . . a school of gilded youths eager to embrace his peculiar tenets." Other newspapers were openly hostile: in *The Kansas City Star*, we read that "Oscar Wilde, the long-haired what-is-it, has finally reached Kansas City, and the aesthetic noodles and blue china nincompoops are in the seventh heaven of happiness." *The Chicago Daily News* bade him depart, and quickly: "Go, Mr. Wilde, and may the sunflower wither at your gaze." Of course this blast might have had something to do with the fact that Wilde had unforgivably wounded the city's *amour propre* by calling its beloved neo-Gothic Water Tower ugly—though he reserved the title of "the most purely dreadful building I ever saw" for the Mormon Tabernacle.

"*Le style c'est l'homme même*": in Wilde's case, this was only partially true, though plenty of people took the fop at face value. Henry James (himself a closeted homosexual) professed himself disgusted: "'Hoss-car' Wilde is a fatuous fool, a tenth-rate cad, and an unclean beast." But those who took the trouble to get to know Wilde discerned a solid center under

the fluttering affectations. Dion Boucicault, already an admirer of Wilde's writing, saw that "beneath the fantastic envelope in which his managers are circulating him there is a noble, earnest, kind, and lovable man." Walt Whitman, whom Wilde sought out in Camden, New Jersey, went further: Wilde, he insisted, was "a great big, splendid boy, frank, outspoken, and manly. I don't see why such mocking things are written of him." Wilde returned the esteem with interest; he idolized the old man and was even prepared to defer to him in manners artistic, as when Whitman voiced an objection to the creed of *Part pour Part*: "Why Oscar," Whitman said, "it always seems to me that the fellow who makes a dead set at beauty by itself is in a bad way. My idea is that beauty is a result, not an abstraction." "Yes," Wilde murmured tractably, "I think so too."

All in all Wilde was an improbable hit even in the hinterlands of the U.S. and Canada, where at the very least he provided a novelty and a distraction; his visit even inspired some new songs, among them "The Oscar Wilde Galop," "The Flippity Flop Young Man," "Oscar Dear!," and "The Oscar Wilde Forget-Me-Not Waltz." And what did Wilde make of the country and its natives? Occasionally he voiced the standard European objections; America, he told one hostess, had "no ruins, no natural curiosities." (As quick on the uptake as he, she responded, "Our ruins will come soon enough, and we import our curiosities.") But in general he was taken with the place and its gregarious, hospitable people. In later life, after his disastrous trial and prison term, he even considered settling in the American West, a place "where a man is a man today, and yesterdays don't count . . . a desperado can make a reputation for piety on his current performance. What a country to live in!" The natural beauty of places like Leadville struck him with force, but it was a violent style of splendor he found essentially alien: "The mountains of California are so gigantic that they are not favorable to art or poetry. There are good poets in England, but none in Switzerland. There the mountains are too high. Art cannot add to nature." Presciently, he railed against the industrial waste that was already beginning

to despoil the natural scene. "The things of nature," he commented, "do not really belong to us. We should leave them to our children as we have received them."

Wilde diverted the natives, but the real gift he gave them—as some of his more intelligent auditors recognized—was a sustained critique against the prevailing materialism of the age. What he himself got from his tour was equally valuable. In the words of his American booking agent, W. F. Morse,

The effect of this year of hard work upon Mr. Wilde was distinctly and strongly for his good. He had, at the end, broadened and deepened, grown stronger, more self-reliant, had seen the unwisdom of the shallow affectations that at first controlled his actions, and come at the last to realize there was something in life better worthwhile than to wear the mask of the poseur and masquerader.

Well—maybe. But on his return to London Wilde did dispose of his stage costume and cut his hair. "All that belonged to the Oscar of the first period," he said. "The Oscar of the first period is dead. We are now concerned with the Oscar of the second period, who has nothing in common with the gentleman who wore long hair and carried a sunflower down Piccadilly." As Morris puts it, "His time in America had taught him—to whatever degree he needed teaching—that he was, in himself, an ongoing work of art."

All that glitters

Consuelo Vanderbilt Balsan

The Glitter and the Gold.

St. Martin's Press, 304 pages, \$25.99

reviewed by Ben Downing

This may already be a stale comparison, but "Downton Abbey" puts one in mind of the great medieval monasteries, such as Cluny. In the riches it accrues, the devotion it commands, and the scale of its cottage industries, the show seems at once a product of the

twenty-first-century entertainment business and of the eleventh-century Benedictines. Not that I've seen much of it: though usually a sucker for the country-house milieu, I found "Downton Abbey" cloying from the start, and after watching the episode where that dreamy slab of Turkish beefcake dies in the saddle I nearly threw my shoe at my own TV—that was it for me. Still, I remain amused and amazed by the "Downton" phenomenon, and when I heard that Consuelo Vanderbilt's *The Glitter and the Gold* was being reissued on the strength of it—"She was the real American heiress who lived long before 'Downton Abbey's' fictional Lady Grantham," the jacket copy simpers—I couldn't resist taking a look.

My expectation, I must admit, was that I would also end up taking a swipe. If the memoir—originally published in 1953—could stand on its own merits, why did it need to hitch its plow to Julian Fellowes's juggernaut? My skepticism grew when I dipped into Amanda Mackenzie Stuart's *Consuelo and Alva Vanderbilt* (2005) and learned that *The Glitter and the Gold* has often been rumored to be the work of a ghostwriter. How good could the damn thing really be?

Quite good, actually. Though no classic, *The Glitter and the Gold* is many degrees above piffle, and the allegations about it coming from a hired pen are hard to credit. Its prose, while not particularly original, bears the earmarks of individual sensibility. Think what you will of her, Consuelo Vanderbilt could write, and her style is the clear, effective medium of a thoughtful, highly intelligent woman with a nice feeling for words. Better yet, her story—its first half, at any rate—is a doozy, a fairytale-as-nightmare that reads more like a "Red Indian" captivity narrative than a Jamesian exercise in the international theme.

Although her status as a Vanderbilt heiress inevitably made Consuelo (born in 1877) a prime target for fortune hunters, the true instrument of her commodification was her mother, Alva, a woman so willful, ambitious, belligerent, and domineering as to make the average "tiger mom" seem a declawed housecat. Insistent that her daughter achieve

perfect posture, she decreed that Consuelo should, whenever reading or writing, be locked into an immobilizing contraption of her own design: "a steel rod," Consuelo recalls, "ran down my spine and was strapped at my waist and over my shoulders—another strap went around my forehead to the rod." It was Alva's overwhelming wish, her daughter writes, "to produce me as a finished specimen framed in a perfect setting . . . my person was dedicated to whatever final disposal she had in mind." By the time Consuelo was in her teens, that disposal had taken specific form: She would be married, come hell or high water, into the top tier of the English aristocracy. When Consuelo fell for a more modest American suitor, Alva soon scared him off, in part by threatening to shoot him. Finally, at the ripe age of eighteen, Consuelo was consigned to the Ninth Duke of Marlborough, a bloodless, thin-skinned chap six years her senior and six inches her shorter. (With her exceptionally long neck, she resembled a corseted giraffe, though not in a bad way.)

The duke's sole reason for marrying Consuelo was to finance the renovation of his Pentagon-sized ancestral home, Blenheim Palace, which he loved far more than any mere human. While her dollars began their glorious work, she herself was expected not only to pump out a male heir in short order (she produced two, and indeed is credited with the immortal phrase "an heir and a spare") but to get up to speed—chop-chop!—on the Peerage and the Table of Precedence. "My husband spoke of some two hundred families whose lineages and whose ramifications, whose patronymics and whose titles I should have to learn." Having spent her childhood as "a pawn in my mother's game," she was now to become, "as my husband expressed it, 'a link in the chain.'"

Reader, she balked. Her new life had its benefits, including the warm friendship of the duke's cousin Winston Churchill and the chance to rub shoulders with everyone from the Prince of Wales to Tsar Nicholas II. But as an avid reader and thinker with a particular taste for German philosophy—she once toyed with the idea of translating *Also Sprach*

Zarathustra—she was appalled by the intellectual vacuity of most of her husband's set. Worse, she was bored stiff, and hardly knew which to dread more: the weekend house parties, during which she had to make endless formulaic chitchat, or the funereal weekday dinners alone with hubby. ("As a rule neither of us spoke a word. I took to knitting in desperation and the butler read detective stories in the hall.") Moreover, she developed an allergic horror to English snobbery. The affectations of Park Avenue and Newport seem never to have given her serious pause, but this was something else. For his part, the duke became enraged by her refusal to manifest the full Marlborough arrogance—Consuelo, he lamented, "had not a trace of snobbishness."

