

# The New Criterion

October 2019

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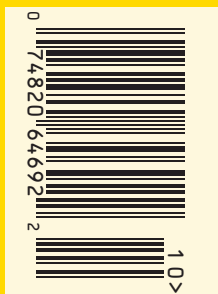
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# The New Criterion *October 2019*

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# Notes & Comments: October 2019

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## *Ain't that a shame*

What is shame? In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle regards shame—*aidōs*—as a feeling that must be kept in proper balance. Too little shame and the brazen will say or do anything, with no respect for the opinions of others. Too much shame and the bashful will not speak up in the face of opposing views, even to do what is right.

Shame is not a virtue in itself. But a good sense of shame helps us distinguish between virtue and vice. This sense is especially important for the young, who might be otherwise prone to do shameful things were it not for their flushed, embarrassed faces. As we age, a healthy sense of shame ultimately directs us away from shamefulness as we grow to understand virtue. “Whilst shame keeps its watch,” writes Edmund Burke in the *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, “virtue is not wholly extinguished in the heart.”

Is there any doubt that culture today has lost this balance of shame? *Just do it*, we are told. *Be yourself*. From educators to advertisers, entire industries exhort us to express supposedly suppressed urges and identities by ignoring our natural feelings of shame.

In the West we have been hearing such misdirection since the 1960s. In a flash, the social norms that helped us understand shame were actively abandoned, all with disastrous consequences. In the name of self-expression, self-empowerment, self-actualization, and

whatever other form of selfish sophistry, the traditions of shame that we once found around divorce, or raising children out of wedlock, or other failures to family, community, and true self were counseled out, medicated away, or straight up ignored.

The result has been a society in which more and more is permitted but less and less is allowed. How is this possible? Just ask Vladimir Lenin. Stripping us of our inward conscience, the radical Left steps in to impose a new outward consciousness. Our sense of shame is replaced by a culture of shaming.

In “Leninthink,” this month’s lead essay and the subject of his talk for our inaugural Circle Lecture, Gary Saul Morson writes about how such reversals of shame are built into the very design of communist ideology. “Lenin worked by a principle of anti-empathy,” Morson explains, “and this approach was to define Soviet ethics. I know of no other society, except those modeled on the one Lenin created, where schoolchildren were taught that mercy, kindness, and pity are vices. After all, these feelings might lead one to hesitate shooting a class enemy or denouncing one’s parents.”

The soul-denying experiment of Marxism-Leninism demands shamelessness from its adherents and uses shame to impose this political discipline. The more ruthless and indiscriminate and inward-turning the shaming, the more assured such actions stay true to Party doctrine. “What is new, and uniquely

horrible about the Soviets and their successors,” Morson writes, “is that they directed their fury at their *own* people.”

From the show trials of the 1930s on through Stalin’s mass purges and denunciations, the use of political shame to impose shamelessness—and the shamelessness required to expunge personal shame—has been a hallmark of socialist terror. In China, Chairman Mao made a high art out of public shame. Everywhere from workplaces to stadiums, China’s Cultural Revolution choreographed elaborate “struggle sessions” to torture and shame class enemies. Those who denied their crimes and pleaded their innocence were, of course, regarded by the Marxists as the most guilty. One favorite spectacle was to force professors to balance on stools in the sports arenas of their universities. The Maoists hung classroom blackboards around their necks and wrote out their names and supposed crimes in chalk.

Anything sound similar to the campus struggle sessions of today? The revolution eats its own. It is now mainly “liberal” professors who find themselves dragged before tribunals or simply denounced on the quad for supposed slights against the latest iteration of race, class, and sexual doctrine.

A similar fervor now extends to all corners of contemporary life. Much of social media and the news cycle revolve around this “call-out culture” and its forensic analysis of one’s supposed transgressions. Shaming words also become shaming actions. Political non-believers now find themselves pelted with eggs and covered with liquids, with videos of their “milkshaking” made available online for further mocking. Diners have been hounded out of restaurants. As in the recent assault of the journalist Andy Ngo by an “Antifa” mob in Portland, Oregon, such Leftist violence is turning increasingly vicious.

Some fifteen years ago, we had occasion to comment on Martha Nussbaum’s *Hiding from Humanity: Disgust, Shame, and the Law* (“Does shame have a future?” September 2004). Back then, Professor Nussbaum, an epitome of everything politically correct, was dead set

against the practice of stigmatizing or shaming certain attitudes or behavior because they departed from traditional canons of morality or mannerly conduct. But as far as we know, Professor Nussbaum—along with many other soi-disant supporters of liberal values—has not been on the barricades defending the victims of Antifa and the squads of academic scolds that have made the academy so inhospitable a place for learning.

Instead of being “famous for fifteen minutes” as a certain wit once promised, the future seems determined to make each of us the focus of the “Two Minutes Hate” of George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. “The rage that one felt was an abstract, undirected emotion,” Orwell writes of the daily shaming ritual, “which could be switched from one object to another like the flame of a blowlamp.” The object of ire is ultimately meaningless. What matters is the display of denunciation and the pitiless scorn that must be arbitrarily shown. (D. J. Taylor has more to say about Orwell later in this issue.)

What a shame. In shameless times, it is these shamers who should be the most ashamed.

### *Marching right along*

The “long march through the institutions” continues apace, this time with a storming of the galleries of the Whitney Museum of American Art. As Herbert Marcuse wrote in *Counterrevolution and Revolt*, radicals now work “against the established institutions while working within them.” This past summer the New York museum found itself on the wrong side of history when artist protestors zeroed in on a board member who had given millions to the institution but whose business dealings did not conform to their political standards. In his letter of resignation to his fellow board members, the trustee Warren B. Kanders expressed little understanding of our radical age as he was fed to the mob:

Art, as I know it, is not intended to force one-sided answers, or to suppress independent thinking. And yet, these recent events have illustrated

how a single narrative, created and sustained by groups with a much larger and more insidious agenda, can overwhelm that spirit.

Did Mr. Kanders really think his Jeff Koons would save him from revolutionary justice? Over the years we have had our differences with the Whitney Museum. We would be hard pressed to identify a “Whitney Biennial” we much cared for. The new downtown headquarters is also more showpiece than showcase—which is too bad, given the Whitney’s solid examinations of American modernism. But the episode reminds us of the civil war that is now waging between the neoliberal establishment, represented by the progressive-flag-waving Whitney, and a resurgent radical Left.

Mr. Kanders could have been anyone—and he will be far from the last victim if the Left continues this way. The real target here is the American system of philanthropy and the free association of its private boards, which have long drawn Leftist ire. Kanders was a target of opportunity—just like the late David Koch, or the Sackler family, or now the real estate mogul Stephen Ross.

Under Director Adam Weinberg, the Whitney showed a failure of leadership in allowing the protests to continue, just as the institution two years before permitted grumblers to censor one of its paintings. Neoliberals always believe they can outflank the rhetoric of the Left while maintaining the prerogatives of the center. Next time they should just send the radicals packing.

### *Victor at last*

Regular readers of *The New Criterion* will be familiar with the work of Victor Davis Hanson, the classicist, military historian, professor, and sage of the American agricultural experience. Victor has appeared regularly in our pages for years, first in 2002, enumerating the lessons that the Duke of Wellington can still teach us, and most recently this month, examining the nature of farming in eighteenth-century America. Recognizing Victor’s myriad

achievements—too numerous to list in this short space—*The New Criterion* bestowed upon him our sixth Edmund Burke Award for Service to Culture and Society in 2018. We are now thrilled to announce that our association with this great scholar has been made even more official. Owing to the generosity of the Gilder Foundation, Victor has been named the inaugural Visiting Critic at *The New Criterion* for this publishing season. In this position, he will contribute essays to the magazine on the role of citizenship in American democracy, an increasingly important topic and one about which he is currently writing a book. He will also participate in events with the Friends of *The New Criterion*. Victor’s learned and engrossing analysis is vital to understanding our cultural moment, and we at *The New Criterion* are proud to welcome him as our first Visiting Critic.

### *Nothing to fear*

While Halloween usually presents the unedifying spectacle of adults behaving like children in ridiculous costumes (something wicked this way comes, indeed), this year, a much-beloved tale of the paranormal will be republished. On October 29, Criterion Books, an imprint of Encounter Books, will release a new edition of *Old House of Fear*, the first novel by the visionary conservative thinker Russell Kirk, originally published in 1961. Drawing on his time at the University of St Andrews, where he was the first American to earn a doctorate of letters, Kirk sets his story in the Outer Hebrides, where foul dealings are afoot. Most of our readers know Kirk as a conservative lodestar, but *Old House of Fear* shows a different side of his genius. Bolshevik mystics, Irish republicans, and an enchanting ingénue populate the scene.

To say more would be to spoil the pleasure of reading this ghoulish story from a master of the mystery genre. We founded Criterion Books to give voice to worthy publications outside the vagaries of *The New York Times* best seller list, and we are delighted to bring this tale back into print. With a new introduction by our own James Panero, this edition is sure to thrill.

# Leninthink

by Gary Saul Morson

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*Editors' note: The following is an edited version of remarks delivered at The New Criterion's inaugural Circle Lecture on September 25, 2019.*

*Lenin was more severe.*

—Vyacheslav Molotov, the only senior official to work for both Lenin and Stalin, when asked to compare them.

*Lenin "in general" loved people but . . . his love looked far ahead, through the mists of hatred.*

—Maxim Gorky

*When we are reproached with cruelty, we wonder how people can forget the most elementary Marxism.*

—Lenin

## *Beyond Doctrine*

An old Soviet joke poses the question: What was the most important world-historical event of the year 1875? Answer: Lenin was five years old.

The point of the joke, of course, is that the Soviets virtually deified Lenin. Criticism of him was routinely referred to as “blasphemy,” while icon corners in homes and institutions were replaced by “Lenin corners.” Lenin museums sprung up everywhere, and institutions of every kind took his name. In addition to Leningrad, there were cities named Leninsk (in Kazakhstan), Leninogorsk (in Tatarstan), Leninaul (in Dagestan), Leninakan (in Ar-

menia), Leninkend, Leninavan, and at least four different Leninabads. On a visit to the Caucasus I remember being surprised at seeing Mayakovsky's famous verses about Lenin inscribed on a mountaintop: “Lenin lived! Lenin lives! Lenin will live!” The famous mausoleum where his body is preserved served as the regime's most sacred shrine.

As we approach the 150th anniversary of Lenin's birth, understanding him grows ever more important. Despite the fall of the Soviet Union, Leninist ways of thinking continue to spread, especially among Western radicals who have never read a word of Lenin. This essay is not just about Lenin, and not just Leninism, the official philosophy of the USSR, but also the very style of thought that Lenin pioneered. Call it Leninthink.

Lenin did more than anyone else to shape the last hundred years. He invented a form of government we have come to call totalitarian, which rejected in principle the idea of any private sphere outside of state control. To establish this power, he invented the one-party state, a term that would previously have seemed self-contradictory since a party was, by definition, a part. An admirer of the French Jacobins, Lenin believed that state power had to be based on sheer terror, and so he also created the terrorist state.

Stephen Pinker has recently argued that the world has been getting less bloodthirsty. The Mongols, after all, destroyed entire cities. But the Mongols murdered *other* people; what is new, and uniquely horrible about the Sovi-

ets and their successors, is that they directed their fury at their *own* people. The Russian empire lost more people in World War I than any other country, but still more died under Lenin. His war against the peasants, for instance, took more lives than combat between Reds and Whites.

Numbers do not tell the whole story. Under the Third Reich, an ethnic German loyal to the regime did not have to fear arrest, but Lenin pioneered and Stalin greatly expanded a policy in which arrests were entirely arbitrary: that is true terror. By the time of the Great Terror of 1936–38, millions of entirely innocent people were arrested, often by quota. Literally no one was safe. The Party itself was an especially dangerous place to be, and the NKVD was constantly arresting its own members—a practice that was also true of its predecessor, the Cheka, which Lenin founded almost immediately after the Bolshevik coup.

NKVD interrogators who suspected they were to be arrested often committed suicide since they had no illusions about what arrest entailed. They had practiced exquisite forms of torture and humiliation on prisoners—and on prisoners' colleagues, friends, and families. "Member of a family of a traitor to the fatherland" was itself a criminal category, and whole camps were set up for wives of "enemies of the people." Never before had such practices defined a state.

For good reason, many have traced these practices to Lenin's doctrines. In his view, Marx's greatest contribution was not the idea of the class struggle but "the dictatorship of the proletariat," and as far back as 1906 Lenin had defined dictatorship as "nothing other than power which is totally unlimited by any laws, totally unrestrained by absolutely any rules, and based directly on force." He argued that a revolutionary Party must be composed entirely of professional revolutionaries, drawn mainly from the intelligentsia and subject to absolute discipline, with a readiness to do literally anything the leadership demanded.

These and other disastrous Leninist ideas derived from a specific Leninist way of thinking, and that is what this essay focuses on. I know this way of thinking in my bones. I am

myself a pink diaper baby and I remember being taught this way of thinking, taken for granted by all right-thinking people. Memoirs of many ex-Communists, from David Horowitz to Richard Wright, confirm that, more than doctrines, it was the Leninist style of thought that defined the difference between an insider and an outsider. And that way of thought is very much with us.

### *Who Whom?*

*Introduce at once mass terror; execute and deport hundreds of prostitutes, drunken soldiers, ex-officers, etc.*

—Lenin's instructions to authorities in Nizhni Novgorod, August 1918

Lenin regarded all interactions as zero-sum. To use the phrase he made famous, the fundamental question is always "Who Whom?"—who dominates whom, who does what to whom, ultimately who annihilates whom. To the extent that we gain, you lose. Contrast this view with the one taught in basic microeconomics: whenever there is a non-forced transaction, both sides benefit, or they would not make the exchange. For the seller, the money is worth more than the goods he sells, and for the buyer the goods are worth more than the money. Lenin's hatred of the market, and his attempts to abolish it entirely during War Communism, derived from the opposite idea, that all buying and selling is *necessarily* exploitative. When Lenin speaks of "profiteering" or "speculation" (capital crimes), he is referring to every transaction, however small. Peasant "bagmen" selling produce were shot.

Basic books on negotiation teach that you can often do better than split the difference, since people have different concerns. Both sides can come out ahead—but not for the Soviets, whose negotiating stance John F. Kennedy once paraphrased as: *what's mine is mine; and what's yours is negotiable*. For us, the word "politics" means a process of give and take, but for Lenin it's we take, and you give. From this it follows that one must take maximum advantage of one's position. If the

enemy is weak enough to be destroyed, and one stops simply at one's initial demands, one is objectively helping the enemy, which makes one a traitor. Of course, one might simply be insane. Long before Brezhnev began incarcerating dissidents in madhouses, Lenin was so appalled that his foreign minister, Boris Chicherin, recommended an unnecessary concession to American loan negotiators, that he pronounced him mad—not metaphorically—and demanded he be forcibly committed. “We will be fools if we do not immediately and forcibly send him to a sanatorium.”

Such thinking automatically favors extreme solutions. If there is one sort of person Lenin truly hated more than any other, it is—to use some of his more printable adjectives—the squishy, squeamish, spineless, dull-witted liberal reformer. In philosophical issues, too, there can never be a middle ground. If you are not a materialist in precisely Lenin's interpretation, you are an idealist, and idealism is simply disguised religion supporting the bourgeoisie. The following statement from his most famous book, *What Is to Be Done?*, is typical (the italics are Lenin's): “The *only* choice is: either the bourgeois or the socialist ideology. There is no middle course (for humanity has not created a ‘third’ ideology, and, moreover, in a society torn by class antagonisms there can never be a non-class or above-class ideology). Hence to belittle the socialist ideology *in any way, to turn away from it in the slightest degree*, means to strengthen bourgeois ideology.” There is either rule by the bourgeoisie or dictatorship of the proletariat: “Every solution that offers a middle path is a deception . . . or an expression of the dull-wittedness of the petty-bourgeois democrats.”

Contrary to the wishes even of other Bolsheviks, Lenin categorically rejected the idea of a broad socialist coalition government. He was immensely relieved when the short-lived coalition with the Left Socialist Revolutionaries collapsed. Immediately after seizing power he declared the left-liberal Kadets “outside the law,” leading to the lynching of two of their ex-ministers in a Petersburg Hospital. He would soon arrest Mensheviks and the

most numerous group of radicals, the Socialist Revolutionaries, famed for countless assassinations of tsarist officials. We think of show trials as Stalinist, but Lenin staged a show trial of Socialist Revolutionary leaders in 1922.

By the same token, Lenin always insisted on the most violent solutions. Those who do not understand him mistake his ideas for those of radicals like the anarchist Peter Kropotkin, who argued that violence was permitted *when necessary*. That squishy formulation suggests that other solutions would be preferable. But for Lenin maximal violence was the default position. He was constantly rebuking subordinates for not using enough force, for restraining mobs from lynchings, and for hesitating to shoot randomly chosen hostages.

One could almost say that force had a mystical attraction for Lenin. He had workers drafted into a labor army where any shirking or lateness was punished by sentence to a concentration camp. Yes, Bolsheviks used the term concentration camp from the start, and did so with pride. Until economic collapse forced Lenin to adopt the New Economic Policy, he demanded that grain not be purchased from peasants but requisitioned at gunpoint. Naturally, peasants—Lenin called recalcitrant peasants “kulaks”—rebelled all over Russia. In response to one such “kulak” uprising Lenin issued the following order:

The kulak uprising in [your] 5 districts must be crushed without pity. . . . 1) Hang (and I mean hang so that the *people can see*) *not less than 100* known kulaks, rich men, bloodsuckers. 2) Publish their names. 3) Take *all* their grain away from them. 4) Identify hostages . . . . Do this so that for hundreds of miles around the people can see, tremble, know and cry . . . . Yours, Lenin. P. S. Find tougher people.

Dmitri Volkogonov, the first biographer with access to the secret Lenin archives, concluded that for Lenin violence was a goal in itself. He quotes Lenin in 1908 recommending “real, nationwide terror, which invigorates the country and through which the Great French Revolution achieved glory.”



Lenin constantly recommended that people be shot “without pity” or “exterminated mercilessly” (Leszek Kolakowski wondered wryly what it would mean to exterminate people mercifully). “Exterminate” is a term used for vermin, and, long before the Nazis described Jews as *Ungeziefer* (vermin), Lenin routinely called for “the cleansing of Russia’s soil of all harmful insects, of scoundrels, fleas, bedbugs—the rich, and so on.”

Lenin worked by a principle of anti-empathy, and this approach was to define Soviet ethics. I know of no other society, except those modeled on the one Lenin created, where schoolchildren were taught that mercy, kindness, and pity are vices. After all, these feelings might lead one to hesitate shooting a class enemy or denouncing one’s parents. The word “conscience” went out of use, replaced by “consciousness” (in the sense of Marxist-Leninist ideological consciousness). During Stalin’s great purges a culture of denunciation reigned, but it was Lenin who taught “A good communist is also a good Chekist.”

### *The Abbey of Thélème*

A special logic governs the Leninist approach to morality, legality, and rights. In his famous address to the Youth Leagues, Lenin complains that bourgeois thinkers have slanderously denied that Bolsheviks have any ethics. In fact,

We reject any morality based on extra-human and extra-class concepts. We say that this is a deception . . . . We say that morality is entirely subordinated to the interests of the proletariat’s class struggle. . . . That is why we say that to us there is no such thing as a morality that stands outside human society; that is a fraud. To us morality is subordinated to the interests of the proletariat’s class struggle.

When people tell us about morality, we say: to a Communist all morality lies in this united discipline and conscious mass struggle against the exploiters.

In short, Bolshevik morality holds that whatever contributes to Bolshevik success is moral, whatever hinders it is immoral.

Imagine someone saying: “my detractors claim I have no morals, but that is sheer slander. On the contrary, I have a very strict moral code, from which I never deviate: *look out for number 1.*” We might reply: the whole point of a moral code is to *restrain* you from acting only out of self-interest. Morality begins with number 2. A moral code that says you must do what you regard as your self-interest is no moral code at all. The same is true for a code that says the Communist Party is morally bound to do whatever it regards as in its interest.

Rabelais’s pleasure-seeking utopia, the Abbey of Thélème, was governed, like all abbeys, by a rule. In this case, however, the rule was an anti-rule: *Fay ce que voudras*, “Do as you wish!” People were to be restrained from yielding to any restraints. Ever since, such self-canceling imperatives have been called *Thelemite commands*.