In 1906 the couple separated, and Consuelo took over their London house. For fifteen years she lived there as a single woman, hurling herself into worthy causes—she was especially tireless on behalf of women and children caught up in the so-called "sweated industries"—and mingling with everyone from George Bernard Shaw to George Curzon (for certain snobs she had a soft spot). In 1921, after at last divorcing the duke, she married a Frenchman, Jacques Balsan, and moved to Paris. It was the best sort of second marriage, and Consuelo, as a lifelong Francophile, found herself far more at ease than she'd ever been across the Channel. Though admirably active as philanthropists, the couple lived well on Consuelo's millions, keeping houses on the Côte d'Azur and then in Normandy, at both of which they hosted Churchill, Curzon, Edith Wharton, Charlie Chaplin, and many others. Nearly trapped by the war, they fled, via Spain and Portugal, to the U.S. in 1940, which is when *The Glitter and the Gold* leaves off. Consuelo spent the rest of her long life—she died only in 1964—as a social lioness in Palm Beach and the Hamptons.

In *The Vanderbilt Era: Profiles of a Gilded Age*, Louis Auchincloss recalls that Consuelo once asked his advice about her memoir, as yet unwritten but already named. Its title, she explained, would reflect the two parts of her adult life: the "glitter" was the false dazzle of

her Blenheim years, the "gold" her activism and contentment with Balsan. Auchincloss tried to persuade her to lay the glitter on thick and keep the virtuous gold to a minimum, but Consuelo resisted, saying that she wanted to emphasize her own redemption and that she simply couldn't "put in a book what a beast Marlborough was." One rather wishes she'd followed Auchincloss's advice, for the memoir's later chapters are sleepy, and punches have clearly been pulled in the earlier ones; the memoir might have benefited, so to speak, from more Downton and less abbey. Then again, it has the advantage of being true—Consuelo was, remember, "the *real* American heiress." (Funny, I could have sworn there was more than one.) As for those who prefer the fictional Lady Grantham, let them eat beefcake.

The bulldog's daughter

Mary Soames

A Daughter's Tale: The Memoir of Winston Churchill's Youngest Child.
Random House, 356 pages, \$28

reviewed by Barton Swaim

Winston Churchill's life defies attempts to fit it between hardcovers. His son Randolph tried it first, completed two volumes, but only got his father to the outbreak of the First World War. That was completed brilliantly by Martin Gilbert, but it took another six volumes to get him all the way to 1965. Roy Jenkins's one-volume life is excellent in its way, but it treated cursorily or left out a great deal, and the book still ran to an unwieldy thousand pages. William Manchester published the first two of his planned three-volume life, *The Last Lion*, but the third volume was only published in 2012 by another author, Paul Reid, Manchester having given up and died.

Better, perhaps, to approach the great man's life through partial perspectives. There is *The Fringes of Power* (1985), John Colville's marvelous diary written during his time as an

aid at 10 Downing Street from 1939 to 1955, or Violet Bonham Carter's *Winston Churchill As I Knew Him* (1965), a substantial work of history as well as the source of many of the best Churchill anecdotes. Now there is *A Daughter's Tale*, the reminiscence of Churchill's youngest daughter and only surviving child, Mary Soames. The book is just as engrossing, though shorter and not so penetrating, as these others. Soames turned ninety in September, but her writing shows no signs of murkiness; it is clear, sharp, occasionally opinionated, and understatedly witty.

Lady Soames (as she has been since 1972) takes us from her childhood at Chartwell, populated mainly by farm animals and, on weekends, the country's most famous politicians, through the war years during which she worked in the Auxiliary Territorial Service, or ATS, in an anti-aircraft unit, and finally to her marriage to Christopher Soames in 1947. The book is far more than a collection of entertaining tidbits about aristocrats and politicians, though it has its share of those (Jack, Winston's brother, playing tunes by tapping his teeth with his fingernails; Mary and her sister calling Lord Mountbatten "Glamour pants"). *A Daughter's Tale* is a serious memoir, even apart from its portrayal of the author's father, and Soames shows a keen awareness of the darker parts of human nature. She recalls, for example, her teenaged cousin Esmond Romilly, an atheist (he would later become a communist and the husband of Jessica Mitford), wagering that he could make her deny Jesus Christ "in sixty seconds flat." Mary, then around twelve, said he couldn't, so "Esmond got up and drew a washbasin full of cold water, frogmarched me to it, and held my head down. After two dousings I of course denied my Saviour."

The American edition of the book has dropped Clementine's name from the subtitle, but she features in it nearly as prominently as her husband. Soames is her mother's biographer, and here, too, Clementine appears as a complex personality, prone to "emotional, electric storms" but loving toward her children, unshakably loy-

al to her husband but intolerant of his more fanciful ideas. We learn of her "flaying" the Conservative Chief Whip David Margesson over luncheon at No. 10 after Margesson uttered some statement Clementine thought suggestive of appeasement. Soames remembers her mother shouting "Oh you old son of a bitch!" at Winston during one of their flare-ups; and she tells the story (also in Colville's diary) of Clementine storming out of a service at St. Martin-in-the-Fields in 1940 when the officiating clergyman urged a pacific attitude toward the country's enemies.

Many of the events Soames records have been recorded before, but in *A Daughter's Tale* we have a new eyewitness account of them: she quotes heavily from her diaries and from her letters to her parents and others, and her memory seems remarkably unaffected by the seven intervening decades. She was with her father when, for example, he arrived at Bristol University in April of 1941 to award honorary degrees. The surrounding neighborhoods had been bombed the night before; men kept arriving late to the ceremony, "grime on their faces half washed off, their ceremonial robes on over their firefighting clothes"; and yet people whose houses lay in ruins cheered for the Prime Minister and slapped him on the back as he passed.

Mary was her father's aide-de-camp when he visited New York in the early fall of 1943. She records a luncheon with President Roosevelt at which Helen Rogers Reid, the publisher of the *New York Herald Tribune*, expressed disapproval of Britain's India policy, a subject on which Churchill had notoriously hidebound opinions. Instead of defending British policy, the Prime Minister asked whether she meant "the brown Indians of India, who have multiplied alarmingly under the benevolent British rule? Or are we speaking of the red Indians in America, who I understand are almost extinct?" She was with him, too, during the 1945 general election, when the United Kingdom ousted its leader as soon as he'd finished saving it. Soames records her father's dejected resignation. "I've

thrown the reins on the horse's neck," he remarked to an adviser, Michael Parish. "But you won the race," Parish replied. "And in consequence I've been warned off the turf?"

The book reminds us how difficult it was, physically, for Churchill to win the race. Other biographies have recorded his bouts of pneumonia (one in 1943, another in 1944) but not with the eye of a daughter; again and again she quotes her worries over his (to her) obvious physical exhaustion. On the brighter side, I don't remember any other book on Churchill revealing so touchingly his penchant for ridiculous attire: "[C]lothed in a padded silk Chinese dressing-gown decorated with blue and gold dragons"; "Papa was wearing his mauve and black quilted dressing gown over his siren suit and a soft black hat"; "We had a tent pitched half way down the beach from which Papa emerged in shapeless drawers—smoking & with his ten gallon hat on."

A Daughter's Tale is a terrific memoir and there are thirty-two pages of photographs, many of them published for the first time. The absence of an index is the one fault I can find in this otherwise superb book.

Greasing the skids

Jay Jennings, editor

Escape Velocity:

A Charles Portis Miscellany.

Butler Center Books, 380 pages, \$27.95

reviewed by Stefan Beck

For years Ron Rosenbaum has played John the Baptist to Charles Portis's Christ, singing hosannas to the novelist whose gas cap he is not worthy to stoop down and unloose. This mission began with Rosenbaum's 1998 *Esquire* piece, "Our Least-Known Great Novelist," which convinced the Overlook Press to reprint Portis's five novels. In 2002, Rosenbaum named Portis's *Dog of the South* the novel he'd most like to force on a neighbor. Today, most reputable style guides require that articles about Portis include a contextualizing graf about Rosen-

baum. Why shouldn't it be so? Jay Jennings, the editor of *Escape Velocity: A Charles Portis Miscellany*, cheerfully reports that Portis has fallen out of obscurity: "Once at a party in New York, I met novelist Jonathan Lethem and . . . mentioned that [Portis] was our greatest unknown novelist." "Yes," Lethem retorted, "he's everybody's favorite least-known great novelist."

Odds are the Library of America has even heard of him. Why doesn't he have a volume? He's funnier than Kurt Vonnegut by a country mile, and *Escape Velocity*, a collection of Portis's reporting, travel writing, short stories, memoirs, and drama—plus an interview and several appreciations—boasts material superior to what is typically wrung out of microfiche to bolster the reputation of a minor or less-than-prolific writer. The critic Ed Park, whose 2003 *Believer* essay on Portis is included, writes that of Portis's five novels, "three [are] masterpieces, though which three is up for debate." Everything in *Escape Velocity* is good, but Portis's travel essays, his memoir "Combinations of Jacksons," and his play "Delray's New Moon" are the equal of any of his novels.

"The failure of historians studying the civil rights era to acknowledge and draw upon Portis's work on the beat in the busy summer of 1963," writes Jay Jennings, "is a mystery to me." This reads like what it turns out to be—breathless, fandom-clouded treatment of reportage that is only truly memorable when the odd flash of Portis wit shines through. At a Klan rally, Portis reports that a "man in red" speaking about sickle-cell anemia solemnly warned, "If so much as one drop of nigger blood gets in your baby's cereal . . . the baby will surely die in one year." Portis deadpans, "He did not explain how he thought a negro would come to bleed in anyone's cereal." It's a line worthy of Twain.

While Portis's stories are funny, they are funny after the fashion of an old, slightly dated Shouts & Murmurs column, or perhaps a competent Barthelme imitation. One parodies an Expert Advice hotline; another, bad travel writing; and another mocks journalism by way of a not terribly imaginative

conceit involving monkeys and typewriters. There is one excellent story, “I Don’t Talk Service No More,” which draws on the experiences of Portis, a former Marine, in Korea. It is an anomaly in the Portis oeuvre—it is neither funny, nor intended to be—but it’s a moving specimen of his fiction.

Portis’s best-known works are in the picaresque mode; anyone who’s read *Norwood*, *The Dog of the South*, or even *True Grit* has probably also wondered why in the hell *On the Road* is America’s most treasured road novel. Two of *Escape Velocity*’s travel pieces, “An Auto Odyssey through Darkest Baja” and “Motel Life, Lower Reaches,” say more about the old, venerable road trip than anything else ever committed to print. It helps that Portis actually knows about cars, their care and feeding, and that this arcana features prominently in his work. But what really helps is being hilarious. Many passages in “Motel Life” do for fleabags what *Lucky Jim* did for hangovers. Here, Portis has just emerged from a filthy motel pool whose water had a “prickly, tingling feel”:

Here came [the motel’s owner] at a limping trot, shouting at me, “Hey, get out of there! Can’t you read?” I was already climbing out when he started this, and he was still telling me to get out of the pool when I was standing there safe ashore, upright and dripping, before his eyes. . . .

He looked around, baffled, then saw that his DANGER/KEEP OUT/NO SWIMMING sign had fallen from the wire fence. He picked it up and showed it to me. Electricity, it seems, was leaking into the pool water from corroded wires and terminals near the underwater lamps. I asked [him] why he didn’t drain the dangerous electrified pool. Because, he said, it was only the great lateral pressure of all that water that kept the thing from collapsing in on itself, and he didn’t want to lose his pool.

This is, it turns out, a good way to think about Portis’s work: Only the great lateral pressure of his wit-laced nostalgia keeps the old, weird America from collapsing and being lost. This is the feeling one gets reading his memoir “Combinations of Jacksons” in

which Civil War trivia vies for the reader’s attention with—and loses to—an account of a boyhood attempt to breathe through bamboo while evading imaginary enemies in a creek. The triumph of nostalgia, of the old order, is the explicit theme of “Delray’s New Moon,” a masterpiece of baroque dialogue in which a coterie of old folks are spared relocation to a retirement community at the eleventh hour.

Many other surprises await the reader in a long interview with Portis. Why not spoil one? One night in Greenwich Village, a reporter from *The New York Times* repeatedly challenged Portis to an arm-wrestling match. Portis finally obliged, and promptly broke the man’s arm. “A freakish thing,” Portis insists, with characteristic modesty. “A weak bone or something.” His partisans know better. That *Times* writer made the mistake of tangling with Portis’s beer-lifting, car-fixing, book-writing arm, which is a powerful thing indeed.

Downbeat

James Wood

The Fun Stuff.

Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 352 pages, \$27

reviewed by Alec Solomita

James Wood’s *The Fun Stuff* is his first collection of occasional writings. In addition to his amiable, cranky novel *The Book Against God* and the engaging, teacherly *How Fiction Works*, Wood has given us two volumes of essays, each unified by a theme. His first book, *The Broken Estate: Essays on Literature and Belief*, examines the modern turn from religion, especially Christianity, to the arts, especially the novel, as our source of meaning, comfort, and transcendence. Various modes of literary comedy unite the pieces in *The Irresponsible Self: On Laughter and the Novel*. *The Fun Stuff*, by contrast, consists of a couple dozen unconnected reviews and essays bookended by two short memoirs. All the pieces originally appeared in *The New*

Yorker, *The New Republic*, or *The London Review of Books*.

Wood's virtues were apparent from the start: his gift for close reading, his control of vast stretches of writing, a prose style both learned and sharp, an eye for obscure literary connections, fearless verdicts. As often happens, his failings proved to be his worthy qualities in excess: snobbish put-downs; pedantry; an ever-more-promiscuous detection of parallels, antecedents, and influences; prose that becomes occasionally as pompous as his sometimes oracular, often idiosyncratic, literary judgments.

Excess, as it turns out, is what *The Fun Stuff* is all about. In the title piece, an homage to Keith Moon, the mad, doomed drummer of The Who, Wood tries hard to effervesce as he describes his teenage passion: "Noise, speed, rebellion: everyone secretly wants to play the drums, because hitting things, like yelling, returns us to the innocent violence of childhood. Music makes us want to dance, to register rhythm on and with our bodies. . . . And in drumming, how childishly close the connection is between the dancer and the dance!" This high-spirited cliché is uncharacteristic of Wood, while his allusion to Yeats—like his superfluous nods to Thomas Bernhard and Wallace Stevens in the rest of the paragraph—is all too familiar.

In much of Wood's work, his bold linkings are often as provocative as they are exotic. ("Sex exists for Updike as grass does, or the metallic sheen of an air-conditioning unit." "There is a technical connection, for instance, between *Make Way For Ducklings* and James's novel *What Maisie Knew*.") But in this latest collection, the associations are more like tics than insights, compulsion rather than revelation. In the Keith Moon piece alone—in addition to Yeats, Bernhard, and Stevens—Gogol, Philip Roth, Lawrence, Faulkner, Bellow, and Georges Bataille (to name a few) roll from Wood's corybantic drumsticks.

An excess of ill nature also characterizes *The Fun Stuff*. Where once he was barbed, Wood is now more often nasty. The short memoir "Packing My Father-In-Law's Li-

brary" is both a little less and a little more than kind. Wood's sketch of his father-in-law is (as my own father used to say) "not very charitable, young man." But curiously, his reports of François-Michel Messud's pedantry lead the reader back to Wood himself: "Not to know precisely who the Phoenicians were . . . not to know the names of the two most famous mosques in Istanbul . . . or the ethnic composition of the Albanians; not to recall exactly who said 'Beware of Greeks bearing gifts,' or to flub a French phrase . . . was to court swift disdain."

Wood's own disdain is swifter than the leopards, and more fierce than the evening wolves. One wonders what animus (or more occult motive) spurs him to plumb "Paul Auster's Shallowness" in such perplexing depth? While averring Auster's tediousness, Wood quotes and paraphrases the novelist at tedious length and fills page after page with critical overkill long after we're persuaded of his sour assessment. "A narrator who trades in such banalities is difficult to credit," he writes. Yes, yes! The reader agrees. Enough! But the picador in Wood pricks away.

A more revealing bit of waspishness pops up in an essay about George Orwell's politics. In a gratuitous segue, Wood misrepresents the columnist Jonah Goldberg: "This is not to suggest, as contemporary neoconservatives like Jonah Goldberg absurdly claim, that socialism is just fascism with a bleeding heart. Orwell never thought that." Here, as he "repeats" a claim Goldberg never made, Wood is, of course, running as fast as he can from Orwell's late, complex, often critical stance toward socialism. At the end of the piece, he provides an even less nuanced appraisal of another liberal bogey man: "[Orwell's] coinages, like 'Doublethink' and 'Newspeak' . . . now live an unexpectedly acute second life in the supposedly free West: to see Fox News go after President Obama or Bill Ayers for days on end is to think, simply, 'Hate Week.'" This delusional aside suggests that the British transplant turned Harvard professor has been living in the 02138 zip code a little too long ("the

most opinionated zip code in America,” the T-shirts boast—true enough, but it’s only one opinion). And besides, in the case of Bill Ayers, what’s not to hate?