Bolshevik legality was also Thelemite. If by law one means a code that binds the state as well as the individual, specifies what is and is not permitted, and eliminates arbitrariness, then Lenin entirely rejected law as “bourgeois.” He expressed utter contempt for the principles “no crime without law” and “no punishment without a crime.” Recall that he defined the dictatorship of the proletariat as rule based entirely on force absolutely unrestrained by any law. His more naïve followers imagined that rule by sheer terror would cease when Bolshevik hold on power was secure, or when the New Economic Policy relaxed restrictions on trade, but Lenin made a point of disillusioning them. “It is the biggest mistake to think that NEP will put an end to the terror. We shall return to the terror, and to economic terror,” he wrote. When D. I. Kursky, People’s Commissariat of Justice, was formulating the first Soviet legal code, Lenin demanded that terror and arbitrary use of power be written into the code itself! “The law should not abolish terror,” he insisted. “It should be substantiated and legalized in principle, without evasion or embellishment.”

So far as I know, never before had the law prescribed lawlessness. Do as you wish, or else. Lenin had ascribed the fall of the Paris Com-

immune to the failure to eliminate all law, and so the Soviet state was absolutely forbidden from exercising any restraint on arbitrary use of power. Indeed, officials were punished for such restraint, which Lenin called impermissible slackness and Stalin would deem lack of vigilance.

The same logic applied to rights. On paper, the Soviet Constitution of 1936 guaranteed more rights than any other state in the world. I recall a Soviet citizen telling me that people in the USSR had absolute freedom of speech—so long as they did not lie. I recalled this curious concept of freedom when a student defended complete freedom of speech except for hate speech—and hate speech included anything he disagreed with. Whatever did not *seem* hateful was actually a “dog-whistle.”

As far back as 1919, Soviet parlance distinguished between purely formal law and what was called “the material determination of the crime.” A crime was not an action or omission specified in the formal code, because every “socially dangerous” act (or omission) was automatically criminal. Article 1 of the Civil Code of October 31, 1922 laid down that civil rights “are protected by the law unless they are exercised in contradiction to their social and economic purposes.” Like the “material” definition of crime, the concept of “purposefulness” (*tselesobraznost'*) created a system of Thelemite rights: the state was absolutely prohibited from interfering with your rights unless it wanted to.

### *Leninspeak*

Lenin’s language, no less than his ethics, served as a model, taught in Soviet schools and recommended in books with titles like *Lenin’s Language* and *On Lenin’s Polemical Art*. In Lenin’s view, a true revolutionary did not establish the correctness of his beliefs by appealing to evidence or logic, as if there were some standards of truthfulness above social classes. Rather, one engaged in “blackening an opponent’s mug so well it takes him ages to get it clean again.” Nikolay Valentinov, a Bolshevik who knew Lenin well before be-

coming disillusioned, reports him saying: “There is only one answer to revisionism: smash its face in!”

When Mensheviks objected to Lenin’s personal attacks, he replied frankly that his purpose was not to convince but to destroy his opponent. In work after work, Lenin does not offer arguments refuting other Social Democrats but brands them as “renegades” from Marxism. Marxists who disagreed with his naïve epistemology were “philosophic scum.” Object to his brutality and your arguments are “moralizing vomit.” You can see traces of this approach in the advice of Saul Alinsky—who cites Lenin—to “pick the target, freeze it, personalize it.”

Compulsive underlining, name calling, and personal invective hardly exhaust the ways in which Lenin’s prose assaults the reader. He does not just advance a claim, he insists that it is absolutely certain and, for good measure, says the same thing again in other words. It is absolutely certain, beyond any possible doubt, perfectly clear to anyone not dull-witted. Any alliance with the democratic bourgeoisie can only be short-lived, he explains: “This is beyond doubt. Hence the absolute necessity of a separate . . . strictly class party of Social Democrats. . . . All this is beyond the slightest possible doubt.” Nothing is true unless it is absolutely, indubitably so; if a position is wrong, it is entirely and irredeemably so; if something must be done, it must be done “immediately, without delay”; Party representatives are to make “no concessions whatsoever.” Under Lenin’s direction the Party demanded “the dissolution of *all* groups *without exception* formed on the basis of one platform or another” (italics mine). It was not enough just to shoot kulaks summarily, they had “to be shot on the spot without trial,” a phrase that in one brief decree he managed to use in each of its six numbered commands before concluding: “This order is to be carried out strictly, mercilessly.” You’d think that was clear enough already.

No concessions, compromises, exceptions, or acts of leniency; everything must be totally uniform, absolutely the same, unqualifiedly unqualified. At one point he claims that the

views of Marx and Engels are “completely identical,” as if they might have been incompletely identical.

Critics objected that Lenin argued by mere assertion. He disproved a position simply by showing it contradicted what he believed. In his attack on the epistemology of Ernst Mach and Richard Avenarius, for instance, every argument contrary to dialectical materialism is rejected *for that reason alone*. Valentinov, who saw Lenin frequently when he was crafting this treatise, reports that Lenin at most glanced through their works for a few hours. It was easy enough to attribute to them views they did not hold, associate them with disreputable people they had never heard of, or ascribe political purposes they had never imagined. These were Lenin’s usual techniques, and he made no bones about it.

Valentinov was appalled that both Lenin and Plekhanov, the first Russian Marxist, insisted that there was no need to understand opposing views before denouncing them, since the very fact that they were opposing views proved them wrong—and what was wrong served the enemy and so was criminal. He quotes Lenin:

Marxism is a monolithic conception of the world, it does not tolerate dilution and vulgarization by means of various insertions and additions. Plekhanov once said to me about a critic of Marxism . . . : “First, let’s stick the convict’s badge on him, and then after that we’ll examine his case.” And I think we must stick the “convict’s badge” on anyone and everyone who tries to undermine Marxism, even if we don’t go on to examine his case. That’s how every sound revolutionary should react. When you see a stinking heap on the road you don’t have to poke around in it to see what it is. Your nose tells you it’s shit, and you give it a wide berth.

“Lenin’s words took my breath away,” Valentinov recalls. I had the same reaction when I first heard a student explain that a view had to be wrong simply because it was voiced on Fox News.

Opponents objected that Lenin lied without compunction, and it is easy to find quotations

in which he says—as he did to the Bolshevik leader Karl Radek—“Who told you a historian has to establish the truth?” Yes, we are contradicting what we said before, he told Radek, and when it is useful to reverse positions again, we will. Orwell caught this aspect of Leninism: “Oceania was at war with Eastasia; therefore Oceania had always been at war with Eastasia.”

And yet the concept of “lying,” if one stops there, does not reach the heart of the matter. In *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, Tolstoy remarks that, contrary to appearances, the hero was not a toady. Rather, he “was attracted to people of high station as a fly is drawn to the light.” A toady decides to toady, but Ivan Ilyich had no need to make such a decision. In much the same way, a true Leninist does not decide whether to lie. He automatically says what is most useful, with no reflection necessary. That is why he can show no visible signs of mendacity, perhaps even pass a lie detector test. La Rochefoucauld famously said that “hypocrisy is the tribute that vice pays to virtue,” but a true Bolshevik is not even a hypocrite.

Western scholars who missed this aspect of Leninism made significant errors. For example, they estimated the size of the Soviet economy by assuming that official figures were distorted and made appropriate adjustments. But as Robert Conquest pointed out, “they were not distorted, they were invented.” The Soviets did not find out the truth and then exaggerate; they often did not know the truth themselves. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Winston Smith hears that fifty million pairs of boots were produced that year and reflects that, for all he knows, no boots at all were produced. Orwell, who never studied the Soviet economy, grasped a point that escaped experts because he understood Leninthink.

### *Partyness*

Lenin did not just invent a new kind of party, he also laid the basis for what would come to be known in official parlance as “*partiimost*,” literally Partyness, in the sense of Party-mindedness. Arthur Koestler understood part of *partiimost*

when he described a Communist confessing to fantastic crimes because loyalty to the Party trumped everything else. If the Party needed one to confess to spying for the Poles, Japanese, and Germans at the same time, while conspiring with Trotsky to murder Stalin and spread typhus among pigs—all while one was already in prison—a true, party-minded Bolshevik would do so.

In his celebrated “Catechism of a Revolutionary,” the nineteenth-century terrorist Sergei Nechaev—whose story inspired Dostoevsky’s novel *The Possessed*—writes that a true revolutionary “has no interests, no habits, no property, not even a name. Everything in him is wholly absorbed by a single, exclusive interest, a single thought, a single passion—the revolution.” Nechaev and his contemporary Pyotr Tkachov established a particular tradition of revolutionaries, to which Lenin traced his lineage. The true Party member cares for nothing but the Party. It is his family, his community, his church. And according to Marxism-Leninism, everything it did was guaranteed to be correct.

Trotsky, forced to reverse one of his positions to conform to the Party line, explained:

None of us desires or is able to dispute the will of the Party. Clearly the Party is always right. . . . We can only be right with and by the Party, for history has provided no other way of being in the right. . . . [I]f the Party adopts a decision which one or other of us thinks unjust, he will say, just or unjust, it is my party, and I will support the consequences of the decision to the end.

Even this much-quoted statement does not get *partii*most’ quite right, since, immediately after affirming that history guarantees the Party’s infallibility, Trotsky speaks of supporting the Party even when it is wrong. His ally, the prominent Bolshevik Yuri Pyatakov, did better. When Valentinov happened to meet Pyatakov in Paris, he reproached him for cowardice in renouncing his former Trotskyite views. Pyatakov replied by explaining the Leninist concept of the Party:

According to Lenin, the Communist Party is based on the principle of coercion which doesn’t

recognize any limitations or inhibitions. And the central idea of this principle of boundless coercion is not coercion itself but the absence of any limitation whatsoever—moral, political, and even physical, as far as that goes. Such a Party is capable of achieving miracles and doing things which no other collective of men could achieve. . . . A real Communist . . . [is] a man who was raised by the Party and had absorbed its spirit deeply enough to become a miracle man.

Pyatakov grasped Lenin’s idea that coercion is not a last resort but the first principle of Party action. Changing human nature, producing boundless prosperity, overcoming death itself: all these miracles could be achieved because the Party was the first organization ever to pursue coercion *without limits*. In one treatise Stalin corrects the widespread notion that the laws of nature are not binding on Bolsheviks, and it is not hard to see how this kind of thinking took root. And, given an essentially mystical faith in coercion, it is not hard to see how imaginative forms of torture became routine in Soviet justice.

Pyatakov drew significant conclusions from this concept of the Party:

For such a Party a true Bolshevik will readily cast out from his mind ideas in which he has believed for years. A true Bolshevik has submerged his personality in the collectivity, “the Party,” to such an extent that he can make the necessary effort to break away from his own opinions and convictions, and can honestly agree with the Party—that is the test of a true Bolshevik.

There could be no life for him outside the ranks of the Party, and he would be ready to believe that black was white, and white was black, if the Party required it. In order to become one with this great Party he would fuse himself with it, abandon his own personality, so that there was no particle left inside him which was not at one with the Party.

Did Orwell have this statement in mind when O’Brien gets Winston Smith to believe that twice two is five? In 1936 Pyatakov asked the Party secretariat to censure him for not having revealed his wife’s Trotskyite connec-

tions. To prove his *partinost'*, he offered to testify against her and then, after her condemnation, shoot her. Pyatakov was himself shot.

### *The Nature of Leninist Belief*

Partyness does not entail merely affirming that black is white but actually believing it. The wisest specialists on Bolshevik thinking have wondered: What does it mean to believe—truly believe—what one does not believe?

Many former Communists describe their belated recognition that experienced Party members do not seem to believe what they profess. In his memoir *American Hunger*, much of which is devoted to his experiences in the American Communist Party, Richard Wright describes how he would point out that the Party sometimes acted contrary to its convictions, or in the name of helping black people, actually hurt them. What most amazed Wright was that he usually could get no explanation for such actions at all. “You don’t understand,” he was constantly told. And the very fact that he asked such questions proved that he didn’t. It gradually dawned on him that the Party takes stances not because it cares about them—although it may—but because it is useful for the Party to do so.

Doing so may help recruit new members, as its stance on race had gotten Wright to join. But after a while a shrewd member learned, without having been explicitly told, that loyalty belonged not to an issue, not even to justice broadly conceived, but to the Party itself. Issues would be raised or dismissed as needed.

My mother left the American Communist Party in 1939 in response to the Hitler–Stalin pact, but her friends who remained were able, like Pyatakov, to turn on a dime. One morning *The Daily Worker* followed *Pravda* and described Nazis as true friends of the working class; the next, nothing too strong could be said against them. Crucially, and as Orwell dramatized in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, there was never an admission that any change had taken place.

When it suddenly dawned on them that issues were pretexts, Wright and some others

like him faced a choice. Usually, however, there was no sudden realization and so no choice was required. I speak from memory now. What happens is something like this: when a criticism of the true ideology is advanced, or when embarrassing facts come out, everyone learns a particular answer. One neither believes nor disbelieves the answer; one demonstrates one’s loyalty by saying it. It is interesting to be present when the answer is still being rehearsed. Gradually, one acquires a little mental library of such canned answers, and the use of them signals to others in the know that you are one of them. If this process took place often enough in childhood, the moment of decision lies in the remote past, if it ever happened at all. For those who joined as adults, there is social pressure to accept one more explanation. Imagine not accepting today’s charge against Trump or Chick-Fil-A. Why stop now? Wright is unusual in that for him the process became acute and demanded he address it.

In his history of Marxism, Kolakowski explains some puzzling aspects of Bolshevik practice in these terms. Everyone understands why Bolsheviks shot liberals, socialist revolutionaries, Mensheviks, and Trotskyites. But what, he asks, was the point of turning the same fury on the Party itself, especially on its most loyal, Stalinists, who accepted Leninist-Stalinist ideology without question? Kolakowski observes that it is precisely the loyalty to the ideology that was the problem.

Anyone who believed in the ideology might question the leader’s conformity to it. He might recognize that the Marxist-Leninist Party was acting against Marxism-Leninism as the Party itself defined it; or he might compare Stalin’s statements today with Stalin’s statements yesterday. “The citizen belongs to the state and must have no other loyalty, not even to the state ideology,” Kolakowski observes. That might seem strange to Westerners, but, “it is not surprising to anyone who knows a system of this type from within.” All deviations from the Party line, all challenges to the leadership, appealed to official ideology, and so anyone who truly believed the ideology was suspect. “The [great] purge, therefore, was designed to destroy such ideological links as

still existed within the party, to convince its members that they had no ideology or loyalty except to the latest orders from on high . . . Loyalty to Marxist ideology as such is still—[in 1978]—a crime and a source of deviations of all kinds.” The true Leninist did not even believe in Leninism.

### *The Other Foot*

I know of no other political ideology that entails such a conception of belief. When I was a young associate professor teaching in a comparative literature department, whose faculty were at each other’s throats, I remarked to one colleague, who called herself a Marxist-Leninist, that it only made things worse when she told obvious falsehoods in departmental meetings. Surely, such unprincipled behavior must bring discredit to your own position, I pleaded.

Her reply brought me back to my childhood. I quote it word-for-word: “You stick to your principles, and I’ll stick to mine.” From a Leninist perspective, a liberal, a Christian, or any type of idealist only ties his hands by refraining from doing whatever works. She meant: we Leninists will win because we know better than to do that. Even Westerners who regard themselves as realists have only taken a few baby steps towards a true Leninist position. They are all the more vulnerable for imagining they have an unclouded view.

Recently Attorney General William Barr asked how his critics would have reacted had the FBI secretly interfered with the Obama campaign: “What if the shoe were on the other

foot?” From a Leninist perspective, this question demonstrates befuddlement. In his book *Terrorism and Communism*, Trotsky imagines “the high priests of liberalism” asking how Bolshevik use of arbitrary power differs from tsarist practices. Trotsky sneers:

You do not understand this, holy men? We shall explain it to you. The terror of Tsarism was directed against the proletariat. . . . Our Extraordinary Commissions shoot landlords, capitalists, and generals . . . . Do you grasp this—distinction? For us Communists it is quite sufficient.

What is reprehensible for them is proper for us, and that’s all there is to it. For a Leninist, the shoe is never on the other foot because he has no other foot.

### *The Spectrum of Awareness*

When I detect Leninist ways of thinking today, people respond: surely you don’t think all those social justice warriors are Leninists! Of course not. The whole point of Leninism is that only a few people must understand what is going on. That was the key insight of his tract *What Is to Be Done?* When Leninism is significant, there will always be a spectrum going from those who really understand, to those who just practice the appropriate responses, to those who are entirely innocent. The real questions are: Is there such a spectrum now, and how do we locate people on it? And if there is such a spectrum, what do we do about it?

There is no space to address such questions here. My point is that they need to be asked.

# Borges's mirror

by Jacob Howland

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“There is a concept which corrupts and upsets all others,” Jorge Luis Borges wrote; “I refer not to Evil, whose limited realm is that of ethics; I refer to the infinite.” The infinite and its avatars—the incommensurable, the unbounded, the immeasurable—have always occasioned intellectual horror. The Pythagoreans dreamed that all things have an articulable *logos* (reason, proportion, ratio). The ancients claimed that the philosopher Hippasus drowned at sea, a vestige of the Chaos from which Hesiod taught that all things spring, following his discovery of irrational magnitudes. While this story may be apocryphal, the discovery of the unspeakable (*alogon*)  $\sqrt{2}$ , which no ratio of whole numbers can express (and whose decimal representation is interminable), was inevitably memorialized as tragedy. In 1874, Georg Cantor proved that the infinite set of real numbers is non-denumerable—that it exceeds the infinite set of positive integers, and so could not be “counted” (matched one-to-one with the natural numbers 1, 2, 3, . . .) even by God himself. He was thereafter tormented by mental illness. What would Euripides, whose maddening Dionysus explodes the most fundamental law of logic, the principle of non-contradiction, have made of that coincidence?

The Greek philosophers struggled to find measures of world and soul that would not dissolve on close inspection. Heraclitus declared that “you could not discover the limits of the soul, even if you journeyed the whole way, so deep is its *logos*.” Plato plays with similar thoughts in his *Statesman*, where he compares

untamed human nature to  $\sqrt{2}$ . In the same dialogue, he has Socrates suggest to his companion, a mathematician who demands threefold recompense for speeches about the sophist, statesman, and philosopher, that the lover of wisdom is radically incommensurable with the first two types. Socrates, who claimed not to know whether he was a multiform monster or a tame and simple animal, sought sunlit uplands of truth beyond the Cave of human existence because he understood that it is not man who is the measure of all things, as the sophist Protagoras declared, but the cryptic god of Delphi, or the mysterious Good that transcends all beings.

Aristotle grappled more soberly with the problem of due measure in his ethical and political writings. His *Nicomachean Ethics* begins by acknowledging the possible insatiability of human desire: “If there is indeed some end in the realm of action that we want for its own sake, and the rest for the sake of this, and we do not choose everything for the sake of something else—for thus it will proceed into the unlimited [*to apeiron*, infinity], so that our longing will be empty and vain—it is clear that this would be the good and the best.” The human good would be the implicit terminus of our restless longings. Its general outlines emerge when we notice that we live not in an endless, empty expanse but in a *world*: a harmonious assemblage of determinate beings, including living ones that spontaneously strive to actualize their specific potentialities within suitable environments. Properly understood,

nature itself directs desire and choice toward fulfillment in the concrete and delimited (but by no means uniform) work of being human. A green, blooming, eagerly heliotropic plant could rightly be called happy; so, too, would an individual man or woman in whom the organic endowment of distinctively human capabilities is developed and flourishes over the course of a lifetime.

Nietzsche saw a wasteland where Aristotle saw a world. Perhaps just for this reason, Nietzsche understood that “every living thing can become healthy, strong, and fruitful only within a horizon.” Unrounded, our little lives would spill into the void: the ancients would not have quarreled with this insight. Nor would Borges, whose stories illustrate the debilitating consequences of the removal of essential dimensions of human finitude like death (“The Immortal”), forgetfulness (“Funes the Memorious”), and ignorance (“The God’s Script”). But it is the historical eclipse of Aristotle’s moderate and sensible understanding of the world—an understanding echoed in the biblical story of the emergence of intelligible determinateness through God’s limitation of the watery chaos—that forms the backdrop to “The Library of Babel” (1941), Borges’s most celebrated exploration of the depredations of infinity.