When he likes a contemporary, Wood is often as rash. While his conclusion about Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go* is both generous and accurate—“this curious, surprisingly suggestive and tender novel”—and his appreciation of Cormac McCarthy is leavened with crisp caveats—“When critics laud him for being biblical, they are hearing sounds that are more often than not merely anti-quarian”—admiration trumps consideration in his excited assessments of Norman Rush, the dyspeptic novelist Aleksandar Hemon, and, especially, the translator and short story writer Lydia Davis.

Davis’s stories and poems, usually a few pages in length, are sly, sometimes funny sketches. She has written hundreds of them, which, when recently gathered into her *Collected Stories*, allowed Wood suddenly to recognize her “grand cumulative achievement,” which may one day “be seen as one of the great, strange American literary contributions.” He praises her “amusing and estranging” wit when she compares an endowed chair to a swivel chair. But her work “deepens” and can “take on a desperate aspect.” In Davis’s “Happy Memories,” a woman worries about how many happy memories she will have to comfort her in old age. Wood judges this story, which slips early and often over the line separating pathos from bathos, a “brief, shattering inquiry” with “an implacable Beckettian power.” Wood concludes his appreciation of Davis with a discussion of “Head, Heart” a “tiny entry” that “throbs with pain.”

“Heart weeps,” Davis writes, and “Head tries to help heart,” by reminding it about loss: “You will lose the ones you love. They will all go.” Heart feels better, but not for long.

“Heart is new to this.
I want them back, says heart
Head is all heart has.
Help, head. Help heart.”

It’s hard to decide if Wood’s elevation of this maudlin doggerel is the result of soft-heartedness or soft-headedness, or just a sign of writer’s fatigue. In any case, it’s not fun at all; and neither is it serious.

A savage wit

François Villon, translated by David Georgi
Poems.

Northwestern University Press, 304
pages, \$21.95

reviewed by Micah Mattix

François Villon is sometimes called the original *poète maudit*. This isn’t quite right. There’s no doubt he lived a fast life, faster than either Verlaine or Rimbaud ever would. He killed a priest (either by a stab to the groin or a rock to the face—it’s unknown which wound was the fatal one), stole 500 gold *écus* from the Collège de Navarre, and was implicated in both a second robbery and a second death before he was banished from Paris for ten years *in lieu* of being hanged.

What excludes Villon from the designation of *poète maudit*—at least as Verlaine used the term—is not a lack of moral deviance. It is a lack of pretension. Verlaine cursed himself. He rejected moral and poetic conventions and wrote against the insufferable bourgeois, in part, because such a break allowed him to see himself as a genius—sometimes with reason, mostly without.

Villon was unlucky. Robbery and murder are never justified, but Villon’s crimes were, at least partially, the result of living in an impoverished, plague-ridden Paris toward the end of the Hundred Years’ War and not merely out of boredom, though I am sure this had something to do with them, too.

And if Villon’s poetry can be—and often is—self-pitying, lewd, profane, and infantile, it is not so because Villon hoped to disgust his audience. Quite the opposite, it seems obvious that he wanted nothing more than to please them with his skewering of college professors, members of Parliament, prison

guards, and prostitutes. Verlaine's *Romances sans paroles* and Rimbaud's *Une Saison en Enfer* and *Les Illuminations* are written for the few. Villon's *Le Lais* and *Le Testament*, like Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, are satires that a whole people could understand and enjoy. Pound once said of Villon: "There is in him no pretense of the man sacrificed to his labor . . . what he sees, he writes."

David Georgi, in his new translation of Villon, hopes to capture something of Villon's wit and playfulness, something of his persona as "a streetwise prankster whose wisecracks are tinged with the shadow of the gallows and the cutting snicker of social satire."

This is no easy task. Villon's mock will and testament alternate between legal jargon and common speech in concise eight-syllable lines. Many of the people and places Villon names—names that would have been immediately familiar to Villon's audience—are foreign to twenty-first-century readers. Then, of course, there are the many puns, most of them sexual in nature, that are difficult (or sometimes impossible) to translate.

But Georgi manages mostly admirably. A couple of examples will suffice. In *Le Lais*, Villon bequests his sword to a member of a wealthy Parisian family and the secretary of King Charles VII. The original reads:

Item, a maistre Ytier Merchant,
 Au quel je me sens tres tenu,
 Laisse mon blanc d'acier franchant,
 Et a maistre Jehan le Cornu,
 Oui est gaige detenu
 Pour ung escot sept solz montant.
 Je veul, selon le contenu,
 Qu'on leur livre—en le rachatant!

Georgi's version is:

Item, to Master Ythier Merchant,
 to whom I am deeply in debt,
 and also to Master Jean de Horn,
 I leave my shaft of trenchant steel,
 which is currently held in hock
 against a bar tab of seven *sous*.
 I hereby record my wish that
 they be the ones who get the shaft.

Here "Corn" becomes "Horn" in order to capture Villon's allusion to a cuckold, and "en le rachatant" (literally, "when they buy it back" or "in buying it back") becomes "get the shaft," which neatly captures the general gist of the octave.

In *Le Testament*, Villon mocks an older man for his lack of wit. The original is:

Car s'en jeunesse il fut plaisant,
 Ores plus riens ne dit qui plaise.
 Tousjours viel cinge est desplaisant.
 Moue ne fait qui ne desplaise;
 S'il se taist, affin qu'il complaise,
 Il est tenu pour fol recreu;
 S'il parle, on lui dist qu'il se taise
 Et qu'en son prunier n'a pas creu.

Georgi renders this as:

When he was young he made them laugh
 but nothing he says is funny now.
 An old monkey is never cute.
 He makes a face and people cringe,
 but if he holds his tongue instead
 he's taken for a vacant fool.
 And if he speaks, they say "Shut up,
 there's no new plums on *your* old tree!"

Here Georgi matches Villon's brevity and wit. "Tousjours viel cinge est desplaisant" ("an old ape is unpleasing") becomes "An old monkey is never cute," and "there's no new plums on *your* old tree" neatly expresses the old man's sexual and intellectual impotence.

Georgi takes a fair amount of freedom in such lines, and rightly so. Without such changes, Villon's allusions and puns would be completely lost. But in an effort to recreate Villon's playfulness, Georgi can sometimes be overly colloquial or just plain wordy. The word "vachiers," for example, becomes "cowboys," and "Ce que j'ay escript est escript" becomes "that what I've written's written now." There's no "now" in the original and it is redundant in the English. Or Villon's most famous line, "Mais où sont les neiges d'antan?" becomes "Where is the snow that fell last year?" Why Georgi adds "that fell"

is unclear. It's clunky and entirely unnecessary. There are a number of such examples, which is a problem because another aspect of Villon's poetry, in addition to his puns and playfulness, is his concision.

Georgi also inexplicably elevates Villon's diction where no elevation exists. Words like "emporte" ("to take away" or "bear") become "beareth" and "En ce temps que j'ay dit devant" becomes "In the aforementioned year." Anthony Bonner's 1960 translation renders this as "At this time, as I have said."

Yet even with these missteps, Georgi's Villon, more than any Villon in the past fifty years, is a Villon who lives and breathes. We have a sense of his savage wit, his relief at his pardon, his occasional humility, his feistiness, and recurring sense that life is short, comical, and unfair. And if we have these, we have Villon.

Sweet, fancy Moses

Herman Wouk

The Lawgiver.

Simon & Schuster, 240 pages, \$25.99

reviewed by Jonathan Leaf

For authors who keep on writing into old age, both their strengths and their weaknesses tend to become exaggerated (as can their critical reception, either pro or con). *The Lawgiver*, the latest novel of Herman Wouk, the ninety-seven-year-old author of *Marjorie Morningstar* and *The Winds of War*, is a case in point.

A religious Jew, Wouk has been among the most popular and prolific novelists in American history, yet he counted among his regrets the fact that he never wrote a book about Moses.

Now here it is. Not far from his eleventh decade, he has produced a novel that deals, if only obliquely, with the Biblical patriarch. Wouk's more immediate subject is one Margo Solovei. A Hollywood film director known for making small-scale comedies, Margo has been charged by Louis Gluck,

an Australian mining tycoon, with making a big budget spectacular about the central figure of the Book of Exodus. Charming and plucky but hardly the outsized tyrannical personality that such a task might ordinarily call for, our heroine fears that she is in over her head. This is not her only concern. Through the course of Wouk's story, Margo must also resolve her unconsummated yearning for Josh Lewin, a corporate lawyer whom she met years earlier.