In a footnote, the anonymous editor of “The Library of Babel” imagines a book containing “an infinite number of infinitely thin leaves.” (This and all other quotations from the story are from James E. Irby’s 1962 *Labyrinths*.) Like that “silky vade mecum,” the pages of Borges’s story—itsself a pure intellectual construction—unfold into superimposed planes of meaning that together constitute, by some mysterious calculus of the imagination, a substantial reflection on the tragic delusions of modern scientific philosophy.

“The Library of Babel,” an account of “the universe (which others call the Library),” seems to originate nowhere—or what is the same, anywhere—in absolute, Newtonian space and time. Its “unknown author” (the editor’s words) speaks of places up or down, times past or future; these are necessarily relative frames

of reference, calculated with respect to an arbitrary moment in the interminable temporal continuum, or arbitrary coordinates within the inestimably vast Cartesian grid of identical, interconnected hexagonal rooms that constitutes the Library’s material structure. That simple and endlessly repetitive structure recalls the representation in organic chemistry of molecules as interconnected hexagons of bound atoms. And the interminable spiral stairways that link the hexagons strangely anticipate the discovery of the helical ladders of DNA from which our chromosomes are spun, with their endless iteration (known since 1919) of alphabetically designated nucleobase rungs (A, G, C, T).

But there is little in “The Library of Babel” that is organic except decay. The universal atmosphere is one of gloomy abstraction, sterility, and dissolution. The author refers once to his birth, but does not mention women, children, or families; the Library appears to be populated only by solitary, occasionally itinerant men. These *hombres*—librarians—exhaust themselves in a fruitless search for meaning, ceaselessly studying, in an “insufficient, incessant” light, vertiginously random sequences of orthographic symbols inscribed in innumerable books of uniform format that line the shelves of the hexagons. An intellectual breakthrough centuries earlier had seemed to promise a total understanding of the universe whose achievement would justify their existence, but this great hope had long since been dashed. The text speaks of suicides, strangulations, epidemics, corporeal decomposition, “final [fecal] necessities,” latrines, and narrow closets where one may sleep standing up—a difficult act, Solzhenitsyn relates in *The Gulag Archipelago*, imposed by necessity on inmates of some notorious Soviet prisons. The librarians are prisoners in an endless labyrinth.

One begins to suspect that “The Library of Babel” is really about intellectual imprisonment. The author echoes Kant in noting the argument of “idealists” that “the hexagonal rooms are a necessary form of absolute space or, at least, of our intuition of space.” More generally, his own language is Euclidean and occasionally scholastic. He recalls two fundamental “axioms.” First, “The Library



exists *ab aeterno*—an axiom whose “immediate corollary” is “the future eternity of the world” (not the transcendence of time that eternity signified in the religious tradition, but sempiternity or unlimited duration, a notion more congenial to scientific minds). Second, “The orthographical symbols are twenty-five in number.” He mentions two “incontrovertible premises”—that all of the Library’s books are made up of the same elements, and that no two books are identical. And he specifies the “fundamental law” that was “deduced” from these premises, namely, that the books of the Library “register all the possible combinations of the twenty-odd orthographical symbols . . . in other words, all that it is possible to express, in all languages.” The knowledge that “there was no personal or world problem whose eloquent solution did not exist in some hexagon” at first gave rise to “extravagant happiness,” and later to the terrible realization that the chance of anyone’s finding meaningful information in a Library that contains  $25^{1,312,000}$  volumes of random sequences of letters (1,312,000 being the number of characters in any given book, each of which admits of twenty-five variations)—or even of discovering reliable criteria for what counts as meaningful—“can be computed as zero.”

If the author’s talk of axioms, corollaries, premises, and deductions echoes Spinoza’s metaphysical demonstrations “in geometrical order” (*ordine geometrica*), he also recalls the early modern cosmologist Giordano Bruno in repeating the “classic dictum” that “the library is a sphere whose exact center is any one of its hexagons and whose circumference is inaccessible.” Bruno’s conception, Borges observes in his 1951 essay “Pascal’s Sphere,” filled the eponymous French mathematician and philosopher with horror; it is also one that finds confirmation in an extraordinary paradox of contemporary cosmology. To peer out into the universe is to look back in time; the Hubble image of a quasar ten billion light years away registers its massive jets of superheated particles as they appeared ten billion years in our past. In theory, an astronomer with a sufficiently powerful telescope anywhere in the universe would be able, looking in any direc-

tion, to see all the way back to the Big Bang. The inconceivably dense point from which the universe is thought to have exploded would thus seem to be present at every point on the surface of an imaginary sphere with a radius of 13.8 billion light years (corresponding to the estimated age of the universe) centered on the observer, wherever he may happen to be. The exact center of everything is everywhere, which is to say that it is nowhere: an image of the frightful relativity of all perspectives within any infinite field.

In posing the problem of detecting an infinitesimally weak signal within an astronomically large expanse of noise, “The Library of Babel” recalls the biblical tale of the city “called Babel, for there the LORD made the language of all the earth babble” (as Robert Alter translates Genesis 11:9). But a seemingly insignificant detail suggests another, deeper connection with the Bible’s infamous Tower. That detail forces the reader to consider how some of humanity’s loftiest intellectual aspirations— aspirations in which the reader is in some small way implicated in the very attempt to decode Borges—may produce unprecedented forms of abjection and despair.

“In the hallway there is a mirror which faithfully duplicates all appearances”: the author invites us to consider the implications of this mirror, from which “men usually infer . . . that the Library is not infinite (if it really were, why this illusory duplication)?” One is perhaps on safer ground in observing that the Library is itself an only superficially faithful duplication of the actual world, traces of which are occasionally visible in the story. Like the image in a mirror, a two-dimensional projection of three-dimensional objects, the Library is curiously flat; the hexagons, interconnected by hallways on opposite sides and staircases up and down, all occupy the same plane. The author calls the two inadequate lamps found in every hexagon “spherical fruit”—but where would he have seen anything like an apple tree? (Here there is also the echo of a book—*the Book*: these artificial lights are dim reflections of the Trees of Knowledge and Life, whose fruit seduced human beings with the promise

of godhood.) Now an old man, he explains that his corpse, thrown over the railing by “pious hands,” will “sink endlessly and decay and dissolve in the wind generated by the fall”: somehow there is atmosphere and gravity in these infinite spaces, as on Earth. He compares the shelves of the Library to “a normal bookcase,” as though some other, everyday lifeworld were the measure of the one and only universe of the Library. His handwriting crudely reproduces the “organic letters” of the books; more mysteriously, these “punctual, delicate, perfectly black, inimitably symmetrical” letters are said to imitate “the twenty-five natural symbols.” (One is reminded that the Greek words *grammata* and *syllabai* mean “letters” and “syllables,” but also “elements” and “compounds.”) Finally, it cannot escape notice that the mirrors in the hallways linking the hexagons reduplicate the librarians as well as their surroundings—that they literally see themselves in the Library. It was Hegel who observed that the scientific theoretician who attempts to penetrate the veil of appearances, positing laws, forces, and elementary forms of matter and motion, enters an “inverted world” of hypothetical objects in which he encounters only his own thoughts.

In brief, Borges allows us to see that the Library is the literary image of a historically particular intellectual construction that imperfectly reflects and significantly distorts the reality it is supposed to describe. That construction was inaugurated by the founders of modern science, who believed, with Galileo, that the book of nature was written in the language of mathematics, and who sought knowledge that, in Descartes' optimistic and ambitious phrase, would make human beings “the masters and possessors of nature.” The modern project of “practical philosophy” does not conform to, or even recognize, the natural order Aristotle so prudently attended to, much less the *scala naturae*, or Ladder of Being, of the medieval Christians. It seeks to replace the biblical *Logos* with another sort of logic: to begin not from the old, creative Word of God, but from the new, analytic and synthetic word of man. Borges's author insists that “no book can be a ladder,” but the books of the moderns are

nothing if not the mechanism by which man would storm the heavens.

Descartes indicates the revolutionary character of the modern project in his *Discourse on Method*, a simultaneously cautious and bold call to arms under the banner of technology whose six parts contain the same “embarrassing, presumptuous echo of the six days of Creation” that the philosopher Amélie Oksenberg Rorty finds in the six stages of his *Meditations*. In the *Discourse*, Descartes summarizes his book *Le Monde*, which “certain considerations” (doubtless including the trial in 1633 of Galileo by the Holy Office in Rome) prevented him from publishing. Starting with just two assumptions, the initial condition of “a chaos as confused as any of the poets could concoct” (cf. Genesis 1:2—it is not Hesiod he is thinking of) and the operation upon this material chaos of certain “laws of nature,” *Le Monde* offers nothing less than a hypothetical explanation of the origin of the universe and all that it contains, beginning with light, the heavenly bodies, and the formation of the earth, followed by the emergence of plants, animals, and finally man. Descartes' disingenuous opinion that “it is much more likely that, from the beginning, God made it [the world] such as it had to be” cannot conceal the unlimited ambition with which he derives the actuality of the existing world from the innumerable multitude of all possible worlds. For he tries to demonstrate in *Le Monde* that the laws of nature “are such that, even if God had created many worlds, there could not be any of them in which these laws failed to be observed.”

At the beginning of the sixth part of the *Discourse*, Descartes explains that he had hesitated to publish his scientific notions because “it would be possible to find as many reformers as heads, if anyone other than those God has established as rulers over his peoples or even those to whom he has given sufficient grace and zeal to be prophets were permitted to try to change anything” in the sphere of moral conduct. But in the end, he believed he “could not keep them hidden away without sinning grievously against the law that obliges

us to procure, as much as is in our power, the common good of all men." Descartes behaves precisely like a prophet or a ruler in revealing this new "law," which has the force of a divine injunction although it is to be found nowhere in the religious tradition, and which radically expands the biblical obligation from love of the neighbor to care for all mankind.

The immediate sequel makes it clear that Descartes is an early prophet of the religion of humanity, a religion that exalts unbounded human desires and intellectual capacities. In its prototypically modern form, this religion promotes what ultimately came to be known as "technology": the concerted employment of extensive social resources for the advancement and application of science, with the goal of transforming man, if not into an actual deity, then at least into what Freud calls a "prosthetic God." In proposing to replace "speculative philosophy" with "a practical philosophy, by means of which, knowing the force and the actions of fire, water, air, the stars, the heavens, and all the other bodies that surround us . . . we might be able . . . to use them for all the purposes for which they are appropriate," Descartes seems to imply that the mastery and possession of nature will be governed by some intelligible standard of what is fitting and needful for human beings. But nature, now reductively understood as matter subject to physical laws, can furnish no such standard. Nor can human nature, whose inner infinitude both propels and is confirmed—or religiously speaking, justified—in the project of mastery.

Descartes explains that mastery of nature is desirable "for the invention of an infinity of devices that would enable one to enjoy trouble-free the fruits of the earth," and because it would make it possible to "rid oneself of an infinity of maladies"—the "maintenance of health" being "unquestionably . . . the first good and the foundation of all the other goods of this life." Why *une infinité* of devices and cures? Because human desire, as Aristotle understood, endlessly increases itself in the absence of natural limits. From the Cartesian perspective, even the finitude of our mortal coil supplies no such limits: Descartes supposes that the means to make human beings

"more wise," and perhaps even to eliminate "the frailty of old age"—goals that far exceed the maintenance of health—lie in medicine. Wise and undying, we would live as gods for whom the "truths of the faith," which Descartes fraudulently avers "have always held first place among my beliefs," would be utterly irrelevant. We could then fill the endless expanse of time with the "infinity of experiments" he foresees, experiments that would disclose an "infinity" of possible "forms or species of bodies" we might desire to produce, if only because we can.

Borges's author asserts that the discovery of the fundamental law and basic structure of the Library was, "in spite of its tragic projections, . . . perhaps the capital fact in history." Immediately thereafter, "all men felt themselves to be masters of an intact and secret treasure." This initial giddiness was followed by pervasive isolation and depression as surely as a hangover chases intoxication. The inordinate hopes aroused by the "thinker" of "genius" who formulated the law were essentially religious in nature, as were the extreme agitations of soul produced by their disappointment. "Pilgrims" traveled to remote regions looking for "Vindications: books of apology and prophecy which vindicated for all time the acts of every man in the universe." "Inquisitors" fruitlessly searched for clues to "the origin of the Library and of time." One sect blasphemously juggled letters and symbols, trying to generate the "canonical books" by chance; another, the fanatical "Purifiers," destroyed millions of volumes in a vain attempt to eliminate useless works. In some districts, young men still "prostrate themselves before books and kiss their pages in a barbarous manner"; meanwhile, "the impious maintain that nonsense is normal in the Library." The author notes that "heretical conflicts" and increasingly frequent suicides "have decimated the population." But the thought that somewhere there must exist "a book which is the formula and perfect compendium of all the rest" inspires him to pray that someone—the legendary "Man of the Book"—may have examined and read it,

so that “for one instant, in one being, Your enormous Library . . . [may] be justified.”

“Like all men of the Library,” the author traveled in his youth; so did Descartes, who “spent some years . . . studying in the book of the world.” Like Descartes, he thereafter retreated to his closets, where his isolation from worldly disturbances allowed him to consider that “the universe . . . can only be the work of a god.” (Descartes worked out the rules for the direction of his mind alone in a “stove-heated room,” where he briefly retired from serving in the conflict between Catholics and Protestants known as the Thirty Years’ War.) In pondering these resemblances, one must observe that plagiarism is unavoidable in the virtually infinite Library. “To speak is to fall into tautology,” the author observes; any *logos* is inevitably a repetition of the same (*to auton*): “This wordy and useless epistle already exists in one of the thirty volumes of the five shelves of the innumerable hexagons—and its refutation as well.” If there is nothing new under the sun, it is perhaps because there is no sun—no real source of life and light, spontaneity and freedom—in this sterile universe of pure information, effectively generated by a computational algorithm that produces uniqueness without meaning.

Nietzsche observes somewhere that the so-called ancients, for whom the world was fresh

and new, are in truth young—that late modernity is, in fact, the old age of mankind. Borges’s aged author suspects that “the human species—the unique species—is about to be extinguished.” We readers of Borges know, but perhaps do not appreciate, that we are but one among many richly variegated forms of life; it is only in the mirror of modern mathematical science, in which nature appears to be just fluctuations of energy or endless strings of code, that we perceive ourselves to be “the unique species.” If we are to recover the one and only actual world from the terrible abyss of possibility that has opened up beneath us—the blessed world in which countless earlier generations have taken root and grown, flourished and suffered—we must cease to trust in the illusory promise of this distorting mirror. Even the anonymous author of “The Library of Babel,” who after all subsists only in the twilight of Borges’s synthetic imagination, has an inkling of this human necessity. For in the solitude of his dying days, he is “gladdened” by an “elegant hope”: that the plane of the not-quite-infinite Library bends around some unknown center to form a closed surface, so that “if an eternal traveler were to cross it in any direction, after centuries he would see that the same volumes were repeated in the same disorder.” This seems to be a distant echo of the celestial spheres once thought to surround the fertile, sun-bathed globe that is our proper home.

# In defense of loyalty

by *Wilfred M. McClay*

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I rise to speak on behalf of a badly neglected virtue: the quality of mind, heart, and will that we call loyalty. It seems strange that philosophers over the centuries have had so little to say about something so commonplace, so fundamentally human, in striking contrast to their volubility on such topics as love, truth, courage, justice, and friendship. To be sure, loyalty may not really be a virtue in the full sense of the word, for reasons I'll readily concede in what follows. But, though it always manages to generate a trove of glittering aphorisms in tribute to it, as well as making regular appearances, along with its opposite number, betrayal, in the plots and characters of our greatest literature, it remains a mystery why a disposition so influential in human affairs has not received more sustained attention.

That may be indicative of a larger problem. A great many of us today are likely to see "loyalty" cast in adverse terms, as a mere tool for the manipulation of the credulous, an excuse for the abandonment of professional standards, or a betrayal of the high calling of the disinterested intellect whose loyalty should be to the truth alone, sought without fear or favor. We have never ceased to value loyalty in our actual dealings with others, but "loyalty" as an abstraction has become something suspect, with few positive associations and many negative ones.

The examples routinely given in the recent American past include the several so-called Red Scares of the twentieth century, the loyalty oaths imposed during the Cold War era, the resistance to reciting the Pledge of Allegiance, and even the recent vogue of wealthy professional ath-

letes "taking a knee" during the presentation of the flag and the playing of the national anthem. We have been taught to regard such defiance as brave and principled, and encouraged to think that any expectation of loyalty to the nation not only is unacceptably narrow and provincial, but also represents an illegitimate coercion of conscience, one that creates a false idol and is therefore to be strongly disapproved of.

This is almost certainly a mistaken view, but it is not without its persuasive points. How, indeed, can we claim loyalty as a virtue if its merit depends so much upon the worthiness of its objects? Because, after all, one can be loyal to bad causes and people, just as easily as to good ones. Cardinal virtues such as wisdom, temperance, and justice are all by definition directed toward worthy ends. But not so loyalty—and how can loyalty to a bad cause still be considered a virtue? And if it can't be, how can loyalty per se be considered a virtue at all?

This is a potent objection. And yet it cannot quite dispose of the fact that the existence and flourishing of loyalty in some fashion is essential to any enduring form of human association; that it correlates to, and undergirds, the sort of trust, mutuality, and reliability in our associations that are needed for such relations to be perpetuated. Our capacity for loyalty is an essential part of what it means to be "political animals," as Aristotle called us, beings who deliberate together within bonds of a *koinonia*, a community, but who do so remembering with gratitude and respect what others before us have done, and showing continuity in our

commitments to them as well as our contemporaries, carried forward by a momentum that is much deeper and more powerful than mere rationality. Man does not live by deliberation alone, just as a plant cannot grow and flourish if it is pulled up by the roots and re-examined each day for its worthiness. There is no such thing as a daily plebiscite.

Nor can we reengineer our social relations on a dime, even if we wanted to. We ought to have learned that by now. And one of the chief obstacles to our successfully doing so is the stubborn tenacity of our loyalties, which function as sturdy tethers of our identity, securing the sinews by which we are attached to the existing order. Only acts of dehumanizing violence, of Leninist or Maoist proportions, can sever those sinews fully; and the end result is almost always a condition incomparably worse than the one it sought to replace. So the political question before us is not how to go about the transformation or sublimation of existing loyalties into something higher and more universal in character. Instead, the better question to ask is how we are to respect those loyalties and direct their momentum rightly, recognizing their immense binding power while guarding against the vices to which they are prone.

These considerations could hardly be more current. One need only look at the way they weave in and out of the current debates over the future of the European Union. Take, for example, the important speech delivered in Paris by French President Emmanuel Macron on November 11, 2018, observing the centennial of the First World War's conclusion. Part of the speech was devoted to an expression of distaste for "nationalism," and an argument for the preferability of what Macron called "patriotism." Such comments might have been meant partly as a cheeky rebuke of U.S. President Donald Trump, pleasing to the world press but arguably a misuse of a solemn occasion. And since Macron gave his speech in the shadow of what remains perhaps the greatest of all monuments to French nationalism, the Arc de Triomphe, such comments were perhaps more than a little bit inconsistent.

But let us give Macron some credit. He was faithfully echoing the conventional view of the

causes of the First World War, that the rise of toxic and competitive nationalism in Europe best explains the nature and severity of that horrendous conflict, and therefore national loyalty itself is and remains a prime enemy of enduring peace, freedom, and prosperity in the West. And by comparing the now-current populist discontents to those of the 1930s, Macron was urging us to learn from the past, warning that we are stumbling down the path to a similar cataclysm. An ever-strengthening European Union, he concluded, clearly represents the best way to avoid such civilizational shipwreck in our own time, and anything that would propose to weaken or dismantle it should be regarded with horror.

Yet there were some peculiar flourishes to Macron's argument. His definition of patriotism was nothing like what we generally mean by that term. He distinguished between a "bad" nationalism and a "good" patriotism: the nationalist, he contended, is someone whose parochial insularity means that he doesn't care about the fate of people in other countries; the patriot on the other hand is one who supports the French Republic's universal values, as expressed in the Declaration of the Rights of Man, and is passionately committed to the idea that these values extend beyond a country's borders. The American philosopher Martha Nussbaum expressed the same idea more cogently in an influential 1995 essay entitled "Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism":

I believe . . . patriotic pride is both morally dangerous and, ultimately, subversive of some of the worthy goals patriotism sets out to serve—for example, the goal of national unity in devotion to worthy moral ideals of justice and equality. These goals, I shall argue, would be better served by an ideal that is in any case more adequate to our situation in the contemporary world, namely the very old ideal of the cosmopolitan, the person whose allegiance is to the worldwide community of human beings.

If we set aside Macron's confused and confusing nomenclature and instead look at the core content of his ire, it was his disdain for any form of *particularism*, for the prioritizing of our partic-

ular loyalties over and above other commitments that we can and should have as human beings. His remarks were directed at Trump, yes, and Vladimir Putin too, but they were also directed at the Hungarians, the Italians, the Brexiteering Britons, the restive Germans, and all the other forces that are splintering the European Union and challenging the Brussels vision of the world. In the pithy but fairly representative words of the Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, one of the most articulate of the European Union's antagonists, in a speech that almost certainly was meant to be a response to Macron's, "Brussels today is ruled by those who want to replace an alliance of free nations with a European empire: a European empire led not by the elected leaders of nations, but by Brussels bureaucrats."

Thus is formulated the great conflict of our time over what one means by "Europe." Is it the project of welding the continent into a fluid, borderless, ever more tightly unified economic, political, and cultural union, held together by an abstract invented supranational identity and a vast administrative magistracy headquartered in Brussels? Or does "Europe" refer to a more complex form of unity that seeks ultimately to support the distinctive and historically grounded national cultures of the continent, rather than supersede them—something closer to Charles de Gaulle's idea of a Europe of Nations?

The two meanings of "Europe" are obviously closely related, but it would be a grave error to conflate them. In fact, the first, newer understanding of "Europe"—the one encapsulated in the initials EU—has in the end necessarily come about at the expense of the second, older one, and the two have as a result become antithetical. It should by now be evident why this is so. The deep rationale for the EU project lay in a particular conception of the lessons of modern European history—namely, that the very existence of the modern nation-state was to blame for the rivalries and savage wars that in the twentieth century wreaked such havoc upon the European continent and so much of the rest of the world. But what if that interpretation of modern European history is wrong or insufficient? What if it overestimates the degree to which national affinities, having first been "invented" by nineteenth-century nationalist

ideologues, can now be deconstructed and superseded, with their freshly released energies being redirected, like the product of nuclear fission, to power the life of various post-national entities? What if something far more fundamental, even primal, is at stake in the debates in which Macron and Orbán and Trump and many others all over the world are now engaged?

The nub of the matter is loyalty. More specifically, it is the recognition that the capacity for loyalty, and the willingness to recognize it and encourage it, is constitutive of our social existence. And faithfulness to it is something very different from adherence to abstract principles. It posits that love for one's own, and preference for what is one's own, for one's forebears and ancestors, for what is tried and familiar and true, enjoys a certain necessary priority in the human affections, a solid base upon which the superstructure of other ideas and affections can be erected.

Perhaps the neglect of loyalty as a subject has arisen because intellectuals and scholars are so likely to be tone-deaf to it, a *déformation professionnelle*. But what they are thereby missing is one of the pervading empirical facts of social existence. Loyalty presents itself to us as one of the most basic moral puzzles in life, beginning in childhood, and in the ways that childhood friendships and cliques form. Whom can you—in that most revealing of locutions—*count on*? The question of personal reliability looms large in the construction of our social world, in the making of clubs, circles, gangs, fraternal and sororal organizations, and the structure of our professional life, very much including the whirlpool of academic politics. It ultimately figures in the making of patriotic sentiment itself, which involves loyalty to unseen others, and loyalty to the memory of those whose blood was shed or who otherwise performed great sacrifices for the sake of the patria.

In fact, our capacity for loyalty is one of the things that makes life worth living. Without it there can be no enduring love, no family life, no friendship, no community, no society. Thomas Hobbes's famous description of the life of man in the state of nature—"solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short"—does that

not describe an existence in which loyalty is neither offered nor received? Doesn't the epidemic of loneliness in modern life of which so many social critics speak today correlate with an absence of binding loyalties, a freedom that proves to be a prison of emptiness?

Loyalty lies at the basis of the things we admire most, a chief element in what we mean when we speak of a person's "nobility of character"—the capacity to endure suffering and misfortune and yet to remain steadfast, the love that endures beyond all things and lasts even beyond death. The chivalric ideal, so esteemed by Edmund Burke, represented a triumph of loyalty over mere passion, or rather a triumph of a consuming passion that has hardened into an iron will of dedication and consecration of life, rising above all lesser passions. The military vocation, which involves the strictest of discipline, yields control over one's actions to those authorities to whom one has bound oneself in loyalty. The life of religious consecration, of the priest or monk or nun who forsakes all entailed in a "normal" existence, similarly binds one through an act of the will. And, there is the consecration behind the more "normal" work of marriage, in which an act of will is meant to carry the marrying couple's loyalty to one another through the rise and fall of passion, until death parts them.

Our esteem for loyalty lies behind the strength that we give to all such vows, or oaths, that bind us in loyalty to something higher and more demanding than ourselves. Consider, for example, the closing words of the Declaration of Independence: "And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor." That act, far more than a belief in radical individualism, lies at the foundation of our nation's commitment to liberty.

It also is true that loyalty matters most when it is not just a matter of calculation, but something supported by sentiment. In fact it is admirable precisely because it is *not* entirely calculated. No one gets extra credit for being loyal to that which is most profitable to them. Where's the virtue in that? It's most admirable when it represents a steadfastness beyond mere

reason, beyond mere convenience. Loyalty to one's imperfect friend or spouse is more admirable than loyalty to one who is perfect—if such a person could be found. Loyalty involves some measure of self-overcoming, of working against interest, a virtue that shows itself when the rational thing to do might be to cut someone loose. When the weather is foul, not fair.

And I should add too that loyalty matters to us because disloyalty matters to us. If loyalty is a virtue of sorts, then betrayal, as a brutal violation of the trust upon which loyalty subsists, is a profound vice. For Dante, betrayal is the most despicable of the vices. Readers of the *Inferno* will recall that, down at the very pit of Hell, in the ninth circle, with the worst of the worst, one finds disloyalty's Hall of Fame. Those who are traitors to their families, traitors to their countries, traitors to guests and friends, and, of course, there is Judas, the greatest of human betrayers, along with Cassius and Brutus, all three of whom are chewed on for all eternity by a three-headed Satan, the ultimate betrayer, the one who embodies disloyalty as a cosmic principle.

This is not to deny that misplaced loyalty, and conflicts between conflicting loyalties, have also always been a problem. A play like Sophocles' *Antigone* beautifully illustrates the latter, the conflicting demands of the family and of the polity, the laws of God and the laws of man. The worthiness of loyalty seems to depend almost entirely upon the object toward which it is directed. "My country right or wrong"—Captain Stephen Decatur's famous cry—is not without its power, but also not without its pitfalls. And even loyalty to a good thing can be too unconditional. G. K. Chesterton quipped in his book *The Defendant* that "My country, right or wrong" is a thing that no patriot would think of saying, except in a desperate case. It is like saying, 'My mother, drunk or sober?'"

The code of *omertà* is part and parcel of a very elaborate and very powerful system of loyalty, one that, in the southern Italian context in which the word emerged, was intricately tied to families and "small platoons" that were criminal undertakings and murderous protection rackets. Which is not to deny that these things could perform an ordering function in radically disor-



dered societies like those of southern Italy and Sicily, where legally constituted authority might be dismissed as incompetent or untrustworthy. But they make starkly evident the contrast between the personalized loyalty of the tribe and the impersonal majesty of the law.

Numerous moments in the *Godfather* movies suggest themselves as illustrations of this principle, such as the opening scene in which an undertaker appeals to the Godfather to avenge his daughter's rape. The undertaker has used the American legal system, and it failed to secure a conviction of the guilty parties; and now the undertaker comes to the Godfather and his criminal organization to seek justice. But the Godfather asks the undertaker, why did you not come to me first? And why have you never sought to be my friend? Later, when his son Michael Corleone achieves great honor through valorous combat as a Marine, the Godfather sniffs that "he performs these miracles for strangers." So exclusive are the demands of familial loyalty in the Don's mind that he cannot conceive of a sense of honor that could supersede them.

The problem of misplaced loyalty manifests itself in a different way in Wilfred Owen's great poem "Dulce et Decorum Est," when the poet is describing a man dying from a World War I gas attack:

In all my dreams before my helpless sight,  
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

If in some smothering dreams, you too could pace

Behind the wagon that we flung him in,  
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,  
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;  
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood  
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,  
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud  
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,—  
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest  
To children ardent for some desperate glory,  
The old Lie: *Dulce et decorum est  
Pro patria mori.*

That concluding Latin phrase comes, of course, from the Roman poet Horace: "It is sweet and fitting to die for one's country." Here those noble-

sounding words ring bitter and hollow. And true. Who can deny that there is much to be said for our modern skepticism about loyalty, and about loyalty to the nation in particular?

But that skepticism becomes life-denying when it comes to define an ethos in which every commitment we make needs to be seen as impermanent, revocable, perpetually subject to further review. Modern thought, with its emphasis on criticism and hermeneutical suspicion, and its atomizing of community life into the independent choices of autonomous individuals, has either neglected or carelessly disparaged the admirable aspects of loyalty, not only as a sentiment but also as a supreme act of the will, a form of perseverance and commitment to others, both living and dead, that often reflects much of what is noblest and best in the human person.

Part of the problem arises from the imposition of universal values, whose overarching truth is thought to supersede our more particular loyalties to particular things or persons. The drift toward universalism often seems irresistible. One sees it even in the work of American philosopher Josiah Royce, whose book *The Philosophy of Loyalty* (1908) is often cited in bibliographies but rarely consulted. (Eric Felten's 2011 book *Loyalty: The Vexing Virtue*, a tome that is delightfully unsystematic and free from jargon, is lesser-known but infinitely better.) Royce generalized the difference between true loyalty and vicious or "predatory" loyalty as follows:

[A] cause is good, not only for me, but for mankind, in so far as it is essentially a *loyalty to loyalty*, that is, an aid and a furtherance of loyalty in my fellows. It is an evil cause in so far as, despite the loyalty that it arouses in me, it is destructive of loyalty in the world of my fellows.

This formulation soon comes unraveled. While every community hopes for the accomplishment of its central cause, and sees that cause's fulfillment as its highest achievement, Royce places particularly high emphasis on the phenomenon of loyalty to a lost cause. A lost cause is not in Royce's view a *hopeless* cause, but rather one that cannot be fulfilled within

the actual lifetime of the community or any of its members. Many lost causes are rightly lost, of course: Royce would have recognized the Confederate States' defense of slavery during the U.S. Civil War as such a case. Besides such misguided causes, though, there are a number of legitimate causes that are, by this definition, "lost" simply by virtue of their scope and magnitude. Such causes are not to be regarded as hopeless, however. It is precisely these causes that establish ideals capable of evoking our highest hope and moral commitment.

Chief among these are the universal causes of the full attainment of truth, the complete determination of the nature of reality through inquiry and interpretation, and of the establishment of universal loyalty to loyalty itself. Thus, in practice, the formula of "loyalty to loyalty" demands that one's moral and intellectual sphere become ever broader and remain critical at all levels. All the actually existing communities we know are finite and to some degree "predatory" in Royce's sense.

In other words, Royce cannot help in the end but subsume the specificity of any particular loyalty under the demands of a larger universal, which ends up thereby depriving loyalty of its particularity and its particular character.

Behind this move is the severe universalism of Kantian idealism, which demands that we perform our duty for its own sake, without regard to consequences. The classic moral example of this is the French farmer's difficult choice between lying to protect the fugitive Jew hiding in his basement and disclosing the truth to the pursuing Nazis. Such a dilemma presents itself to us as a most unwelcome prospect, since the correct answer for Kant, of course, would be the duty to tell the Nazis the truth, irrespective of the consequences.

But this arctic and austere moral standard offends our fundamental humanity. Among other things, it fails to see that considerations such as family loyalty, personal loyalty, and the like are not merely parochial or sentimental attachments to lesser things. They are part of what it means to be human, to cherish our bonds to the flesh-and-blood and concrete features of our *Lebenswelt*, over against the tyranny of abstractions—a tyranny that can easily become the indispensable

tool of a tyrannical government. The free flourishing of our particular and provincial loyalties may be the single most important barrier there is to the success of such totalism.

How then are we to find a balance? One could hardly do better than to consult Burke, who esteemed loyalty and acknowledged its power and authority but also left room for broader and loftier considerations. Moreover, Burke's famous debate with Richard Price, which was the motivating force behind his composition of the *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, sheds light directly on the dilemmas of Monsieur Macron and the like, whose speeches could almost have been cribbed from Price's.

Price was a liberal and Enlightened clergyman who offered his "Discourse on the Love of Our Country" as a sermon in London in the fateful year of 1789. He put forward a strikingly rational and cosmopolitan view of patriotism, urging that conventional patriotism was a form of blindness, and that "a narrow interest ought always to give way to a more extensive interest." Price argued that love of our country "does not imply any conviction of the superior value of it to other countries, or any particular preference of its laws and constitution of government." Good citizens should consider themselves "more as citizens of the world than as members of any particular community"; the king was "no more than the first servant of the public, created by it, maintained by it, and responsible to it." His majesty was not his own, but that of "the people," and his power was "a trust derived from the people." Hence the monarch, and the state itself, was merely an object of utilitarian value, to be discarded when their utility had ceased. Hence the British people, like the French, whose just-beginning revolution Price regarded with wide-eyed admiration, had the right to overthrow their monarch and reorder their regime anytime they saw fit to do so.

Burke found such ideas utterly repugnant, and undertook to publish his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* in the following year as a stern rebuttal to Price's sermon. Part of the dispute turned on history, and on the proper way of understanding Britain's past. Price's sermon had been delivered to the London Revolution Soci-

ety, a group dedicated to the veneration of the Glorious Revolution of 1688, and in his sermon Price was affirming the Glorious Revolution as an expression of the universal Rights of Man.

In the *Reflections*, Burke argued against Price's interpretation of the Glorious Revolution and instead gave a classic Whig defense of it. Burke spoke out against the idea of abstract, metaphysical rights of humans and instead advocated the force of a particular national tradition:

The Revolution was made to preserve our *antient* indisputable laws and liberties, and that *antient* constitution of government which is our only security for law and liberty. . . . The very idea of the fabrication of a new government, is enough to fill us with disgust and horror. We wished at the period of the Revolution, and do now wish, to derive all we possess as *an inheritance from our forefathers*. Upon that body and stock of inheritance we have taken care not to inoculate any cyon [scion] alien to the nature of the original plant. . . . Our oldest reformation is that of Magna Charta . . . [T]he ancient charter . . . [was] nothing more than a re-affirmance of the still more ancient standing law of the kingdom. . . .

In the famous law . . . called the *Petition of Right*, the parliament says to the king, "Your subjects have *inherited* this freedom," claiming their franchises not on abstract principles "as the rights of men," but as the rights of Englishmen, and as a patrimony derived from their forefathers.

There has been a great deal of ruin in the hypertrophied "rights revolution" of the past half-century that we could have avoided, had we followed Burke's lead. In place of Price's abstract rationalism, Burke traced out a historical origin for rights, stressed the importance of reverence, and held high the wisdom of traditional and time-honored things. In place of universalism and cosmopolitanism, Burke chose to ground politics and law in the life of actual communities, in all their particularity and idiosyncrasy. Key to his argument, for our purposes, is the rejection of the notion that "a narrow interest ought always to give way to a more extensive interest." That is precisely the move in Price, and Nussbaum, and Macron that makes loyalty so tenuous, if not impos-

sible; and it is in the vindication of what is proximate, and of what has been generative of one's own being, that Burke vindicates loyalty.

What Burke manages to do is meld the roles of reason and sentiment together in ways that acknowledge the power and necessity of both things. He sees that we are ineluctably *particular* beings, and that we have particular loyalties, to our particular parents, and homes, and neighborhoods, and children, and a hundred other such particularities of situation and history that we cannot deny without denying our humanity. For Burke, it was a telling argument against Jean-Jacques Rousseau that he professed a general benevolence for all of humankind, but sent his own children off to a foundling hospital: he was, said Burke, "a lover of his kind but a hater of his kindred." Thus did Burke understand the relationship between a commitment to universals and a commitment to particulars. The ascent to the first must first travel through the valley of the second.

But how to be something more elevated than a Godfather? How to avoid being the prisoner of a slothful and uninventive going-along with the status quo? Is there a higher and nobler way of understanding loyalty, and the attachment to particulars that loyalty entails?

Here Burke's great 1774 *Speech to the Electors at Bristol at the Conclusion of the Poll* may provide us with some enduring illumination. The speech was especially notable for its defense of the principles of representative government against the notion that elected officials should merely be delegates:

[I]t ought to be the happiness and glory of a representative to live in the strictest union, the closest correspondence, and the most unreserved communication with his constituents. Their wishes ought to have great weight with him; their opinion, high respect; their business, unremitting attention. It is his duty to sacrifice his repose, his pleasures, his satisfactions, to theirs; and above all, ever, and in all cases, to prefer their interest to his own. *But his unbiased opinion, his mature judgment, his enlightened conscience, he ought not to sacrifice to you, to any man, or to any set of men living.* These he does not derive from

your pleasure; no, nor from the law and the constitution. They are a trust from Providence, for the abuse of which he is deeply answerable. *Your representative owes you, not his industry only, but his judgment; and he betrays, instead of serving you, if he sacrifices it to your opinion.* [emphasis added]

So Burke concludes with the representative's loyalty, one more generous than that of the delegate. It is a concrete loyalty, grounded in a particular setting and the natural loyalties of a particular constituency. But it is not mindless or slavish. It does not demand that "a narrow interest ought always to give way to a more extensive interest." But neither does it demand that an extensive interest always give way to a narrow one. That would be a betrayal.

The standard he endorses is elevated without being coldly abstract. It elevates not by resort to the one-size-fits-all universal dicta, but by recourse to Providence, within which all good loyalties are presumed to be conjoined

and connected. Representation is here understood as itself a *form* of delegation, rather than the transcending of the particular for the sake of the universal. That is a crucial difference, and it goes to the heart of the question of loyalty and its place in the economy of our souls and societies.

It can return us, too, to the questions with which we began, relating to M. Macron, patriotism, and the European Union. If the last is to succeed, it will need to learn how to draw effectively and respectfully upon the profound national and regional affinities that already exist, rather than seek to renounce and discredit them, and replace them with a universal standard comprising whatever "more extensive interest" the then-governing cosmopolitan elites have decreed. Loyalty is not the sole key to a peaceful and harmonious world, but it cannot be done without. It speaks to a great human need, without which all efforts at larger forms of union are doomed to fail.

# Orwell & the totalitarian mind

by D. J. Taylor

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The roots of Orwell's obsession with the totalitarian mind are strewn all over his life in the late 1930s and the early 1940s. Naturally, they can be found in the books he read and in the books he wrote himself, but they would also have been sharply apparent in some of the international news that sprang each morning from the pages of his daily newspaper. In the third category, he would certainly have taken an interest in the widely reported Soviet show trials of 1938, which led to the deaths of erstwhile pillars of the regime such as Genrikh Yagoda, Alexei Rykoff, and Nikolai Bukharin, and of which *The Times's* special correspondent in Moscow remarked: "According to Soviet law, crime and the intent to commit crime are virtually the same thing . . . . In the coming trial the prosecution expects to show that the accused premeditated certain crimes though they never committed them—and therefore are little less guilty than if the crimes had actually been committed." It was in 1938, too, that he read Eugene Lyons's *Assignment in Utopia*, a memoir by the United Press Agency's Moscow correspondent from 1928 to 1934, with its incriminating reportage from a world in which the leader's portrait hung in every apartment, children denounced their parents as traitors, and even making an inappropriate gesture could lead to arrest and imprisonment.

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This piece is adapted from *On Nineteen Eighty-Four: A Biography*, by D. J. Taylor, to be published by Abrams this month.

But all this is to ignore Orwell's growing interest in the burgeoning genre of dystopian literature—novels set in imaginary never-never lands where something has gone badly wrong, usually in a way that amplifies some of the political tendencies of the world in which it was written. It is more than likely, for example, that he read Murray Constantine's *Swastika Night* (1937)—it was published by Orwell's own publisher Gollancz and, like *The Road to Wigan Pier*, was chosen for the Left Book Club—which envisages a world tyrannized over by the Nazis for the past seven hundred years, where German and Japanese empires squabble incessantly over their colonial possessions. There are several eerie little prefigurations of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, from the dissident hero's discovery that there had in the past existed such things as "memory" and "socialism," to the demonization of the four "archfiends" (these include Lenin and Stalin), which might be thought to predate the Inner Party's treatment of Emmanuel Goldstein. None of which proves that Orwell read it, but the eagerness with which he sought out and drew attention to dystopian fiction that he thought relevant to contemporary political systems is a point in its favor.