Wouk offers his story in epistolary form, and he includes himself as a subsidiary character, an advisor on the prospective motion picture. Trying to keep current, Wouk uses Skype call transcripts, emails, and text messages.

What results is reflective of the author's long career, one that commenced with the publication in 1947 of *Aurora Dawn*, an affectionate lampoon of the world of radio. That novel was soon followed by his hugely successful and extremely funny *The Caine Mutiny*, an account of larger-than-life happenings among a group of sailors on a naval minesweeper during the Second World War.

Though *The Caine Mutiny* was awarded the Pulitzer Prize, this was the first and last major literary honor its author received. As Wouk's next novels sold in the millions, his reputation among the cognoscenti plunged, and he was mocked for his repeated use of unexpected plot twists and his desire to entertain.

In this regard, his career has been something like that of Somerset Maugham. Enormous success with the reading public over many decades has proceeded hand-in-hand with adaptations of his books into widely seen plays, miniseries, and movies. All this came with a habit of publishing often, and not always with a strict standard of quality. For those who are envious of their earnings or hostile to their politics, of course, this offered ammunition.

Thus, in 1998, when a panel of judges for the Modern Library issued their list of the 100 best English-language novels of the twentieth century, they placed *Of Human Bondage* just sixty-sixth while placing a Steinbeck novel in the top ten. Wouk, needless to say, was entirely absent from the survey.

But what Wouk, like Maugham, offers at his best is that which is in such rare supply in even the most trumpeted fiction: complex and recognizable characters, humanely depicted in tales with involving, well-crafted plots. One wishes that this union of first-rate psychology and storytelling was not so uncommon and that it was afforded more regard.

I regret to say that *The Lawgiver* will not do much to persuade those who have sneered at Wouk. The book is ripe with improbability. Though Margo is a movie director living in Beverly Hills, she is a virgin. This is as likely nowadays, I suspect, as a filmmaker who arrives on set each morning in horse and buggy. Moreover, all the characters, like their author, are great lovers of classic fiction, and they take for granted not that their twenty- and thirty-something peers have watched “The Sopranos” and attended Jay-Z concerts, but that they have read Shaw’s letters. Equally implausibly, one character asks another to be her bridesmaid though they have been no more than pen pals.

Lacking is the remarkable attention to detail that distinguished the author’s exhaustively researched war novels. Missing as well is the precision in describing characters who obviously had living models, something that further elevated those volumes. Yet his usually appealing affection for his characters is here almost cloying.

The humor of his earlier books, which would have cut through the sugar, is absent. Employed as a staff comedy writer for the radio personality Fred Allen before he wrote his first novel, Wouk has always had a good sense of timing in telling a joke. He shared this talent with his contemporaries and fellow war veterans Gore Vidal and Norman Mailer. These two men lacked Wouk’s ability to describe three-dimensional people in their novels, and one is inclined to wonder why their reputations so far exceeded his. Was this simply politics? Or was it that they had a knack for self-promotion that he lacked? Whatever the cause, the time for a re-ordering of reputations is overdue. It may be time to admit that, for all his popularity and in spite of his flaws, Wouk was the best American novelist to write about the Second

World War. I would suggest, though, that interested readers skip *The Lawgiver*—unless they’re looking for writing of the same weight as *The Devil Wears Prada*.

Cries of London

Mark Ford, editor

London: A History in Verse.
Belknap, 784 pages, \$35

reviewed by Paul Dean

During the Olympic Games, the London *Guardian* published “Translating the British, 2012,” by Poet Laureate Carol Ann Duffy, which will doubtless be included in any revision of Mark Ford’s generously proportioned anthology. “We speak Shakespeare here,” Ms. Duffy proclaimed, “a hundred tongues, one-voiced.” Few of us think of Shakespeare in that way, and the variety of styles and tones in *London: A History in Verse* suggests polyphony rather than plainsong. Alas, it is a long time since anyone could say of the city that “Earth hath not anything to show more fair.” The depredations of the Great Fire, the Blitz, and the architectural vandalism of the late twentieth century have reduced much of the center to ugly incoherence, and the long-term social and economic benefits of the Games constructions, if any, remain to be seen. Where Wordsworth could marvel at the prospect of “Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples” lying “open unto the fields, and to the sky,” Alice Oswald’s “Another Westminster Bridge” offers only a view of “strip-lit offices” seen through “tiny windows,” “the teetering structures of administration.”

As Peter Ackroyd reminds us at the start of his magisterial *London: The Biography*, to which this anthology forms an ideal companion piece, the site of London has been inhabited by human beings for half a million years. Kipling is being no more than accurate when he makes the River Thames say “I remember the bat-winged lizard-birds,/ The Age of Ice and the mammoth herds,” for in 1690 the bones of a mammoth were indeed uncovered at King’s Cross. (It had probably been waiting

for a train.) London was already a commercial center under the Romans, a bulwark against the Vikings in King Alfred's reign, and aggressively asserted its civic rights in the face of attempted monarchical control in medieval times. Chaucer's London was a metropolis, at once the location of Court, Parliament, and the mercantile world; by the time Shakespeare was born, London's total population is estimated to have been around 100,000. With all this came the problems of crime, disease, overcrowding, and inordinate expense. "For lack of money I might not speed" is the refrain of the fifteenth-century poem "London Lickpenny"; Everard Guilpin's *Skialethia* (1598), with its charge that the city is "the map of vanities,/ The mart of fools, the magazine of gulls," is only one of many satirical critiques of the 1590s; John Donne, adapting Juvenal, complains of its endless procession of hangers-on and exhibitionists, as Pope was to do a century and a half later. High spirits and keen social observation are much in evidence in these writers, but more somber voices also make themselves heard—that of Chidiock Tichborne, for instance, writing from the Tower on the eve of his execution for treason in 1586, when he was in his late twenties:

My tale was heard and yet it was not told,
 My fruit is fallen and yet my leaves are
green;
 My youth is spent and yet I am not old,
 I saw the world and yet I was not seen;
 My thread is cut and yet it is
not spun,
 And now I live, and now my
life is done.

The fall of Charles I had profound effects upon the character of London, and it is good to see an extract, albeit brief, from Cowley's *The Civil War*, a pre-Miltonic epic poem in heroic couplets, which was not published in full until 1973. The Great Fire in 1666—only one of many, as Ackroyd notes, that have periodically ravaged the city—destroyed much of medieval London, including its greatest building, St. Paul's Cathedral. As Dryden wrote, in *Annus Mirabilis*:

The daring flames peeped in and saw from far
 The awful beauties of the sacred choir;
 But, since it was profaned by civil war,
 Heaven thought it fit to have it purged
by fire.

The poems on London by Swift, Gay ("Trivia: Or, the Art of Walking the Streets in London"), Pope, and Johnson (whose "London" laments the curse of poverty with personal depth of feeling) belong to the pre-Romantic age. By the time we reach Cowper, with his line "God made the country, and man made the town" (*The Task*), and Blake's protests, in "London," "The Chimney Sweep," and elsewhere, against the corruption of the city and its institutions, changes in sensibility are stirring. "To one that has been long in city pent," wrote Keats, "'Tis very sweet to look into the fair/ And open face of heaven"; to Shelley, London's darkness, smoke, and sinfulness brought it close to Hell; and to Clough it was more like "a huge Bazaar." Yet, as this last comparison suggests, the sheer scale and variety of London continued to dazzle. Wordsworth's evocation, in Book VII of *The Prelude* (amply excerpted here), of its multicultural population, architectural splendor, and unique range of diversions, remains vivid and exciting, even if he does feel obliged to censure its "blank confusion."

One of the most interesting aspects of Mark Ford's book is its selection of London poems by Hardy, of which, as he says, there are a "surprising number." In "The Coronation," the monarchs buried in Westminster Abbey comment on the scaffolding being erected for the coronation of George V in 1911. Each gives a personal slant to the noise they hear; Mary Stuart believes a scaffold is being put up, while Henry VIII naturally suggests a wedding: "Ha-ha! I never would bow down to Rimmon,/ But I had a rare time with those six women!" "In the British Museum," the scene of more than one poem, focuses on a working-class man who muses on the fact that a stone from the Areopagus which he is viewing might once have echoed to the voice of St. Paul. "In St. Paul's a While Ago" goes further, imagining Paul himself preaching in the building, and being

spurned by passers-by as “An epilept enthusiast.” Characteristically, London for Hardy becomes a vast museum itself, a perpetual historical echo-chamber. Different sounds reverberate to different poets; for W. E. Henley, the cries of street hawkers; for Arthur Symonds, the entertainments of the music-hall; for D. H. Lawrence, the importunings of the homeless on the Embankment; for T. S. Eliot, the snatches of Cockney conversation in pubs—which I mention in order to express astonishment that Mark Ford does not include those lines in his extracts from *The Waste Land*.