Pride of place in this catalogue of formative influences is occupied by a round-up review that Orwell contributed to the weekly magazine *Tribune* in July 1940, shortly after the fall of France, which he would have sat down to write in the realization that Britain might very shortly be invaded. The four books chosen to

illustrate his thesis are Jack London's *The Iron Heel* (1908), H. G. Wells's *When the Sleeper Wakes* (1897–99), Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), and Ernest Bramah's *The Secret of the League* (1907)—each set in a dystopia and each indirectly connected to the way in which *Nineteen Eighty-Four* would come to be conceived. The significance of the piece lies in Orwell's analysis of the four alternate worlds on display and his attempt to establish their plausibility. According to this estimate, *The Iron Heel*, in which a band of robber barons supported by a private army known as “the mercenaries” wrests control of America, is not a forecast of Fascism but “merely a tale of capitalist oppression.” At the same time, he makes a distinction between London and Wells: “because of his own streak of savagery London could grasp something that Wells apparently could not, and that is that hedonistic societies do not endure.”

*When the Sleeper Wakes*, he maintains, offers a vision of a glittering, sinister world, with a permanently enslaved workforce, expressly designed to allow a soft, amoral upper class to amuse itself. *Brave New World*, written a quarter of a century later, with its pleasure domes and constant pursuit of sensual gratification, is a kind of parody of these political arrangements, in which “the whole world has turned into a Riviera hotel.” This may be a wonderful caricature of the upper-bourgeois world of 1930, Orwell hastens to explain, but it is not prophetic:

No society of that kind would last more than a couple of generations, because a ruling class which thought principally in terms of a “good time” would soon lose its vitality. A ruling class has got to have a strict morality, a quasi-religious belief in itself, a mystique.

Jack London's land-grabbing plutocrats might be tyrants and swindlers, but they are not sensualists or idlers. They maintain their position because they honestly believe that civilization depends on them. The same, nine years later, is true of the apparatchiks of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Every crime the members of the Inner Party commit is necessary—not that they would

regard their activities as criminal—for in their absence, and without their decisive intervention, the world would instantly be reduced to chaos.

All this represents an important step in Orwell's understanding of the totalitarian mindset and, in particular, its mystical and well-nigh religious underpinning. It was not only that the mid-twentieth century's flight from God had created a vast reservoir of displaced religious sensibility; it had also provided a key ingredient of the atmosphere in which totalitarian societies took root and flourished. “Inside the Whale,” a long essay from 1940, subtitled “Writers and Leviathan,” picks up this theme: the Western world is moving into a time of “totalitarian dictatorships,” Orwell argues, when freedom of thought will become first a “deadly sin” and in the end little more than a “meaningless abstraction.” A later review of Malcolm Muggeridge's *The Thirties* contrasts the processes of thought control exercised by the Catholic Church with the depredations of the totalitarian state.

If supernatural sanctions no longer apply, then people have a license to do as they believe without fear of punishment. In all likelihood, the future will consist of a secular version of the Spanish Inquisition, made yet more powerful by radio transmissions and secret police surveillance.

As to where all this left England, here in the first year of war, *The Lion and the Unicorn: Socialism and the English Genius*, a long essay published in pamphlet form in 1941, is relatively optimistic. Only a socialist nation could fight effectively, Orwell proposed. By turning itself into one, by democratizing its institutions, tearing down the bastions of privilege, and fostering greater equality—by saying goodbye to the old lady in the Rolls-Royce car, as he figuratively put it—England might be able to bring off a trick that no European nation had yet managed to achieve: centralizing its economy while preserving the freedom of its citizens. Meanwhile, wherever one looks in Orwell's life, the situational details on which *Nineteen Eighty-Four* would rely are beginning to stack up. [His first wife] Eileen's first wartime job took her to the Censorship

Department in Whitehall, where she and her colleagues decided which homegrown newspapers and magazines were suitable for export and issued “stop” notices prohibiting correspondents from neutral countries filing stories which contained sensitive material. Naturally, the news coming in from Nazi-occupied Europe brought constant reminders of the way in which objective truth seemed to be falling out of the world. A diary entry from June 1942, for example, notes that

the Germans announce over the wireless that as the inhabitants of a Czech village called Ladice [Lidice] (about 1200 inhabitants) were guilty of harbouring the assassins of Heydrich they have shot all the males in the village, sent all the women to concentration camps, sent all the children to be “re-educated,” razed the whole village to the ground and changed its name.

Wartime atrocities, Orwell concluded, were to be “believed in or disbelieved in according to political predilection, with utter noninterest in the facts and with complete willingness to alter one’s beliefs as soon as the political scene alters.” Other twitches on the prefigurative thread were from closer to home. By this stage, the Orwells had come to rest at Langford Court, an apartment block on Abbey Road in St John’s Wood, London NW8. Here, like Winston Smith, they occupied a single-bedroom flat on the seventh floor, with a view looking out over central London in sight of the Ministry of Information’s headquarters at the University of London’s Senate House—a vast, sinister skyscraper whose upper stories looked out over the war-torn city and whose countless windows dazzled in the morning sun. The building’s telegraphic address was *miniform* (compare the Newspeak word for the Ministry of Truth, *Minitrue*) while its director, Churchill’s protégé Brendan Bracken, was known to his subordinates as “BB,” just like Big Brother.

And then there was the job Orwell held down as a producer for the Indian Section of the BBC’s Eastern Service between mid-1941 and the latter part of 1943, scripting and record-

ing broadcasts for Anglophone audiences in Southeast Asia. Almost from the outset, Orwell discounted the value of his work for the BBC. Six months into his time there he suggested that the atmosphere was “something halfway between a girls’ school and a lunatic asylum” and that “all we are doing at present is useless or slightly worse than useless.” Later he would mark the experience down as “two wasted years.” But however great his sense of frustration and dislike of BBC protocols, there was a way in which the cramped interiors and punctiliously observed daily routines worked on his mind. One of his tasks was to script the Section’s weekly news broadcasts with their updates on the progress of the war. Six years later, Winston will see in his mind a map of the fighting with arrows sweeping across India showing the defeat of the Eurasian forces. Moreover, Orwell was essentially being employed as a propagandist, even if, as he once put it, “while here I consider that I have kept our propaganda slightly less disgusting than it might otherwise have been . . . . To appreciate this you have to be as I am in constant touch with propaganda Axis and Allied. Till then you don’t realise what muck and filth is flowing through the air.”

His duties took place in the Corporation’s premises at 200 Oxford Street, whose rows of hutch-like offices and dismal canteen look as if they contributed something to Winston’s daily routines at the Ministry of Truth, while the room at the BBC headquarters in Portland Place where Eastern Service editorial meetings took place was numbered 101. One of Orwell’s closest colleagues was the literary critic William Empson, an enthusiast for the “Basic English” techniques pioneered by Professor C. K. Ogden and, as such, a more than plausible candidate for the original of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*’s Newspeak-obsessed Syme. And there is a revealing diary entry from the early days of his employment:

The only time when one hears people singing in the B.B.C. is in the early morning between 6 and 8. That is the time when the charwomen are at work. A huge army of them arrives all at the same time. They sit in the reception hall waiting for

their brooms to be issued to them and making as much noise as a parrot house, and then they have wonderful choruses, all singing together as they sweep the passages. The place has a quite different atmosphere at this time from what it has later in the day.

Several critics have taken this to be the origin of the prole woman on whom Winston and Julia eavesdrop from the window of their room above Mr. Charrington's shop, singing a popular song of the day as she pegs out laundry on a line. The woman, who marches "to and fro, corking and uncorking herself, singing and falling silent, and pegging out more diapers, and more and yet more," is never named, but the role she plays in *Nineteen Eighteen-Four* is highly symbolic. Watching her going uncomplainingly about her work, Winston feels a "mystical reverence," which is somehow mixed up with the pale, cloudless sky that stretches away over her head:

It was curious to think that the sky was the same for everybody, in Eurasia or Eastasia as well as here. And the people under the sky were

also very much the same—everywhere, all over the world, hundreds and thousands and millions of people just like this, people ignorant of one another's existence, held apart by walls of hatred and lies, and yet almost exactly the same—people who had never learned to think but were storing up in their hearts and bellies and muscles the power that would one day overturn the world.

If there was hope, Winston decides, it lay in the proles. Without yet having reached the end of Emmanuel Goldstein's *Theory and Practice of Oligarchical Collectivism*, he knows instinctively that this must be Oceania's arch-heretic's final message.

All these influences add up. By the autumn of 1943, as the war entered its fifth year and the Anglo-American forces assembling in the Home Counties geared up for the launch of a Second Front in Nazi-occupied France, most of the materials on which *Nineteen Eighty-Four* would come to depend had taken up residence in Orwell's imagination. All that was needed now was a spark to set them aflame.



# New poems

*by Jessica Hornik*

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## Recuerdo, January

While he talked of new love,  
the ifs of his life restored  
after illness, and sipped

a coffee and checked for texts,  
she watched the water's aluminum sheen  
ribbon toward the island shore,

cormorants dipping like ladles  
and surfacing with a pop she could  
see but not hear from inside

the ferry's enclosure.  
When they got closer  
she looked into windows

of houses built for water views,  
drawing the measured portions  
of the lives they held into her own

sense of things—as though  
understanding had physical volume.  
Coming up from the ferry among the locals

and other tourists, they soon found the town  
something short of quaint,  
the shops and banks and bakeries

pretty much like anywhere, the one  
bookstore with only bestsellers on display.  
Old friends hoping for a new experience,

they chose a restaurant on a marina,  
and sat side by side rather than across  
so each would get the same

helping of the view—the masts unmoving  
in the still of an overcast afternoon,  
a few lights faintly signaling (or so it seemed)

among the pines on the hillside,  
a heron making its way in a muddy inlet.  
Walking back to the ferry in the evening chill,

they knew they'd never have reason enough  
to return to this place, which made the leaving  
as sad as a paradise gained and lost

in the space of two hours.  
That dessert they'd shared  
and savored—and kept talking about

as the ferry pulled away, the best ever—  
even that wouldn't bring them back.  
It was already a small joy preserved,

purely remembered, sharper  
for being singular, the golden  
pastry like cupped hands,

the ice cream melting into the blackberries  
like the ferry's wake  
into the darkening sound.

## At Scargo Lake

Look down  
into the shallows,  
the water so clear  
it's like a glass of air.  
If memories are just  
what you see inside  
your own mind, what  
exactly is your life?  
A kingfisher  
flies by at eye level  
like a line drive,  
its crackling cry  
snapping like a flag  
in a stiff breeze.  
See if you can  
attach yourself  
to its freedom.

Letter from London

# The wobbling of the House of Windsor

*by Simon Heffer*

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One apparent certainty about the House of Mountbatten-Windsor is that, just when one thinks it is damaged beyond repair, it simply keeps calm and carries on. Remember the late summer of 1997, when the hysteria after the death of Diana, Princess of Wales, put even the Queen in the doghouse—in the estimation of the public, whipped up by an irresponsible British tabloid press that for a few days itself surrendered any vestige of reason. Yet, before too long, all was normal again. Then, in 2005, the British tabloid press confidently predicted that that same public would be so outraged by the decision of the Prince of Wales to marry Mrs. Camilla Parker-Bowles, his mistress of many years and the perceived wrecker of his marriage, that the Prince's position would become untenable. Nothing of the kind occurred. Indeed Camilla, Duchess of Cornwall, has, by her very visible attitude of being a thoroughly good sort, inserted herself comfortably into the affections of many Britons, often to their surprise.

Three other factors have helped stabilize the royal house since Diana's death. The first, and by far the most important, is the steady and soothing presence of Queen Elizabeth II at the head of what her husband, the Duke of Edinburgh, calls "the firm." The second is the massive unpopularity (verging upon loathing) in recent years of the British political class. Next to the political charlatans, the Mountbatten-Windsors have seemed dutiful, honest, and recognizably normal. The third is an extensive period of good behavior, or absence of scandal, that has left the tabloids—who rely on royal dirt

to give much-needed boosts to their flagging circulations—with little to stir the public up.

Now, however, an alarming conjunction of events threatens to bring a serious cloud over the Mountbatten-Windsors. Having allowed them a short honeymoon period, the media has turned its unforgiving scrutiny on the Duke and Duchess of Sussex—Prince Harry and his American actress wife, Meghan Markle. Over the last few months, as a welcome distraction from Britain's Brexit difficulties, story after story—some plausibly true, some palpably false—has appeared about the Sussexes and their (or more particularly her) supposed misconduct of royal life. With little apparent understanding of the rudiments of public relations, the couple (recently augmented by their son, Archie Harrison Mountbatten-Windsor) has given occasional aid to the campaign to tease, abuse, and denigrate them.

For example: an entirely unnecessary announcement that they would have no more than two children as part of their desire to save the planet was interpreted as sanctimonious, attention-seeking grandstanding. Within days, tales of the Sussexes' carbon-guzzling jaunts by private jet—apparently four in eleven days—reached the press. They were mocked not just for hypocrisy, but for swanking. Her Majesty the Queen has for the most part done away with the Royal Train, for instance, and now often travels first class with her staff and detectives on a scheduled rail service. The jet incident followed allegations that the Sussexes—who receive public funds from the Sovereign Grant—have been willing to take the perks of royalty while refusing to fulfill all royal-

ty's duties. The Duchess went to the Wimbledon tennis championships and caused affronts by having her security man ask others in the crowd not to take photographs of her: something unprecedented for British royalty when appearing in a public place. When their baby was born, they strictly controlled any photographs of him and refused to disclose the names of his godparents. The deal with members of the British public is this: they pay for a royal family on the grounds that it is public property, for the people to enjoy and share in. There is a growing feeling that the Sussexes are not honoring that particular deal.

Then there were stories of a note issued to neighbors of the Sussexes—who have moved into Frogmore Cottage in Windsor Home Park—telling them not to approach the couple if they saw them in the park and setting out other absurd rules of behavior. The incident was blamed on an “overly protective” official, but there has been speculation about what pressure had been put on the official to issue a document of any sort. The press has tried the usual gambit of seeking to divide the family, pointing out how lacking in hauteur the Duchess of Cambridge—the Sussexes’ sister-in-law and the future Queen—is by comparison. The Duchess of Cambridge, the press reported, took one of her children on a scheduled British Airways flight rather than demand a private aircraft. Depending on what one believes, the Duchesses of Cambridge and Sussex are either thick as thieves, texting each other constantly, or can hardly stand the sight of each other. Similarly, their husbands—best friends until Meghan Markle came along—are said to have fallen out, with the Duke of Cambridge, as a future head of “the firm,” supposedly concerned by the behavior of his younger brother and his American wife and the effect it might have on the monarchy. And it is said that the Duke of Sussex is so thin-skinned that any perceived slight to his wife sends him off the deep end. Given the zeal with which the Sussexes protect their privacy, how one is expected to work out whether any of this is true is baffling.

Prince Harry, as he was before his grandmother conferred his dukedom upon him, was perhaps the most popular member of the royal family. He had fought in Afghanistan, at his own insis-

tence, and continues to do exceptional work for disabled ex-servicemen. He was not, however, considered senior officer material, and so he left the Army in 2015 in the rank of captain (he has, since his retirement, been promoted to major). Perceptions of him have changed since he married, because the nature of his rapport with the public has changed. Nigel Farage, the leader of the Brexit Party, made some off-color remarks in Australia in August about how the Duke's popularity had sunk because of the politically correct causes, notably climate change, that his wife has caused him to embrace. An attempt by the media to provoke outrage at the remarks failed. This was not least because the public felt Mr. Farage was right, a perception that ought to have set alarms ringing at the Court of St James's.

According to courtiers, the royal family has gone to lengths to try to make the American princess feel comfortable. The Queen, especially, has made strenuous efforts to take her into the family's bosom, as have the Duchess's in-laws. It was revealed, however, long after the Sussexes' wedding, that there had been a tiff between the Queen and her grandson over what grade of tiara his bride could wear at the ceremony; Her Majesty, understanding precedence and protocol better than anyone in the land, held firm.

There has been a high turnover of staff in the Sussexes' establishment: according to the tabloids, three nannies in a month. A veteran courtier observed that, having seen the Duchess at close quarters for the last eighteen months, he would be surprised if problems did not begin to multiply. She is said to loathe the English weather and hanker for California, where it is believed she will lobby to spend time. The court shudders at such a prospect. It would take young Archie (technically the Earl of Dumbarton, but another of his parents' foibles is that they choose not to use his courtesy title) out of the influence of the royal family and the court for periods during his upbringing, time spent at which is regarded as necessary training. It would also create an interesting financial situation. The Duke could hardly remain a beneficiary of the Sovereign Grant if he were often domiciled abroad and not performing the duties for which such funding is a compensation. His father, with the wealth of the Duchy of Cornwall at his disposal, could

make him an allowance, or the Duchess could resume a well-remunerated acting career, which, to say the least, would be an unusual step for a granddaughter-in-law of the Queen of England. These suppositions are fantastical and so the pessimism of courtiers about the Duchess's future intentions may be exaggerated, or just downright wrong, and simply reflect their cultural inability to adapt to such an outsider joining "the firm."

The misdemeanors, real or imagined, of the Sussexes usually would be neither here nor there; for several reasons, however, these are increasingly not usual times. The foreign media have lubriciously reported allegations that Prince William, the Duke of Cambridge, was overfriendly with the Marchioness of Cholmondeley, whose husband's Norfolk seat, Houghton Hall, is near the Cambridges' home on the Queen's Sandringham estate. The British media, facing strict libel laws, have largely stuck to innuendo, saying the Duchess (who enjoys considerable public regard in Britain) has barred Lady Cholmondeley from any social events she arranges and does not wish to meet her elsewhere.

More toxic, and less disputed, is the association of Prince Andrew, the Duke of York—second son of the Queen and uncle to the Dukes of Cambridge and Sussex—with the late Jeffrey Epstein. The Duke of York is a mildly tragic figure. Now in his sixtieth year, the high point of his life was his courageous service in the Royal Navy as a helicopter pilot in the Falklands War of 1982. He served until 2001, when he retired in the rank of commander, having been promoted several times. His marriage, to Sarah Ferguson, was over in 1996 after ten years, having entertained Britain's tabloid readers for too much of that time. He does not enjoy great popularity, and it is widely believed he would have been better off staying in the Navy. He has struggled to find a role since he left the service, regularly being criticized in the media for freeloading (attracting the sobriquet "Air Miles Andy") and for having unsuitable friends, the latter perhaps encouraged by the fact that he has never remarried. Friends did not come much more unsuitable than Epstein; a photograph shows the Duke peering from inside Epstein's New York mansion around a half-opened door. Another shows him with Virginia Giuffre—who

says Andrew raped her—and Epstein's former associate and lover, Ghislaine Maxwell. Further, a woman named Johanna Sjoberg alleges that the Duke groped her at Epstein's house in 2001, an allegation the Duke strongly denies. Even if everything else is untrue, the Duke's association with Epstein is especially unhelpful to "the firm."

All these difficulties come at a time when, unavoidably, a change of management is coming closer. Though remarkably fit and active, the Queen is in her ninety-fourth year. (But her mother did die at 101, vigorous almost to the end.) The Duke of Edinburgh is ninety-eight, only having given up driving earlier this year after a minor road accident in which he was temporarily dazzled by the low winter sun. He has retired from public life and lives quietly, mainly in Norfolk; he, too, is in astounding health for one of his age. Courtiers fear the effect his death would have on the Queen, but these are inevitabilities that must be addressed before long.

The royal family functions as smoothly as it does because of the presence, guidance, and example of the Queen. Such is the regard in which she is held, and such is her expertise as a head of state, that when she leaves the scene it will, whatever the other circumstances, destabilize an institution that survives only by consent. The monarchy is no more degenerate than in the past—indeed it is far better behaved than in the era of the Prince Regent, or when Edward VII was Prince of Wales, or when some of George V's sons were playing the field. What has changed is the arrival of universal and entirely undeferential media. For that reason, should the end of the Queen's reign to come during a period of family turbulence, the institution could wobble badly.

That is not to insult the capabilities of the Prince of Wales, whose own popularity has improved since his second marriage, despite confident predictions that the opposite would occur. The Queen's eventual departure will trigger a period of national uncertainty and introspection. It is essential in the time that remains that her family, whether born to the purple or having married into it, understand the fragility of the monarchy, and how they can either destabilize it further or prove it can outlast even the most admired and beloved of sovereigns.

# The architect of abstraction

*by Steven W. Semes*

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Soon after the East Building of the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., opened in 1978, I visited the new structure designed by I. M. Pei & Partners. The structure, both impressive and controversial, was the first to introduce sophisticated modernism into the predominantly classical monumental zone, perfectly embodied in John Russell Pope's magnificent National Gallery building next to it. What I most remember from that first visit was a curiously intimate encounter with the triangular geometry that orders the entire structure. There was an installation of tiny French Impressionist paintings in one of the smaller galleries. I entered the room and immediately began looking closely at the pictures hung on the left wall precisely at eye level. Alone in the room and completely absorbed by the art, I stood close to the wall and moved slowly from left to right, examining each framed work intently. After passing several of the paintings and approaching the last on that wall, I became aware that I had wedged myself into the acute angle of the triangular room and my back was up against one of the paintings on the adjacent wall. I delicately extricated myself without damaging the paintings or setting off any alarms, but marveled at how the architect's uncompromising allegiance to a geometrical pattern could interfere with the basic purpose of viewing the art. It seemed that a stylistic quirk had usurped common sense. The older West Building, needless to say, has no triangular rooms.

Leoh Ming Pei, who died on May 16 at the age of 105, was not the first architect to subject an entire building and virtually everything in it to the rigor of a geometrical system. Frank Lloyd Wright, especially in his later years, also experimented with plans based on parallelograms, hexagons, octagons, triangles, and circles, extending his modular systems to the furnishings and the smallest details. By the 1960s, mainstream modern architects were eager to integrate such abstract geometries with new modular structural systems such as space frames, geodesic domes, concrete waffle slabs, and tensile structures. They employed repetitive industrialized processes to order spaces according to a predictable pattern of recurrent units.

Modernist architects really had no choice but to pursue this route. Until the years just before the Second World War, the dominant metaphor inspiring building design was the human body, with its proportionally related but individualized parts comprising an organic whole. Pope's National Gallery, opened in 1941, was one of the last expressions of this idea in American public architecture. The Modern movement replaced this literal humanism with another model, the machine, characterized by an iteration of standardized parts. The new "engineer's aesthetic" jettisoned the formal and hierarchical composition of spaces and masses, rejected familiar elements like columns and arches, and abandoned traditional proportions and ornament. All architects had left was geometry and structure.

The year after Pei's East Building was completed, the Pompidou Center opened on the Place Beaubourg in Paris, the work of Renzo Piano and Richard Rogers. The two buildings illustrate the two principal ways modernist architects responded to the challenges of creating a new architectural language: the building-as-abstract-sculpture and the building-as-machine. In the first, buildings were conceived as minimalist objects—Le Corbusier's "masterly, correct, and magnificent play of masses brought together in light"—whose expressive power came from the contrast between unadorned solid walls and strategically placed openings. Pei's 1968 Everson Museum of Art in Syracuse was an early example of this approach in the United States. Pei claimed that not only should the building display art, but it should itself *be* art. Toward this end, he used reinforced concrete and cubic stone to create effects of massiveness and permanence, taking Le Corbusier's 1955 Chapel of Notre-Dame du Haut at Ronchamp, France, as his model, though without the curvilinearity and spatial ambiguity of the French example. The other approach conceived the building as a kit of parts, like the standardized window units of the curtain wall wrapping Gordon Bunschaft's 1952 Lever House in New York, or the Rube Goldberg assemblage of the Pompidou Center, where brightly colored pipes and escalators exposed on the outside of the building suggest that the air-conditioning and human visitors are being distributed with equal efficiency.

Pei made use of both of these approaches and, as in the East Wing, sometimes both at once. In the first instance, he designed buildings whose expressive character derived from mute masses silhouetted against the sky, consistently eliciting the adjective "bold" from the critics. While his asymmetrical volumes and sharply cut openings were imposing, their underlying geometry saved them from the sometimes arbitrary shape-making issuing from other hands. Pei typically organized buildings on grids in plan and elevation. For example, a uniform plaid of concrete members and squarish openings was the dominant motif of his high-rise housing

blocks, culminating in the 1966 University Plaza towers in Greenwich Village. At least most of the time, Pei knew when to stop, subjecting his modular systems to the disciplined boundaries of the sculptural object. Similarly, the glass-sheathed John Hancock office tower in Boston completed in 1973, whose technical problems were the greatest setback in an otherwise triumphant career, is both a prismatic form without detail and a machine-like assembly of thousands of interchangeable glazing units. Pei's 1989 Louvre Pyramid, too, is simultaneously an abstract sculptural shape and a dematerialized space frame whose semi-transparent glass makes it seem less invasive in its historic setting.

Decades later, we can see the limitations of both approaches, as well as the problems created by their continued use by contemporary architects. The building-as-abstract-sculpture is essentially anti-urban, because such objects only work if they are freestanding; they cannot visually connect with other buildings or gather together to form the spaces of city streets or squares. Buildings conceived as an industrial kit-of-parts, however, have often failed to fulfill their technological promise, sometimes incurring unsustainable maintenance costs and requiring massive air-conditioning and heating systems to maintain comfort. The "well-tempered environment" foreseen in the 1960s by the philosopher of high-tech Reyner Banham turned out in many cases to be more wasteful of energy and resources than more traditionally constructed buildings.

Neither approach can readily produce a building capable of harmonizing with historic monuments or centers of older cities with well-established character. Since all the traditional ways of architectural harmonization were now thought to be unavailable, modernist buildings could only claim to be compatible with their historic settings by using similar materials and making the new building the same height as the old ones around it, whatever other visual differences they might have. This was Pei's approach at the East Building, using the same marble and matching the roofline of the Pope building but otherwise



depending on a sharp contrast in composition to stimulate a “dialogue” between the two Buildings. The Louvre Pyramid relies for its effect almost entirely on contrast in shape and material, though the apparently incidental reference to ancient Egyptian pyramids and Napoleon’s affection for them suggests a more subtle historical connection between the new entrance pavilion and the façades around the court, despite their conspicuous visual dissonance. The Pyramid certainly succeeded better than earlier schemes would have done—Pei apparently had previously studied a cube and a sphere—but an ongoing problem at the Louvre is the entourage of banal fountain pools and the smaller pyramids that accompany the principal form, cluttering the Court and crowding the entrances to *Pavillons Richelieu* and *Denon*.

From the Syracuse art gallery forward, Pei’s reputation—like those of his competitors Philip Johnson and Louis Kahn—benefited from the ascendancy of the art museum as the principal project type of High Modern architecture. No other type offered the same freedom or the same demand for “signature” buildings while imposing relatively few programmatic demands. Among Pei’s final projects, completed in 2008, was the Museum of Islamic Art in Doha, where there is a hint of nostalgia for a different kind of architecture, one in which the building was free to resemble not just a sculpture or a machine, but a *building*. Indeed, Pei’s later projects reveal a growing interest in re-connecting with nature and architecture “off the grid.” Examples include the 1993 Four Seasons Hotel tower in Manhattan, with its more subtle subdivisions and allusions to Art Deco, and the 1982 Fragrant Hill Hotel in Beijing and the 1997 Miho Museum in Kyoto, where the architect enriched modernist geometry with aspects of the traditional architecture and landscape of China and Japan, respectively. This recovery of the sensory dimension in architecture is a promising starting point for moving beyond the limitations of a minimalist, geometry-obsessed approach.

Pope’s West Building illustrates the alternative traditional approach. Classical architecture

like Pope’s relies for its expressive effect on artful subdivision, as the bulk of the whole breaks down in stages into smaller parts and parts-within-parts. These subdivisions represent different scales, gracefully calibrated and nested one within another throughout the composition. We can relate comfortably to such buildings by comparing ourselves to the scale level that corresponds to our own size as well as to those larger and smaller than ourselves. This perceptible connection between the building, its parts, and our bodies is the source of that sense of “human scale” that people typically find lacking in modernist architecture. The judicious ornament that articulates the main subdivisions is simply the continuation of the same compositional spirit into the smallest-scale levels.

While Pei’s East Wing presents itself as a unique gesture with the mute appeal of, say, the sculptures of Alexander Calder, it is also scale-less, having at most three scale levels: the whole, the principal constituent volumes, and the individual modular parts. Pope’s building has (to my eye) five, having itself bowed to the simplifying abstraction that was becoming the predominant aesthetic impulse in virtually all architecture at the time. Buildings like the United States Capitol, with seven or eight scale levels, demonstrate how the full flower of classicism enriches even such a large building by increasing scalar complexity. From a distance, you see the mass of the building as a silhouette; from a middle distance, the principal subdivisions define themselves. Finally, when directly before the building, a wealth of detail springs into view. Modernist abstraction, by eliminating the middle and small scales, denies us this experience of scaling coherence, as the mathematician Nikos Salingaros calls it. As we approach Pei’s East Building, the mass of the building gets bigger but reveals no new information.

I. M. Pei will likely be remembered as one of the most successful modernist architects. He garnered widespread admiration, though admittedly as a popularizer of modernism rather than an originator. Ada Louise Huxtable, the architecture critic of *The New*

*York Times* during the years of the Pei firm's greatest successes, was consistently worshipful in her columns, her reviews of the East Building grasping at superlatives. More impartial judges took note of the essential conservatism of the Pei style, which by the late 1970s had become the favored vehicle for elite institutions and corporate capitalism. No one, however, denied that Pei's team boasted excellent craftsmen: as abstract and free of historical reference as Pei's buildings typically were, they rarely left one in doubt where the front door was, or how to find one's way to one's destination inside, and they often created spatial excitement while avoiding disorientation (at least when not a hostage to triangles).

Just as at the end of a commercial film the credits roll hundreds of names, so a project for a major office building, art museum, or university facility is the product of teams of specialists from a variety of disciplines, not to

mention those responsible for construction. Pei, like all those who ascend to the top of large-scale architectural enterprises, had excellent support from generations of colleagues. He was especially fortunate in his choice of senior partners, including Henry N. Cobb (still practicing with the firm at ninety-three) and James Ingo Freed (who died in 2005). After 1992, Pei formed a partnership with his two younger sons, Sandi and Didi, and their roles should also be acknowledged.

If Pei's work was often predictable, it was also of consistent quality, and, in a period of unbridled experimentation, that assurance was very attractive to his establishment clients. In the end, we can say that the work of I. M. Pei represents the high point, as it also reveals the limitations, of a modernist architecture that has itself now been superseded by a new style, in which neither minimalist shapes nor structural rationalism has a place.

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## Forthcoming in *The New Criterion*:

- What the West made of the Ottomans *by James Hankins*  
"The Flashman Papers" at 50 *by John Steele Gordon*  
Border anxiety *by Daniel Johnson*  
The poetry of Herman Melville *by Christoph Irmscher*  
Israel's founding father *by David Pryce-Jones*

## Reconsiderations

# Sachie Sitwell's museum of curiosities

by David Platzer

When I first began to explore the Sitwells—Edith, Osbert, and Sacheverell—in the mid-1970s, the youngest of the trio, Sacheverell, Sachie to his friends, was the only one still alive. Endearingly gregarious by nature and happy to chat with admirers, he was accessible and spoke in the same flowing way that he wrote, sharing nuggets of knowledge, anecdotes, favorite pieces of music, or even his preferred barber. Always, he took it for granted that others knew as much as he did. Never did he dwell too long on any subject, instead flitting from one to another in the way of the hummingbird moth, “serious and diligent . . . the creature of night as well as day,” to whom he compared himself. *For Want of the Golden City*, a fascinating summary of his life and his various interests, appeared in 1973. Throughout that decade he went on producing booklets of his poetry as well as reviewing occasionally for *Apollo*, the distinguished art magazine whose then-editor, Denys Sutton, was something of a disciple of Sachie’s. Sutton’s *The World of Sacheverell Sitwell* appeared in three issues of *Apollo*, September, October, and November 1980, and later as a special one-off volume. Sutton’s book-in-magazine-form, which sadly coincided with the death in October 1980 of Sachie’s beloved wife, Georgia, was well overdue in exploring, for almost the first time, a remarkable author who was for many years in the shadows of his siblings.

Sutton expressed confidence that Sitwell’s writings, especially his poetry and the “imaginative books,” which Sutton called Sitwell’s “spiritual autobiography,” would soon be

“carefully studied.” The prediction has yet to come true. Unless I have missed something, all of Sitwell’s work—including books famous and influential in their day like *Southern Baroque Art* and *British Architects and Craftsmen*—is out of print and waiting to be rediscovered or indeed discovered at all.

Sitwell wrote in *For Want of the Golden City* that his series of “imaginative books” that began with *Dance of the Quick and the Dead* (1936), subtitled “an entertainment of the imagination,” and continued with *Sacred and Profane Love* (1940), *Primitive Scenes and Festivals* (1942), *Splendours and Miseries* (1943), *The Hunters and the Hunted* (1947), and *Cupid and the Jacaranda* (1952), were “the best things I have written,” something that, elsewhere, he also said of a later and similar book, *Journey to the Ends of Time* (1959). He was distressed that, by 1973, the books in the series were “unknown to the present generation,” except for a few eccentrics such as myself who searched them out. He had been similarly distressed about the fate of *Journey to the Ends of Time*, the most ambitious of his books. He had planned to follow this with a second volume, but failed to find a publisher for it.

The “imaginative books,” together with *Journey to the Ends of Time* and *For Want of the Golden City*, would be ideal for an inquisitive beachcomber marooned on a desert island. The books flow from one subject to another, covering disparate topics: the “False Messiah” of the seventeenth-century, Sabbatai Zevi; the forgotten nineteenth-century Jewish hurdy-gurdy musician Michael Joseph Gusikow;

Bach's fugues; Brueghel's *Dulle Griet*; Madeline Smith, accused of poisoning her lover with arsenic kisses; Picasso, "with the most astonishingly natural equipment of any painter of these last three centuries," who opened "one path after another that he has no inclination to follow"; Watteau's *Pierrot*; one of Madame Du Barry's last balls; an imagined dinner in Soho with Swinburne, Rossetti, and Rossetti's wife and muse, Elizabeth Siddal, on the same evening when the last of these died; and the "shoals of pearls" and shells in Tiepolo's Venice. The books are unique in their wide-ranging knowledge, enough to send readers on all kinds of journeys. "Isn't *Sacred and Profane Love* a curiosity?" Nancy Mitford wrote to the Mitford family friend Violet Hammersley in December 1940, though she added she was enjoying the book. "Curiosity" may be the key word for these books, which have no equivalents in recent writing and no peers. They remind me of the "cabinets of curiosities," those ancestors of museums that decorated the palaces or houses (country or town) of enlightened princes, noble lords, or gentlemen of antiquarian bent in the sixteenth, seventeenth, or eighteenth centuries.

Sitwell looked a spiritual descendent of an eighteenth-century searcher of "curiosities" in a picture taken by Cecil Beaton that appeared in John Lehmann's *A Nest of Tigers* (1968), a book about the Sitwells' literary career and much disliked by Sachie and Georgia, the latter a tigress when it came to her husband's interests. There we see him in his library at Weston Hall, the country house in Northamptonshire which his father, the brilliant and redoubtable Sir George, gave to him soon after his marriage to the vivacious Georgia, a Canadian banker's daughter. He is elegantly dressed in a dazzling waistcoat, with eyes abstracted and alert at the same time, and holding a burning cigarette, perhaps Egyptian, his father's preference.

When writing about the Sitwells, it is difficult to avoid mentioning their father. Sachie praised his father "for his intelligence and interesting mind" and expressed anger with the way Sir George was mocked and derided, most brilliantly by Osbert in his five-volume

memoir, but also by Edith. It was a matter Sachie raised with Osbert in private at the time Osbert's autobiography appeared and later more openly in *For Want of the Golden City*, its title deriving from Sachie's disappointment over Osbert's secretly changing his will shortly before his death to refuse the family castle in Tuscany to Sachie. "And so the legend dies," Sachie sadly wrote. For Sachie, his father's "posthumous fame as an eccentric has obscured his true stature." It was Sir George who appreciated the Italian Baroque and Rococo in a way few people did in his period. He told his sons of the wonders he had seen in southern Italy and paved the way for Sachie to write his pioneering *Southern Baroque Art*.

Published in 1924 at the author's expense, this dazzling book made an immediate splash and was soon to be on the shelves of every Oxford aesthete throughout the twenties. Painters like Salvator Rosa, Luca Giordano, and Guercino, much appreciated during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, had been relegated to attics and basements after Ruskin dismissed the Baroque and Rococo. Unlike more conventional academic studies, *Southern Baroque Art* is itself a specimen of the style: full of flamboyant people and false perspectival shifts across scenes, media, and periods. It was nothing like a catalogue or guide book, and Sitwell only mentions in passing artists like the Carraccis while discussing in detail Giambattista Tiepolo, a Venetian not properly "southern" at all. El Greco, generally considered as anything but Baroque and only intermittently understood even in his lifetime, was only beginning to be appreciated at the start of the twentieth century. Sacheverell's discussion of El Greco's work in "Les Indes Galantes," the second essay in *Southern Baroque Art*, makes it clear that whether the painter was Baroque or not hardly mattered. He had brought to Spain a "fervour and hysteria" that was to mark the style: "The voyage that Greco made to Spain should have resulted in a victory more sensational and more deserved than those which accompanied Caravaggio on his travels." In the book, Farinelli's singing is described at such length because the castrato's virtuoso qualities of rapidity and

brilliance were parallel to “the only virtuoso architecture to be found in Europe.” Sitwell’s essay the “The King and the Nightingale” was a highlight. It told of how Farinelli forsook his public career to sing in the chamber next to Philip V every night in the hope of relieving the King’s chronic melancholy. This story was to be echoed more than a decade later when Sachie wrote in *Dance of the Quick and the Dead* of how the insomniac Count Kayserling commissioned Bach to write pieces for the famed harpsichordist Goldberg to play every night in the chamber next to Kayserling’s so as to ease him to sleep. Sitwell was a master of these theatrical set pieces based on historical figures.

Sitwell returned to Tiepolo and his son, Domenico, whose Punchinellos he loved, often throughout his career. Another favorite was Watteau, who prized actresses much as Sitwell adored dancers such as Moira Shearer and Pearl Argyle. Of Watteau’s work, Sitwell wrote most frequently of *Pierrot* (formerly known as *Gilles*), which he described in *For Want of the Golden City* as “the most poetical of all paintings.” For Sitwell, the image of Gilles, “the white pierrot of the hustings” was “Watteau’s masterpiece . . . a portrait of a pierrot many years, perhaps a hundred years, before his time.” “He has stood there for two hundred years and more, and is not a day older. He is no dolt or zany, but poet and acrobat,” Sitwell wrote in *Cupid and the Jacaranda*.

*Pierrot* was a favorite figure of the first years of the twentieth century, appearing in Picasso’s paintings and on *Vogue* covers. Bertie Wooster dressed up as a *Pierrot* for a party. In his early memoir, *All Summer in a Day* (1926), Sitwell wrote that his baptism “into the magic and mystery of the theatre” had been through seeing at Scarborough, the coastal town where the Sitwells then had a house (the one in which Sachie was born), the “seaside *Pierrots*,” a troupe managed by his tutor, Major Viburne, portrayed in Edith’s autobiographical poem “Colonel Fantcock.”

In America in particular, the Sitwells have been inaccurately conflated with the Bloomsbury group. The Sitwells, while friendly with some of the Bloomsberries (notably Arthur Waley, the great translator from Oriental lan-

guages), were far more dashing and stylish, Cavaliers to Bloomsbury’s Roundheads. Sachie had a particular dislike of the “freakish and anything but kind-tongued” Lytton Strachey, who was rather a friend of Osbert’s. Sachie made an interesting comparison of Strachey to a more recent group of counter-culture icons: “the whole of life and of intellectual experience were for Strachey one long and high-pitched ‘giggle.’ It was in this spirit that John Lennon and his fellow Beatles swarmed into Buckingham Palace to collect the decorations they had been . . . awarded.” In condemning the long-haired idols—the Beatles, Rolling Stones, et al.—of the Sixties, Sachie wrote that they “had nothing to do with great songwriters like Irving Berlin, George Gershwin, Cole Porter, Jerome Kern and others who were phenomenal in their especial line.” He had predicted in *Sacred and Profane Love* that “long-haired man must come again. He must be apart from other men, able to live in a modern flat or a hotel bedroom as though it was a tent or medicine lodge.” When the prediction came true, Sachie was less than pleased at the result. He who had long been fascinated by “fanaticism and . . . virtuosity” censured the hirsute: it was now “not enough to make an artist or musician of someone . . . because he has long and untidy hair.”