Once we enter the twentieth century, the diversity is bewildering. But, to gain anchorage, consider two poems entitled “Parliament Hill Fields,” one by John Betjeman, the other by Sylvia Plath. For Betjeman, the spot (so called because of its use as a Roundhead rallying-point in the Civil War) evokes a precise topography of named shops and churches, and ends with sympathy for “children carrying down/ Sheaves of drooping dandelions to the courts of Kentish Town.” For Plath, wandering neurotically, a “crocodile of small girls . . . Opens to swallow me,” and “over Kentish Town, an ashen smudge/ Swaddles roof and tree.” London loses its old identity without quite taking on a new one. The last fifty pages or so of the anthology make depressing reading, as the city becomes the excuse for the preening of various poetical egos, with the occasional desperate attempt at a political poem, such as David Kennedy’s “The Bombs, July 2005.” Finally we come to Ahren Warner’s “Διόνυσος” with its remark that the loutish boyfriend of some girl on a bus

but a happy one	is obviously a knob and that
is the important	it seems to me though not localisable thing.

Yes indeed, one may be a happy knob anywhere these days; but with that cheerless reflection, the specific importance of London to poetry has evaporated.

Habitually restless

Penelope Niven

Thornton Wilder: A Life.

Harper, 848 pages, \$39.99

reviewed by John Simon

Based on more than a decade’s research and travel, *Thornton Wilder: A Life* is written by Penelope Niven, distant kin of Thornton’s mother, Isabella Niven Wilder. Wilder (1897–1975) was, by his own admission, a gypsy, peripatetic to the last, dying at seventy-eight in the family home at Hamden, Connecticut, not far from New Haven.

He journeyed and sojourned all over the U.S., Europe, and South America, studied as a schoolboy in China, and served as an officer in North Africa with Air Corps Intelligence during World War II. Though a staunch American, he was equally a citizen of the world, writing, as he stressed, about and for Everyman. He won awards and fame in more or less equal measure for his novels and plays, although it is mostly through the latter that he survives.

Thornton’s very New England father, Amos Parker Wilder, was a newspaper owner and editor turned American consul general in Hong Kong and Shanghai. Both Thornton and his eldest sister, Charlotte, attended an English school in provincial China, where they may have incurred outsider feelings. Their mother was the cultivated Isabella, a fine pianist, an amateur poet, and a translator of Verhaeren and Carducci, no less. But Amos shockingly told her that there was no tenderness left in him after the girl he really loved turned him down.

Strictly religious and a fanatical teetotaler, Amos was a devoted but domineeringly meddling father to another Amos, Thornton, Charlotte, Isabel, and Janet, and went so far as to have his sons sign statements that they would never touch alcohol. This may have contributed to Thornton’s compensatory love for his sympathetic mother, which was clearly excessive.

The family was often scattered between China and America, New England and California. Both sons went to school in Berkeley, continued at the very Christian Oberlin College

(founded by their ancestors), and ended up, like their father, at Yale. The eventual family home was in Hamden where the elder Amos worked for the Yale-in-China Foundation.

All along, Thornton was writing plays, often in his head during the long walks he enjoyed all through his life. This was abetted by the plays and operas his mother took him to, and that he greatly enjoyed. Sometimes he and his siblings acted in his plays, which their father disapproved of, once forbidding Thornton to play Wilde's *Lady Bracknell* in an all-male school production. The father had both sons work on farms during summer vacations, which Thornton hated. "A fine lad," his father considered him, hoping that physical labor would "rid [him] of his peculiar gait and certain effeminate ways."

Thornton kept up his language studies; he was good at Greek and Latin, to which he added French, German, and Italian, while also studying piano, organ, and violin. He followed theater in the German-speaking countries with particular interest, and eventually even managed to meet his idol, Max Reinhardt, though Wilder was disappointed in his looks.

He became friends, platonically, with Nina Trego, a smart young woman, which set the tone for many other female friendships. These never became sexual, though they involved lifelong epistolary relationships, as with Amy Weil Wertheimer, a married woman smitten with him, but whom he kept at arm's length. To avoid sex, he tended to pick women who were married, older, or lived far away. Thus the British interior decorator Sybil Colefax (more than twenty years older, to whom he wrote 400 letters), who lived in England, and Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, who were lesbians.

This is where Niven's biography falls short. Not until page 433 does Niven touch upon homosexuality, which was a significant influence on his life and work. It is widely known that Wilder was a closeted homosexual, with, to be sure, only one documented relationship, but also a few putative others. Niven makes much of his intense privacy—understandable in a family that included a strictly puritan, temperance-fanatic father and a minister elder

brother during a largely homophobic era—but relatively little of the homosexuality that may have been a cause of this.

Niven repeatedly alludes to some terrible blow that Wilder suffered as a young man during his eight-month stay for study in Rome, while he also mingled with high society. Here he incurred a wound that, she points out, remained with him forever, which stemmed from a rebuff by a would-be lover—or even two lovers—about which he remained vague, though it figures, in disguised form, in some of his works, particularly his first novel, *The Cabala*.

To people involved with him, Wilder could be both very difficult and very secretive. About this, Niven contradicts herself. We read on page 336, "Not only was Wilder the product of an upbringing that left an intimidating mark on his emotional and sexual life, as well as the lives of his brother and two of his sisters, but the heartbreaks that wounded him in the 1920s had made him a cynic, wary of intimacy, full of doubts about himself and distrust of others." But on page 345, we read, "Wilder—too trusting, and sometimes naïve and gullible—could become too enamored of a friend."

More frequent than contradictions are repetitions, with every Wilder trait—and secretiveness in particular—dwelt on over and over. Without this, the book could have been much shorter, as it would have been without details about the siblings, especially about his sister Charlotte's descent into madness, even though it shows how much that cost him in money for her hospitalizations and in remarkable patience with her.

We follow Wilder's career, which, in his glory days, made him the only author to win Pulitzer Prizes for both fiction (*The Bridge of San Luis Rey*) and drama (*Our Town*) and another one for *The Skin of Our Teeth*. He was happy enough as a French language teacher at Lawrenceville School, and, for another five years, studied and taught French literature at the University of Chicago. While there, he became lifelong friends with the school's president, Robert Maynard Hutchins, and his wife, despite their Isolationist position during World War II, in which Wilder served and worked his way up to lieutenant colonel.

Two things, he said, were worth living for: great art and friends. (He should have added travel.) Niven does not quote Glenway Wescott's observation about Wilder: "I have never known anyone give his friends so much satisfaction of pride, even of vanity." And what famous people some of Wilder's friends were: Stephen Vincent Benét, William Rose Benét and his wife Elinor Wylie, Montgomery Clift, Katharine Cornell and her husband Guthrie McClintic, Lauro De Bosis, Lynn Fontanne and Alfred Lunt, Sigmund Freud, Ruth Gordon (whom he adored, wrote *The Matchmaker* for, and thought of marrying, her spouse Garson Kanin notwithstanding), Texas Guinan, Ernest Hemingway, Mabel Dodge Luhan, Archibald MacLeish (who sponsored his military and international lecturing careers), Max Reinhardt, Edwin Arlington Robinson (whom he befriended during one of his several stays at the MacDowell Colony), Jean-Paul Sartre, the bedridden playwright Edward Sheldon (whom he often visited), Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, the bookish heavyweight Gene Tunney (with whom he went on a European walking tour), Orson Welles, and—his closest friend of all—the waspish critic Alexander Woollcott.

Where did he not travel? "He was habitually restless," Niven writes, "with an innate yearning for the road, barely finishing one journey before he wanted to embark on the next." He traveled throughout most major European countries and much of the United States, also in Canada and Peru, sometimes lingering where he went. In many cities he proved a popular lecturer, at times even in French and German. He socialized much, even while often seeking Gertrude Stein's ideal of solitude without loneliness.

He read the right authors in German, French, Italian, and Spanish. He revered Mme. de Sévigné, for him the greatest epistolarian

ever. He loved Calderón, who led him to Lope de Vega, and his seemingly endless attempts to establish a definitive chronology for Lope's numerous writings. There were also Proust, Pirandello, Kierkegaard, and Ibsen; Goethe, Grillparzer, Stifter, and Nestroy, one of whose plays he turned into the failed *Merchant of Yonkers*, rewritten as the successful *Matchmaker*, and ultimately becoming *Hello, Dolly!*, making him affluent for life.

His greatest passion, though, was for James Joyce, and especially *Finnegans Wake*, which he wrote a book about and, off and on, spent years deciphering. It also led to trouble when Joseph Campbell and Henry Morton Robinson, rival Finnegans, accused him in print of plagiarizing Joyce's novel for *The Skin of Our Teeth*. This became a huge brouhaha, enlisting vehement partisanship for and against Wilder, and nearly landing him in court. In the end, he won out, with perhaps his best defender being Bennett Cerf in the *Saturday Review*, where the attack had started. "Quoting the opening sentences of Joyce's novel," Niven writes, "Cerf declared that it was 'utterly incomprehensible to ninety-nine percent of the literate public,' and that 'anybody who could turn that sort of thing into a smash hit on Broadway is entitled to everything he can get.'"

I would like to leave you pondering two of Wilder's quoted remarks. Of woman onstage: "Under those bright lights, on that timeless platform, all the modesty of demeanor in the world cannot convince us that this is not our hereditary ghost, the haunter of our nervous system, the friend-enemy of our dreams and appetites." And again: "Woman is silly and man is stupid, but in one another's [properly each other's] company they seem temporarily to surpass themselves, and this false and superficial elation is the only thing we can write about." How fortunate for Wilder and for us that he could ignore his own precepts.

On solitude: rereading May Sarton's journals

by *Richard Teleky*

On January 1, 1975, May Sarton, the American diarist, poet, and novelist, went up to the third-floor study of her house in York, Maine, and glanced out the window at its ocean view. She had just one daily task ahead—walking the dog at noon. When she opened a new calendar, the “only connect” epigraph from E. M. Forster’s *Howards End* caught her eye. Sarton began an entry in her journal by recording this moment and soon fell into a riff about solitude and detachment, one of the “mini-essays,” as she called them, that appear in her journals. The context of her thoughts that morning was the recent Christmas holidays and her sense of release after the departure of her guests.

Sarton moves deftly in her entry, with a kind of free association. From Forster’s admonition she proceeds to Sybille Bedford’s biography of Aldous Huxley, which she had been reading, commenting on his vision of life (“he was able to *create* only a fragmented world”), and then recalls an afternoon in London, during the previous fall, with her friends Julian and Juliette Huxley (Aldous and Julian were brothers), whom she found to be “old now, old and self-absorbed,” set against happier memories of their youthful generosity during the years before the Second World War. Thoughts of friendship lead her to her latest novel, *Kinds of Love*, which had brought her new readers. Some of these even showed up at her door with gifts—one young man offered a bunch of roses from his grandmother and a Belgian

cake to honor her forebears. Sarton ends the passage with a nod to solitude’s freedom: “Let it all begin once more, the step-by-step joyful effort to lift a poem out.” This entry, running three pages, appeared in *The House by the Sea*, and is as familiar to me as a comfortable old sweater.

May Sarton is not a great poet or novelist. There, I’ve said it. Why, then, this essay? Because she is an exemplary diarist. Every January, for over two decades, I begin my reading of the new year with one of her journals. It’s become a tradition, a ritual of sorts. You might say that I reread one of Sarton’s journals instead of making any new year’s resolutions. There are a total of eight journals, which means that I’ve read all of them at least twice. And I’ll admit that several times in the past decades I’ve taken out a specific volume and looked for a marked passage that seemed relevant to something troubling my own life: the death of a parent, a difficult move, the loss of a beloved pet, the end of a friendship. Sarton, who lived alone for thirty-seven years (until her death at the age of eighty-three, in 1995), often makes a great deal of sense about living alone.

The subject of solitude is a difficult one because it can mean so many different things. May Sarton’s poetry is often predictable and her novels sometimes hastily written (among several exceptions are *As We Are Now* and *Mrs. Stevens Hears the Mermaids Singing*). Her publisher, Norton, treated her like a cash cow, bringing out a new book almost

yearly and barely editing them for repetition, flaccid writing, and banal imagery. In the journals, however, Sarton rose above her limitations both as a writer and a cult figure in the 1970s and 1980s. She recorded her thoughts, her wishes, her problems and fears, but most of all the dailiness of living: planting spring bulbs, organizing her desk before a writing session, grooming one of her cats, making *carbonnade à la Flamande* (a Belgian beef-and-beer stew from her childhood), coping with a broken furnace, napping beside her dog, watching the sky or the ocean, listening to a favorite Mozart recording, and reading, reading, reading. Yet the comings and goings at her houses—first in Nelson, New Hampshire, in *Journal of a Solitude*, and then near York, Maine, in the subsequent journals—are always shadowed by aging, illness, and depression.

My interest in Sarton was piqued by her first journal, and the title itself may help explain why. Instead of calling the book *Journal of Solitude*, Sarton added the article *a*, giving the noun “solitude” a double meaning as both a place, state, or space, and as a person, figure, or psychological type. This blurring of literal sense is crucial.

For Sarton, isolation was an important part of solitude. She welcomed a generous chunk of isolation from other human beings, although she did live with various cats, her sheltie, a green parrot named Punch, and, for one summer, a donkey called Esmeralda. As she wrote, “Solitude shared with animals has a special quality, and rarely turns into loneliness.”

Keeping a journal of solitude for publication meant that Sarton edited herself for her readers: each journal became a public performance of sorts. She was aware of this paradox. She thought that the art of keeping a “very personal record” for publication pivots on the writer’s attitude, which Sarton summed up with an axiom from her friend Elizabeth Bowen, the Anglo-Irish novelist: “One must regard oneself impersonally as an instrument.” About her own readers, Sarton wrote, “From my isolation to the isolation of

someone somewhere who will find my work there exists a true communion.” In an interview from 1976 with Jane S. Bakerman, she claimed that she had never kept a journal except for publication:

I think that people who keep journals not for publication are terribly narcissistic. It’s very fashionable now; people are keeping journals more and more. But I very much doubt whether they really are honest with themselves. I think often, it’s just a reflective mirror in which you see yourself in the best possible light.

Along with a conversational tone, Sarton’s method of journal writing, which she discussed with Bakerman, was to move beyond the personal: “Quite a large part of my journals is really short, very short, informal essays of two or three paragraphs.” These mini-essays allowed her “to examine experience and to relate it to universal experience. It is this reflection which *makes* a journal; it’s not just telling what happened today.”

“Universal” was probably the wrong word for Sarton to use—“general” might have been a better choice—since her journals record an uncommon life, though elements of it appealed to readers of disparate backgrounds.

Sarton began writing *Journal of a Solitude* because she believed that her popular memoir *Plant Dreaming Deep*—about reclaiming an eighteenth-century house in a small New England village and making a life there suited to the needs of her writing—gave a false impression of a serene life in the country, an idyll of easily produced books and effortless gardening. Known for inviting guests for lunches of lobster salad and Pouilly-Fuissé and later complaining that she did not have enough time to herself, Sarton was brutally frank about her conflicting needs for time with people and time alone, and the price that she—and sometimes others—paid for this conflict. Far from being a recluse, Sarton required the silence at the core of solitude to balance her contacts with the world.

In the thirty-minute documentary *A World of Light: Portrait of May Sarton*, by Martha Wheelock and Marita Simpson,

Sarton called solitude “my last great love.” And like many great loves, it had complications. One requirement of solitude, she argued, was “not to get unbalanced and not let depression get hold of you. Everything becomes more intense, which is partly why it’s marvelous. There’s nothing to break the intensity.” Such intensity, she told Wheelock, provides an ideal ground for creation: “The great flow from the subconscious to the conscious is the good thing about solitude; there’s no barrier between consciousness and the subconscious, or much less.”

While not everyone who lives alone wants solitude, this apparent contradiction may relate to a pervasive social stigma, as if solitudes are deficient in some way. In his study *Going Solo: The Extraordinary Rise and Surprising Appeal of Living Alone*, sociologist Eric Klinenberg examined the tremendous growth in people living alone over the last fifty years and concluded that the trend will continue because it satisfies many diverse desires. Statistics show that 28 percent of all Americans and Canadians live in “households with only one occupant” (the figure is closer to 50 percent for large metropolitan areas); the national percentage is greatest in the highly developed Scandinavian countries, with 45 percent, and lowest in the poorest, with 3 percent in Pakistan. But I don’t want to get lost in numbers and bypass my true subject, which is not the practical problems of living alone, or self-sufficiency, but solitude itself.