He was the eternal “baby” of the family who survived considerably longer than his siblings and was least marked by illness. His perpetual innocence and youthfulness made others want to look after him. This he needed, for he learned neither how to drive a car (despite living in a part of England where there was no public transport) nor how to promote himself in the way his siblings did. Nevertheless, he has been praised by not a few as the most accomplished of the Sitwell trio. Reviewing Sarah Bradford’s biography of Sachie in 1993, John Gross observed that while the youngest Sitwell was unlikely ever to become popular to the general public, he would always find readers happy to discover him. He had a way, found some poets, of making observations that impress a reader as something he or she has always known, or ought to have known. It is indeed time for Sacheverell Sitwell to be reconsidered.

## Theater

# West End diary

by Kyle Smith

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Aspects of the Harvey Weinstein story are grotesque and disturbing. But other aspects are simply funny. Consider the mea culpa Weinstein issued two years ago when he was first accused of sexual misconduct by many women: He asked us to consider that times had changed since he started out. He quoted the rapper Jay-Z. Then he started talking about his anger. He was angry he'd been caught:

I am going to need a place to channel that anger, so I've decided that I'm going to give the NRA my full attention. I hope Wayne LaPierre will enjoy his retirement party. I'm going to do it at the same place I had my Bar Mitzvah. I'm making a movie about our President, perhaps we can make it a joint retirement party. One year ago, I began organizing a \$5 million foundation to give scholarships to women directors at USC. While this might seem coincidental, it has been in the works for a year. It will be named after my mom, and I won't disappoint her.

David Mamet's brilliant satire *Bitter Wheat* is an entire play of a Weinstein stand-in named Barney Fein sounding like that—a self-pitying idiot frantically trying to avoid censure by reminding us that he's liberal, Jewish, rich, and has a mother. He's also quite the feminist, need he remind us? Think of all the scholarships for women he, er, got other people to pay for. He hardly needed to add that he was also a major fundraiser for Hillary Clinton and the Democratic Party, having hosted parties at which the price of admission was a large

check. Some would prefer that we forget all this, but Mamet hasn't. Nor has he forgotten that this Lothario needed chemical assistance to aid his depredations: assistants told stories of Weinstein getting mysterious injections and fueling up with Viagra. He wasn't merely a disgusting lecher, he was a comical one.

Directed as well as written by Mamet, *Bitter Wheat*—which closed in September after a four-month run at London's Garrick Theatre and awaits its New York premiere—is very nearly perfection, cutting and hilarious and mordant. It's a breathtaking vivisection of not just Weinstein but everything Weinstein represents. Producers should bring it to this side of the Atlantic without changing a thing. It takes a great artist to find a breathtakingly novel approach to a story that is so deeply entrenched in the culture, and Mamet has not only done that but has come up with his funniest and most entertaining play in many years.

Critics mostly seemed outraged, though. Two years after Weinstein's offenses first began to be revealed in a series of news reports, the accepted range of reactions is a narrow one. We are meant to be angry about what Weinstein and others like him did, then aver that we think women who tell stories about the sexual misbehavior of men should automatically be believed, then pivot to the agreed-upon antidote, which is a massive affirmative action program for Hollywood women and a concurrent purge of anyone tainted with a hint of bad behavior. David Mamet, being averse to cliché, isn't interested in any of this.

Since Mamet can be brutal, as in his 1992 sexual-harassment play, *Oleanna*, a sharp intake of breath came with the news that he was writing about Weinstein. It's a relief to report that *Bitter Wheat* depicts no sexual violence at all. Rape isn't funny, and Fein, the Weinstein-like producer robustly played with a kind of rageful focus by John Malkovich, doesn't lay a hand on a woman in the play. The character Mamet creates, and Malkovich portrays, is inspired by the pitiful Weinstein, not the gruesome one. For each of the cases in which the film mogul allegedly attacked women, there were apparently many others in which he begged them like a dog, asserting his importance, promising them film roles, trying to be their best friend, or, if all else failed, lamenting that no one could ever love him because he's fat.

At the outset of the play, Fein is berating a forlorn screenwriter who has evidently poured all of his heart into a script that is far too subtle for Fein's tastes. Fein reminds the writer that he is contractually obligated to do a rewrite since he has been paid \$200,000 for his services. When the writer objects that he has in fact been paid nothing, Fein changes his story instantly. His lawyers advised him not to pay, he claims, because then he would have been a party to fraud for paying for such an obviously unusable script.

We're meant to find all of this irrational rage and free-ranging cruelty amusing because, after all, the writers are beta males and Hollywood producers are titans. "Let's count houses. I have five," says Fein. Then Mamet springs the trap: the amusing status quo in Hollywood is considerably more disturbing when the other person in the room with the mogul is a delicate, unspoiled young beauty. Mamet himself must have been on the receiving end of abuse from producers like Weinstein on many occasions and concluded that anyone who behaves so dishonorably in his professional capacity wouldn't hesitate to use the same bullying tactics in a more personal context. So it is with Fein. The bulk of the play consists of Fein's increasingly ludicrous efforts to lure a British-Korean starlet (Ioanna Kimbook) into bed. He promises to make her a star if she'll sleep with him. Is that not a possibility? Well, then,

he promises to stop her from becoming a star if she won't sleep with him. Still she refuses. Well, then, how about if she just watches him take a shower? No sale.

All of this takes place within the madcap whirl of a number of other schemes Fein is trying to enact with the aid of his deadpan assistant (Doon Mackichan). There's a board meeting at which Fein's mother is meant to preside as chairman, but her health is failing and in order to prop her up Fein calls in a doctor to give her illegal injections. It's also his mother's birthday, meaning he has to arrange some sort of gift, plus he's preparing humbly to accept yet another award for his human-rights work. He needs a speech that doesn't sound like a speech, since he is supposed to be unaware that the award is about to be bestowed on him. Meanwhile he continues to weigh important Oscar-scented scripts about veganism and civil rights even as he keeps up with such worthy causes as a foundation for illegal immigrants.

Though his business is apparently to make saccharine liberal message movies for the purpose of lining his trophy case at other people's expense, when he asks the assistant what purpose his company really serves, she is baffled. "Money laundering," Malkovich says, impeccably emphasizing all syllables, as though addressing the mentally challenged. The savvy audience member can hardly help laughing, given that Weinstein, contra his reputation as a shrewd filmmaker, mostly produced flops that kept him forever on the hunt for fresh sources of capital. Even his successes were mostly dreck like *Chocolat*, *The Reader*, and *Silver Linings Playbook* that were custom-designed to flatter the sensibilities of Academy Awards voters.

Malkovich, who wears a fat suit that shapes him into something resembling a beach ball, keeps getting stuck in his chair or stranded on his back like an immense turtle as he plots and glowers and harangues, knowing that he can get away with almost anything as long as he keeps producing movies that make liberals swoon. His Weinstein doppelgänger is not just a sex pest but the hilarious incarnation of all of Hollywood's virtue-signaling hypocrisy, its self-congratulation for all the subjects of its

preaching that it fails spectacularly to practice. Of course the critics hate *Bitter Wheat*; they wanted to boo the villain of the month, not have their own tastes and ideals lampooned. But they can't say that. Instead they've been calling Mamet lazy. Lazy has become critical shorthand for "striking targets I think should not be hit."

Just around the corner in London, *The Son* (the Duke of York's Theatre through November 2) completes a trilogy of plays by the Frenchman Florian Zeller. The best of these, *The Father* (which played in the West End in 2015 then on Broadway the following year), was a devastating exploration of age-related dementia portrayed from the viewpoint of a sufferer brilliantly played by Frank Langella. An unrelated family story, *The Mother*, starred Isabelle Huppert as an exasperating old bat refusing to let go of her youth, rowing with her husband, and flirting increasingly pathetically with her own grown son. It debuted off-Broadway last winter and was poorly reviewed. Exploring the travails of a third family, *The Son* is much less abstract than the other two, which broke the consciousness of their protagonists into jagged shards and often elided the distinction between reality and imagination. This one plays like an extended episode of a television drama about a disturbed teen boy. How disturbed? Early on, after the teen in question, Nicolas (played by a twenty-five-year-old actor named Laurie Kynaston), has been raging about a pristine white room, scribbling on the walls with a black marker and hurling objects all over the space while others in the cast remain oblivious to his actions, his mother says she fears something bad is going to happen. At that point the entire trajectory of the play came clearly into view. I did a lot of checking my watch while I waited for things to play out exactly as expected.

The teen boy is depressed and has been cutting his own forearms. His father, Pierre (John Light), has left his mother, Anne (Amanda Abbington), and is raising a newborn with a new girlfriend, Sofia (Amaka Okafor). The entire play consists of scenes of Nicolas being anguished while everyone flutters around try-

ing haplessly to rescue him from his depression. I couldn't see the point of any of it. Did anyone come into the theater not knowing that teens can fall into suicidal despair?

Two people close to me have made it clear that from their point of view my principal duty as a critic is to tip them off when a story is about a child in deadly peril so that they may avoid such calculated tear-jerking. The people who create plays and books and movies along these lines are always quite coy about it, but a huge red sticker that says "WARNING: KID MAY DIE IN THIS" seems appropriate. Such narratives usually strike me as a bit hollow: Why, yes, for a child to die is really horrible, you are absolutely correct. Was there anything else you wished to say? If not, why bother? These children-in-peril dramas tend to feel tawdry and exploitative, as though playwrights confusing misery and profundity simply reached for the bluntest possible instruments with which to make the audience cry. I didn't cry; such transparent hackery simply makes me impatient.

Just as some diners seek the all-you-can-eat buffet, a certain kind of theatergoer ventures forth in search of quantity of theatrical experience. To such an audience Lucy Prebble's *A Very Expensive Poison* offers a whopping, indeed groaning, evening of theater on the South Bank of the Thames (the Old Vic through October 5).

A former Russian spy turned British refugee in London, Alexander Litvinenko was murdered in slow motion between November 1 and November 23 of 2006. It took doctors a number of days to figure out the source of his illness—he had ingested a massive dose of Polonium, a radioactive substance that could have come only from a single nuclear reactor in Russia—but before he expired he helped the police solve the mystery of his murder. Not that it did him much good; the two men who poisoned his tea at the Millennium Hotel in Mayfair had long since returned to Russia, which to this day is disinclined to extradite them. Both governments proved less than eager to pursue the matter. Luke Harding's exhaustive book documenting Litvinenko's



life, written with the aid of his widow, Marina, is the source of a longish play by Prebble, who tells the story via physical comedy, folk tale, musical numbers, animation, and other forms of digression from the central mystery. The set changes are many; the props are colorful. We get an eyeful of a six-foot-tall bronze penis that was a centerpiece of the dance floor of the London nightclub where Litvinenko's two assassins went in search of a good time. One minute Litvinenko (Tom Brooke) is suffering in his hospital bed; the next, three actors in evening dress dance with six life-sized puppets to the tune of Fleetwood Mac's pop tune "Everywhere." Apparently either Prebble or the director, John Crowley, thought it would liven up the evening's murder and thuggery. At any rate, the audience seemed to enjoy the spectacle.

Amid all of the buffoonery, the sudden shifts to earnestness strike me as discordant, especially when MyAnna Buring, the actress playing the widow Litvinenko, breaks character to ask audience members to bear witness by reading portions of a London judge's ruling on the matter, which arrived only in 2016 and only after considerable pushing on her part. It's affecting that Marina lost her husband and must live with the certainty that his killers will never be brought to justice, but it seems odd to beg the audience's sorrow in what is essentially a broad comedy. Vladimir Putin almost certainly knew about the murder and may well have ordered it, but, as played by Reece Shearsmith, Putin (whose name goes unmentioned until the last few minutes) is charismatic and amusing, spending the second act watching the play from the balcony heckling the cast, telling

the audience "the only crime here is charging four pounds for a program" and casting doubt on Marina's version of events. I could have forgiven a lot if the play had made me laugh. It rarely did, possibly because I was never unaware of how much effort was being made. I had the sense I was in a slightly desperate varsity revue.

Litvinenko's gruesome death may have shocked the world at the time, but it becomes considerably less shocking when the details are brought forth. A longtime burr in Putin's saddle who essentially became a traitor to Russian security forces (FSB), Litvinenko evidently made the mistake of thinking that when you sign up for the FSB, you're allowed to let your personal sense of morality be your guide. In an early scene, he is seen declining to participate in the assassination of the tycoon Boris Berezovsky (Peter Polycarpou). "It is illegal, and also wrong," he declares. Litvinenko was kidnapped, imprisoned, and tortured for going public about this plot, and he would have been wise to get as far away from Russian thugs as possible. Instead, after winning asylum with his wife and son in the United Kingdom, he continued publicly to oppose and denounce the Putin regime while working with MI6. A fellow Russian warned him in 2002 that he was the target of an assassination scheme, but Litvinenko kept at it, going so far as to blame Russia for the July 7, 2005 Islamist terror bombings in London. The British government's foot-dragging on the matter seems like a case of treating the Russian government and everyone who has worked for it as a kind of mafia: murders that take place within it are a grim but predictable reality.

# David Park: a retrospective

by *Karen Wilkin*

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When I was in high school, beginning to venture on my own to galleries, I saw an exhibition that fascinated and excited me at the time and remains with me today. Many decades later, I can see some of the bold, minimally rendered figures in the paintings on view, conjured up with big, fierce brushstrokes, schematic modeling, and saturated color. They reminded me of the German Expressionist works I was beginning to know about (and respond to, as teenagers do), but they seemed much more immediate and surprising. As a student at Music and Art (long before it merged with Performing Arts), I was aware of the attention being paid to adventurous abstraction in New York—one of the painting teachers was famous for having studied with Hans Hofmann. I'd seen *Life* magazine articles about “Jack the Dripper” and his colleagues, and I'd heard my parents and their friends, very modest collectors of American Modernism, arguing about their merits; “Picasso, of course, can draw,” I remember one of them saying, as he dismissed Abstract Expressionism wholesale. I didn't think I agreed with him, but neither was I yet fully up to the rigor of Jackson Pollock or Franz Kline, so the fact that here were paintings as daring and loose as any up-to-the-minute abstractions that also included recognizable images seemed startling and important.

The show was “David Park,” at Staempfli Gallery. My interest was strengthened, somewhat later, by a group show there, “Elmer Bischoff, Richard Diebenkorn, David Park,” which introduced me to two other artists who

followed a related path. After that, I watched for exhibitions of what I had learned was “Bay Area Figuration,” although it wasn't easy to see Park and his colleagues in New York, apart from occasional group shows at the Whitney. Most impressive, as I recall, was a fairly substantial Park solo exhibition at Staempfli, which I now know was held in 1961 and was followed three years later (according to a slim catalogue that, miraculously, I still have) by a survey of seven California painters: Bischoff, Diebenkorn, Park, and others. Park, who I later learned had led the West Coast shift to figuration, remained my favorite.

Since those first encounters, Park's robust, light-struck figure groups have continued to demand my attention whenever I come upon them—which, except on the West Coast, has not been frequently, even when you discount the years that I lived in countries where contemporary California painting simply did not exist. Now there is “David Park: A Retrospective,” a full-scale tribute organized by Janet Bishop, Chief Curator of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.<sup>1</sup> The exhibition presents the artist whole, from his earliest, rather tentative forays into Modernism to the powerful works of his

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1 “David Park: A Retrospective” was on view at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth from June 2–September 22, 2019. It will next be seen at the Kalamazoo Institute of Arts, Kalamazoo, Michigan (December 21, 2019–March 15, 2020), and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (April 11–September 7, 2020).

last decade—the fierce paintings that burned themselves into my mental image bank and galvanized his peers and colleagues in San Francisco. That last decade, sadly, was also the entire decade of Park’s mature working life. Born in Boston in 1911, he moved to California at seventeen, living and working in the Bay Area (apart from a five-year teaching stint in Boston) until his 1960 death from cancer in Berkeley.

An accomplished, classically trained pianist, Park was largely self-taught as a painter, although he drew seriously from a very young age (he apparently declared his ambition to become an artist at eleven). After moving to Los Angeles to live with relatives, he took some advanced courses at the Otis Arts Institute, quit, and moved to Berkeley. Far more important was the influence of an artist aunt, the Berkeley arts community, an apprenticeship to an important sculptor, and encounters with artists who visited or taught at Berkeley, including Henri Matisse, Hans Hofmann, and Diego Rivera. Park’s precocious abilities were noticed early on. He began exhibiting and teaching in his early twenties.

As installed in the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, where “David Park” began its tour in June, the show introduced us to the young painter through works on paper and prints made in 1933 and 1934, when he had been married for a few years and was the father of two daughters, teaching art and participating in the New Deal’s Public Works of Art Project. The fluid, playful images, some of workmen and some with biblical subjects, have the stylishness of *New Yorker* magazine cartoons of the era, with a strong admixture of social consciousness. Park was awarded a few mural commissions during the Depression years, the most ambitious a hundred-foot-long *Allegory of Music* (1936) for the music room of Mills College, Oakland. The exhibition’s single panel from the vast project is vaguely Pompeian, with generous figures in classicizing tunics against a red background. The frieze-like composition is most satisfying for the way the sturdy limbs of the bare-breasted, music-making nymphs chain across the long, horizontal space; the

bare breasts, however, caused the all-women’s college to reject the scheme.

Park’s paintings of the late 1930s reveal a young man seeking his voice, trying out a range of compositions with stylized figures in geometric settings, with echoes of Mexican muralism and Picasso. The figures tend to be ample and rather generalized, with massive hands, while the cubic buildings in the backgrounds don’t always take their place, spatially, in the larger context. The most striking and articulate of these early efforts is *Self-Portrait Painting His Wife (Painter with Palette and Model)* (ca. 1937), which shows a pair of half-length protagonists and a painting in progress on an easel, animated by play of the implied spaces among them. Everything is pressed close together, as if trapped by the tight boundaries of the canvas; there’s a lot of compressed energy in a zig-zagging yellow zone between the painter’s tipped face and his wife Lydia’s raised elbow, echoed by the blonde hair of all the figures, “real” and “depicted.” The painter, Lydia, and the Picasso-inflected, brightly hued image in the picture within the picture are all vividly characterized. The unfinished portrait is very sweet. Lydia looks bored. A glamorous Park, head at a coy angle, gazes from beneath lowered lids; the phrase “bedroom eyes” comes to mind. Oddly, in a painting with mainly naturalistic, if intensified, colors, he appears to be wearing lipstick and nail polish. Puzzling as this is, *Self-Portrait Painting His Wife* is most notable for its paint handling—more sensuous, less controlled, and more assured than just about any other work of the period, a prefiguration of what will come.

Sensuous paint handling persists through the 1940s, while Park’s imagery becomes increasingly responsive to Synthetic Cubism’s translation of the world around us into large, flat, crisp-edged organic shapes, loosely combined into expansive compositions. There’s sometimes a flavor of Joan Miró and sometimes a little too much naturalism uncomfortably imposed on the Cubist simplifications. The works look rather provincial and a little second-hand, apart from their suave paint application, but they are also very much of their moment. I kept thinking about such correlations to New York developments, probably unknown to Park, as Adolph Gottlieb’s first *Pictographs*, from the early 1940s, with their

fragmented, shorthand facial features and body parts arranged on roughly indicated grids, or Gottlieb's friend David Smith's sculptures of billiard players, their bodies and the playing surface flattened into rounded and sharp-edged planes oddly similar to those in Park's paintings.

As the 1940s progressed, Park was more daring in his treatment of the figure, slicing and combining profiles into structures that teeter on the brink of abstractness, but also depicting flattened but fairly naturalistic birds, sometimes in the same picture. By the late 1940s, he was painting abstractly, moving his medium around with great accomplishment. But while he appears to have been confident about *how* to paint, he seems to have been far less certain about *what* to paint. The exhibition's few abstractions of the period seem to have been generated less by internal imperatives than by then-prevailing notions about the necessity and superiority of abstraction—convictions regularly affirmed on the East Coast, in the Cedar Tavern and The Club and among the Abstract Expressionists and their circle, and widely disseminated. Park's abstractions share the palette and touch of the ambiguous *Self-Portrait Painting His Wife* of the previous decade, but lack its intensity.