Though there are more than four centuries between Michel de Montaigne’s classic essay “Of Solitude” (1572–74) and the British psychoanalyst Anthony Storr’s much-praised study *Solitude: A Return to the Self* (1988), Sarton might have agreed with the ideas of both men. Montaigne, who had retired from court life to his father’s country estate, saw solitude as something to follow experience of the world, and suiting some temperaments more than others. It was a state of being alone where “our ordinary conversation must be between us and ourselves” (much like keeping a journal) and also a challenge:

“let us win from ourselves the power to live really alone and to live that way at our ease.” Storr saw solitude as a capacity to be alone “linked with self-discovery.” While Storr acknowledges that temperament plays a part in this “return,” he continues that, for creative individuals, solitude always involves “the search for coherence and sense.” That phrase might have come from Sarton herself; it echoes her idea of “the whole self” and her emphasis on discovering one’s true identity in solitude, and “growing” into that self.

Sarton’s attitude towards journal writing grew from her commitment to solitude. In *The House by the Sea*, she says that she wanted her journals to be written “on the pulse of the moment,” showing how one might live as a solitude yet engage life fully. She further developed this idea in *At Seventy*, claiming that it is “the business of the journalist to record a mood as it comes, as exactly as possible, knowing that life is flux and that the mood must change.” Sarton recognized her own limitations, including a tumultuous temperament: “I feel too much, sense too much, am exhausted by the reverberations after even the simplest conversation. But the deep collision is and has been with my unregenerate, tormenting, and tormented self.” In Wheelock and Simpson’s documentary, Sarton explained that for journal writing she was “not dependent on the muse,” as she was for poetry. It was necessary, however, to discover “the right line between indiscretion and openness.” Journals allowed her to “find out where I really am.” Recording dailiness mattered: “What seems often fairly meaningless—I mean like weeding a patch in the garden—when I write about it in the journal, it sort of becomes something else.” Dailiness shapes the balance Sarton sought for her life and work: “I think I have a kind of balance and discretion in the journals that I really don’t have, unfortunately, in my life.” (In the film she paused before saying “unfortunately” with a small laugh.) Does her statement suggest that the journals are a distortion? Not necessarily. Sarton’s answer was that “as an artist I think there’s taste,” which she defined

as “what you are going to talk about, and what not.”

While Sarton rarely wrote extended discussions of public affairs, and did not spend pages recollecting memories for their meanings, such topics do appear, usually in relation to the moral imagination. She often mentions her attachment to Europe, her parents (George Sarton, the Belgian historian of science, and Mabel Elwes, an English clothing designer), her New England childhood, and of numerous friendships with figures of note, from the actress Eva Le Gallienne to the Huxleys to other poets, including Louise Bogan and Muriel Rukeyser. When Sarton mentions a lover (usually unnamed), it’s the process of love that engages her imagination, not confessions about an individual. Almost inevitably the process touches on solitude and the claims that others made. Sarton had the misfortune to find an unsympathetic biographer in Margot Peters, whose *May Sarton: A Biography* includes her subject’s admission that conflict had become “the leitmotif of this journal,” but Peters dismisses Sarton’s self-analysis: “A true solitary would not complain publicly about solitude, inspiring hundreds of people to relieve it. But then May was a solitary only because of her impossible temperament.” The word “relieve” here suggests that Peters misunderstood Sarton’s ideas about solitude. Apparently she wanted her subject to be an iconic model of female creativity, the Wise Woman—a role that Sarton declined to play.

If one accepts Sarton’s ideas about an artist’s life—“How one lives as a private person is intimately bound into the work”—then her journals can be seen as a struggle to attain the balance that would let her continue writing. In *Journal of a Solitude*, she thought of herself as someone “always split between art and life,” with solitude providing a bridge between them. Never serene, she did try for something like equilibrium. The impression of continual striving—and the sheer hard work of it—is one of the most original features of her journals. As she admitted, “It occurs to me that boredom and panic are the

two devils the solitary must combat”; several times she notes the “panic of solitude.” Though she left this “panic” undefined, in an interview with Karla Hammond from 1977, Sarton spoke about “making a life out of solitude,” and observed, “Many people live alone. So there’s a great interest in this, just as there’s a great interest in dying. Solitude has some resemblance to dying.” Its relation to death may be what sometimes makes solitude an uneasy state, yet Sarton’s journals also show that, as a place or space, solitude can bring a heightened sense of awareness of the nonhuman relations of one’s life; this is, in part, what I mean by dailiness. It’s not just that she takes the time to notice her surroundings (the bulbs, the sunsets, the snow storms), or her rich ties to animals, but that without human companionship Sarton has the time, though never quite enough, to realize the significance of bonds that might otherwise seem insignificant. Yet the idea of death remains constant: “I feel sure that after sixty everyone has death in the back of his or her consciousness much of the time,” she wrote in *The House by the Sea*. (Sarton was about to turn sixty-five when she made that observation.) With heightened awareness, she saw her world more sympathetically—an ideal condition for art-making, even if the art doesn’t always match the vision.

May Sarton, at her best, reaffirms the importance of paying attention to the smallest details of the day, yet she often had to remind herself of this: “I always forget how important the empty days are, how important it may be sometimes not to expect to produce anything, even a few lines in a journal.” When she gave advice about writing journals, in an interview with Lois Rosenthal in 1989, Sarton emphasized the quotidian: “Remember to write about what you are seeing every day, and if you are going to hold the reader’s interest, you must write very well. And what does writing well mean? It means seeing very well, seeing in a totally original way.” Keeping a journal is worthwhile because “it gives a certain edge to the ordinary things in life,” which makes the solitary enter a deeper relation with his or her surroundings, enjoying

the full benefit of solitude. This “edge” was a recurring motif in Sarton’s various interviews, and she elaborated on the idea while talking with William Heyen and Mary Elsie Robertson in 1983, explaining that “what’s important about life is not the major calamities or joys but just living the day, just seeing the light on the wall.” Easier said than done.

As time passes, literary reputations go in and out of fashion. Since May Sarton’s death, Norton has published three new books of hers, all selections of letters ed-

ited by Susan Sherman. I doubt that I’m the only reader still holding on to my old copies of the journals and wishing for a new one. Sarton often complained that too many readers and critics preferred her journals to her poetry, but in 1987, at the age of seventy-five, she was able to tell her interviewer Connie Goldman: “I think I have created something of a work of art with the journal, and I’m proud of that. For a long time I brushed the journals aside and said, ‘They’re just nothing,’ but I don’t think that now.” Sarton’s readers will agree.

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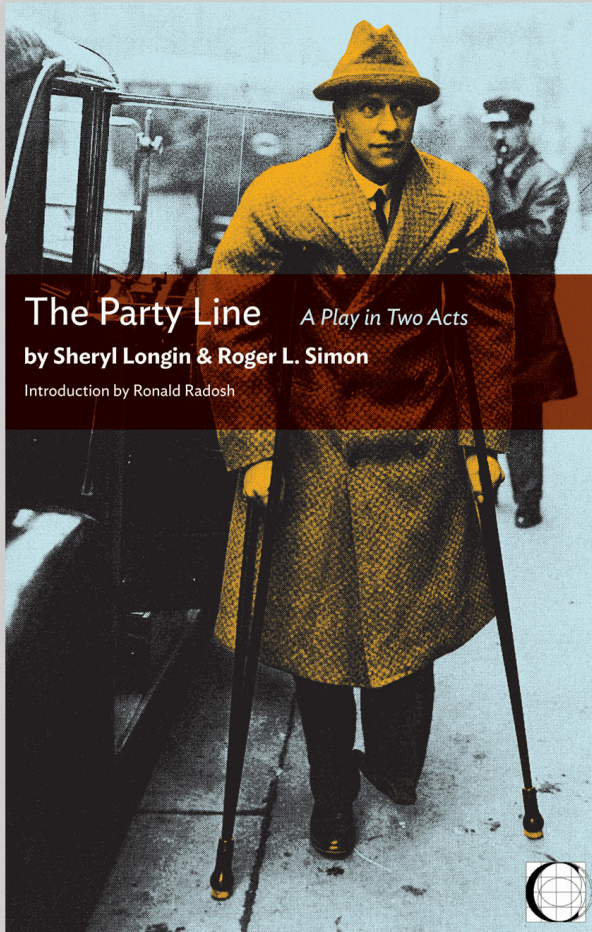


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