Park knew it. Details vary, but sometime early in 1950—exactly when is not known—he and Lydia loaded as many of his abstract canvases as would fit into their 1935 Ford and consigned them to the dump. This dramatic act liberated him, giving him license to change radically his conception of what a painting could be. As he explained in 1952, “I believe the best painting America has produced is the current non-objective direction. However I often miss the sting that I believe a more descriptive reference to some fixed subject can make. Quite often, even the very fine non-objective canvases seem to me so visually beautiful that I find them insufficiently troublesome, not personal enough.”

After 1950, Park was the Park of the fiercely and gorgeously painted, vernacular, all-American figures that established and sustain his reputation—images with plenty of sting, that are wholly personal, and, especially in the last years of his too-short life, troublesome in their sheer insistence and urgent paint

application. The paintings of the early 1950s are often like Raymond Carver short stories: seemingly straightforward visions of people going about their everyday lives—walking on the street, attending a cocktail party, shopping at a market, or simply coming close to us, as if about to pass us on a crowded sidewalk—with a twist. There's nothing straightforward about the way energetically brushed, full-bore color both creates and threatens to subsume the figures. In *The Bus* (ca. 1952), a glowing, orange-gold plane vibrates against a half-length figure's minimally suggested orange coat. A row of rectangles populated by sketchy heads, at the top of the canvas, snaps the picture in and out of reference, explaining the title. Something similar happens in the smaller, economical *Two Boys Walking* (1954), in which a very large, shadowed male face looms against blocks of varied greens, while the space is suddenly expanded by a much smaller figure at his shoulder, suggested only by two strokes of denim blue, a rectangle of blue-green, and patches of tan and brown face and hair. The compressed space and the way the figures press towards us, like people who stand too close when holding conversations, add an invigorating overtone of unease. Park confronts us with his images, pushing us away by giving us no place to stand, while at the same time filling our field of vision so aggressively that we become slightly uncomfortable. The cropped snapshot views and the zooming distances can make these paintings seem cinematic or dependent on photographs, but there's no evidence that Park ever took, much less used, photos for his art. Blame the zeitgeist. In any event, Park's lush gestures always return us to the fact of paint on a surface and the presence of his hand.

Occasionally, we catch glimpses of Park's interest in other artists. There's a flavor of Matisse in the harmonies and internal rhythms he creates among like and unlike elements—as in the play of the verticals of neckties, lapels, a fragment of striped dress, and distant figures in *Tournament* (ca. 1953), each drawn or painted slightly differently, from assertive stroke to delicate line. The tipped tabletop that occupies much of *Table with Fruit* (1951), and the way everyone and everything is pushed to the leftover

spaces at the perimeter have echoes of Pierre Bonnard, an association challenged by the density of Park's unbroken expanses of paint.

By the mid-1950s, Park was in full command of his new idiom. Still lifes of banal objects—a hairbrush and comb, a hammer and pliers—seen up close, have the immediacy and seductive touch of Édouard Manet's little paintings of peonies and asparagus, absent their elegance. A sink, seen head-on, is a just plain terrific near-abstract of horizontal bands of deep ochre, off-white, and pale, streaky celadon, shifted into the quotidian by casually indicated faucets and a bar of soap. A group of uncompromising, frontal, close-up portrait heads, including an owlish Imogen Cunningham behind big glasses and an affectionate, slap-dash Richard Diebenkorn, have the hectic audacity of German Expressionist figure paintings; so do a gray-haired man with a mustache and heavy-rimmed glasses and an apparently rapidly executed portrait of a San Francisco collector, with a brutal slash of red lipstick.

The last galleries of the show, as installed in Fort Worth, were dazzling. One large space was devoted to nudes, bathers, and people in boats. With assured, full-arm strokes of a large brush and a faultless sense of tone and color, Park gives us men and boys on the beach in strong light; hefty figures in boats against explosive backgrounds that suggest vast space and the movement of water; and agile women in bathing suits. The women in *Two Bathers* (1958) turn and gesture in low, afternoon light, their movements and the moment magically evoked by sweeps of luminous blues, ochres, and browns, anchored by judiciously placed geometric areas of white and a few ferociously intelligent notes of red and pink. The women, one turned away, pressing her hands to her lower back, the other in three-quarter view, raising a towel behind her, are wholly convincing, three-dimensional beings who move easily in space, but if we even briefly stop concentrating on the associative power of Park's oversized brush marks, we discover an impressive abstraction. Other works, no less compelling, are less equivocal, such as the hieratic, bathing-suited pair, *Standing Couple* (1958), with their nearly identical poses and

their sturdy shoulders and the planes of their torsos rendered with slashing strokes of light and dark. Even more direct is *Standing Male Nude in Shower* (1955–57), a ruddy, backlit body framed by radiant blues that we identify as shower curtain and tub. The expressively drawn figure seems poised, tense, and vulnerable, all at once.

Park's works of the late 1950s are among his most audacious and unfettered, as if he had—rightly—gained full confidence in his ability to walk the tightrope between potent allusion and expressive gesture. The two figures concentrating on their books in *Women at a Table* (1959) are suggested by a few authoritative brushstrokes, modeled with unpredictable color oppositions, and isolated against a brushy, radiant ochre ground. Our attention toggles between the introspective, intimate image and the opulent paint *as paint*. The pared-down, startling *Nudes and Ocean* (1959) suggests a burgeoning interest in more varied paint handling and even greater liberties with the figure. It's an immensely provocative picture, but, tragically, we'll never know how—or if—Park would have developed this theme. The last works in the show, painted in 1960, when he was very ill, in pain, and unable to stand at the easel, are bold, loose, brilliantly colored gouaches on paper that rehearse his preferred subjects: heads, nudes, bathers, vernacular figures. A digital reproduction allowed us to view *Untitled (The Scroll)* (1960), thirty feet of vivid, interlocking images encapsulating memories of places and events important to him since childhood, which he drew with felt-tip markers at the end of his life. (The real thing will be included in the showing at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.) Neither the gouaches nor the scroll are the equal of Park's strongest canvases, but their energy and freshness is astonishing, making us regret his early death even more.

There's a handsome, informative catalogue and a coda: drawings by Park and his circle, the artists influenced by his commitment to figuration—Bischoff, Diebenkorn, Frank Lobdell, and Manuel Neri, among others—made when they shared models and worked side by side. It's eye-testing and fascinating. But so is the entire Park retrospective.

## Exhibition notes

“Picasso and Antiquity: Line and Clay”  
The Museum of Cycladic Art,  
Athens, Greece.  
June 20–October 20, 2019

“Picasso and Antiquity: Line and Clay” brings to mind a cartoon I came across ages ago in (if memory serves correctly) the pages of *MAD* magazine. It was a parody of the familiar image of Darwinian ascent, tracing, in this case, the evolution of art and artists. From left to right, we follow the step-by-step development, beginning with an ape wielding a brush to, a couple of figures over, a stately Leonardo-like figure holding a palette. Ultimately, we end up on a downhill slope to the original ape, albeit now wearing a beret and splattering paint, Pollock-style. An obvious joke, perhaps, yet like most jokes it contains a hard kernel of truth—about the development of artistic pursuit, say, or the illusory nature of progress. Might the wits at *MAD* have had Ecclesiastes in mind, placing broad strokes on the observation that there is nothing new under the sun? Certainly, there are immovable facts that refute historical circumstances. An ape wearing a beret? There are better emblems of human constancy. Worse, too.

The line traced by “Picasso and Antiquity” is less encyclopedic and less cynical. It is, in fact, as heartening an exhibition as one could hope for. Art, it insists, is a means by which human beings, however separated by time and culture, can uncover and sustain correspondences of feeling and ambition, vision and thought. “Universal values,” they used to be called, and without employing scare quotes as a crutch. In a culture as identity-riven and politically rebarbative as our own, such an effort might be derided as furthering the wiles of, um, *the cisheteropatriarchy*. (Yeah, it’s a thing.) Yet by placing works by the foremost innovator of twentieth-century art alongside objects that predate them—by, at times, a good three millennia—“Picasso and Antiquity” places its bets on art as an inclusive and transformative continuum, and wins. Kudos to Nikolaos C. Stampolidis, Director of the Museum of

Cycladic Art, and the art historian Olivier Berggruen for assembling a show that posits history as a vital continuity, a resource in which aspiration and accomplishment are forever contemporary, forever relevant.

Influence is a slippery thing, and not always easy to codify. Stampolidis admits as much, noting that the sundry examples of antiquity featured at the Cycladic Museum are objects the “artist might have . . . encountered, absorbed, digested, adjusted and transformed, or have been to a greater or lesser degree inspired by.” “Might” is the operative word. How versed was the Spaniard in the art and lore of Greece and Rome? The poet and critic Randall Jarrell described Picasso as an artist who “loves the world so much he wants to steal it and eat it.” Picasso was, in artistic terms, an omnivore of unceasing appetite. As a young painter in Paris, he haunted the Louvre’s Campana Collection with its myriad artifacts and sculptures. Recurring motifs in his oeuvre—fauns, minotaurs, and centaurs—testify to Picasso’s knowledge of myth. More specialized references pop up as well—to Silenus, for instance, the drunken semi-divinity who served as tutor to Dionysus. Berggruen suggests that relationships with Efstratios Eleftheriades (better known as Teriade) and Christian Zervos, publishers of Greek extraction and proselytizers for Greek culture, were pivotal in furthering the artist’s immersion in all things antique. Score a point for the home team.

“Picasso and Antiquity” is divided into sections with discrete themes, among them “Line and Light in Space,” “Lysistrata,” “Arcadia,” “The Three Graces,” and “The Minotaur.” The works are modest in scale and sometimes tiny; this is, very much, a jewel-box exhibition. The minotaur introduces the show—with a Roman copy, done in marble, based on an earlier Classical prototype—and rounds it off with a calyx krater, *circa* 340–300 B.C., in which we see a red-figure diorama of Theseus wrestling and besting the fearsome man-bull. As a curatorial gambit, this is risky. The former piece is a powerhouse of sinew and verisimilitude; the latter a supernal exercise in concision

and contour. In between, there are artifacts depicting Aphrodite, Dionysiac revels, sacred fish (the tilapia), powerful animals (the bull), and birds—rendered in clay, silver, bronze, and marble. Any artist worth his salt would be rendered skittish by the majesty—or, in the case of the priapic slapstick seen on the *Black Figure Kabirian skyphos* (ca. fifth century B.C.), arrant ribaldry—inherent in even the least of these pieces. After my initial run-through of the show, Picasso came off as small potatoes, an overinflated ego out of its depth. Upon subsequent visits, the ego gained muscle and credibility. Talent will out and, as it happens, so can irreverence.

Irreverence and, it should be noted, generosity of spirit. Rarely has Picasso—*that monster! that villain!*—been so likable. Was a degree of modesty elicited by the source material—that is to say, the competition? Or is this amiability a factor of curatorial choice—abjuring painting and sculpture for ceramics and drawing? The latter two media encouraged a greater degree of informality and play for Picasso than did painting or sculpture. As a draftsman, he is seen at his most mercurial and, at moments, meticulous: *Silenus in the company of dancers* (1933) and *Lysistrata (Reconciliation Between Sparta and Athens)* (1934) are tours-de-force, respectively, of narrative density and lyrical momentum. Ceramics has always seemed the least necessary of Picasso's various mediums, but it did encourage his sense of humor. At the Cycladic Museum, Picasso the ceramicist is an unexpected head-turner, simultaneously confirming and transforming the spiritual heft and stylistic élan of his forebears. In some cases, it's hard to tell who did what without a scorecard; the commonalities of form and vision are uncanny. A cabinet dedicated to the owl—helpmeet to Athena and, as such, a symbol of erudition—is a delight. As goofy as Picasso's owls may be, they tap into the iconographic power embodied within the antique bowls and figurines placed nearby. Such juxtapositions are exciting, revealing, and often very funny. "Picasso and Antiquity" is an achievement of rare and welcome distinction.

—Mario Naves

"Abstract Climates:  
Helen Frankenthaler in Provincetown,"  
The Parrish Art Museum, Water Mill,  
New York.  
August 4–October 27, 2019

Sandro Botticelli is alleged to have claimed that "by just throwing a sponge full of different colors at the wall, you leave a stain, in which you can see a beautiful landscape." It's a poetic-sounding line, but the Early Renaissance Florentine said it with a sneer, deriding the importance of a subject that he believed could be depicted with the most cursory and random of gestures. Nonetheless, I hope I can be forgiven for having thought of it while watching a video of Helen Frankenthaler (1928–2011) at work in her studio with sponge in hand—squeezing, spreading, scrubbing, and flicking paint across a floor-bound canvas—that helps introduce "Abstract Climates: Helen Frankenthaler in Provincetown," an exhibition that examines Frankenthaler's relationship with the Cape Cod town and its natural environs on now at the Parrish Art Museum.

Abstract Expressionism has long been associated with the transcendental myth of the American landscape, and among her peers Frankenthaler was especially ready to acknowledge the link in her own work. She frequently titled paintings after the places that inspired them, and she did landscape studies throughout much of her working life. She once called *Mountains and Sea* (1952, not included in the exhibition), the painting for which she is best known, a "totally abstract memory of the landscape" of coastal Nova Scotia, which she had visited months before.

But can a "memory of the landscape" be "totally abstract," or does that memory imply some sort of causal relationship with an original, external, observed experience? And if we'll allow for this sort of psychological painting, one "abstracted" by the subjective forces of memory, then what's the line between those kinds of landscapes and their more traditional cousins, works in which the viewer can reasonably associate forms with "real life"? Does the influence of a place such as open and airy Provincetown seep into the paintings, and, if so, what might be the signs of such influence? "Abstract Climates," originally

hosted by the Providence Art Association and Museum, prompts these sorts of questions in its attempt to chronicle the painter's working relationship with this historic artists' colony.

An introductory gallery includes works that Frankenthaler made while a student at Hans Hofmann's renowned school in Provincetown during the summer of 1950. Frankenthaler's professional rise was lightning-fast, and *Mountains and Sea*, painted at the impossibly young age of twenty-three, just two years after the summer in question, is often described as if it simply poofed into existence *ex nihilo* following a Eureka moment in the studio of Jackson Pollock. The student pieces on display here correct this conception, replacing it with an understanding of young Helen as sharply in touch with a large number of important painterly influences, both contemporary and historical. Hanging are a sensitive, de Kooning-esque charcoal study of a semi-deconstructed female figure; a Marin-like watercolor depicting the Provincetown Harbor with energetic, dry-brushed marks; a Surrealism-inspired landscape titled *Provincetown Bay*; and an abstraction inflected with what Frankenthaler herself disparagingly called "collegiate Cubism" with its perhaps too-rigid study of planar relationships and all-over design.

The cumulative effect of these mostly derivative but not unpromising paintings is to show that Frankenthaler probably agreed with T. S. Eliot's idea that a "poet cannot help being influenced, therefore he should subject himself to as many influences as possible, in order to escape from any one influence." Frankenthaler clearly drank deeply of her immediate aesthetic surroundings, as well as the greater tradition of Western painting. At the same time, the sharply perfectionist and self-critical painter seemed anxious to come upon a "look" all her own, writing in her journal of a "A prob[lem] of too many styles" in March 1950.

With her innovative "soak stain" technique Frankenthaler soon did just this, and through the next six or seven years she created some of her greatest and most original works. But the artist wouldn't return regularly to Provincetown until 1959, after she married Robert Motherwell, and so the exhibition picks up here, by which time

Frankenthaler had earned her place in the upper echelons of the New York art world.

By the looks of the Parrish Museum's presentation, Frankenthaler returned to Provincetown with unbounded energy. A number of works on paper from the *Provincetown Series* (all 1960) have a sort of chaos to their varied mark-making and unusual color. These must have been deeply informative to the similarly riotous larger works on unprimed canvas of this period, full of wild calligraphies in uncomfortable tension with their remarkable sparsity.

The relationship between paintings and place becomes progressively more clear over the course of the 1960s, a decade in which Frankenthaler returned to Provincetown each summer with Motherwell and his two children, Lise and Jeanne. We find Frankenthaler moving from sparse, linear abstractions to more luminous compositions where the tension between tonal atmosphere and graphic shape seems to take over as a primary concern. Among these later works are paintings that occasionally veer closely to recognizable landscape forms, such as *Flood* (1967), a large work whose expanses of burnt orange and pink in the upper registers atop slimmer bands of green and blue can read as a sort of dramatic sunset over an inlet or bay. Frankenthaler never tips over the edge into direct representation—here the green "land" section shoots impossibly upwards, almost all the way up to the top-right corner of the canvas—but once you make the association it's tough to unsee.

Befitting its organizing principle, "Abstract Climates" includes letters, photographs, and other biographical paraphernalia that reveal a bucolic existence in Provincetown. This sense of happiness is corroborated in a catalogue note by Lise Motherwell (a co-curator of the exhibition along with the Helen Frankenthaler Foundation's executive director, Elizabeth A. T. Smith) who looks back fondly on her Cape Cod days, only occasionally disturbed by her step-mother's studio angst and strident perfectionism. Of course, as is usually the case, the real story of this exhibition are the paintings themselves. In the Parrish's spacious galleries, the "climate" of these works is one shimmering with light.

—Andrew L. Shea



# Gallery chronicle

by James Panero

Paintings of the nude can still be shocking, just not in the way you might think. The real nudity of “William Bailey: Looking Through Time,” now on view at the Yale University Art Gallery, is painting denuded of contemporary pretense.<sup>1</sup> That’s the shock of the career survey of this living master and longtime Yale professor: a love for painting, past and present, without modern adornment. Bailey’s nudes, still lifes, and landscapes reach back to Piero della Francesca and the early Italian Renaissance to draw out compositions of consummate craft and uncanny tranquility. Pairing those with examples of his drawings and prints, this must-see exhibition, remarkably Bailey’s first museum survey, makes us grateful for a painter who looks through time and shares his distant vision.

Born in 1930, Bailey trained under the modernist Josef Albers at Yale, where he earned his BFA and MFA before joining its faculty, teaching there until his retirement in 1995. Bailey was one of the key artists to break with mid-century abstraction and lead a resurgence in representation, mentoring a generation of students along the way. When his *Portrait of S* (1979–80) appeared on the cover of *Newsweek*, the magazine’s critic Mark Stevens wrote that Bailey “helped restore representational art to a position of consequence in modern painting.” That painting, here on loan from the University of Virginia, proved to be a sensation for *Newsweek* due to the portrait’s

partial nudity. When the issue appeared in 1982, some newsstands even censored the breasts and removed the magazine to their “adult” section.

I cannot quite decide which part of that story seems most removed from us today: that there was a painting of a nude on the cover of *Newsweek*, that *Newsweek* put a painting on its cover at all, or that there was once a magazine called *Newsweek*. Today the painting remains startling for its skill and suppleness, but not for the nudity of the otherworldly figure glowing at its center.

Nevertheless, when I went to see this exhibition with my daughter, a gallery guard kindly flagged me down to warn me of its nude contents. Even today Bailey can elicit an unusual reaction. Plenty of paintings past and present feature the nude, of course, but I doubt works by Titian or Raphael would spark the same concern. There is something uniquely present in Bailey’s paintings, something fresh and exposed. It is not the figures themselves, which emerge from Bailey’s own painting-filled imagination. I rather think it is the way he brings his painted surfaces forward into our own space.

The paint itself is sensuous. Bailey’s touch can be as appealing across the creamy walls and shadow lines of *Empty Stage II* (2012) as along the shelved vessels in *Horizon* (1991) and the outstretched leg of *N* (ca. 1965), his astonishing nod to Ingres’ *Grande Odalisque*. There is much still life here, perhaps too much at the expense of a broader survey that might have included Bailey’s early transitional work. Yet while these vessels repeat, the treatment of their overall surfaces conveys a broad range of

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<sup>1</sup> “William Bailey: Looking Through Time” opened at the Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, on September 6, 2019 and remains on view through January 5, 2020.

response. Perhaps due to his modernist training, Bailey focuses his paintings all-over, with no one part of the composition commanding more attention than another. Walls and other “background” surfaces share equal billing. This is why one wants to linger over the grass of *Afternoon in Umbria* (2010) and the reflected window light of *Turning* (2003). The same goes for the hatch marks of his lithographs and etchings and the stunning draftsmanship of his silverpoint, pen, crayon, and graphite on paper. The abstract passages can be just as compelling as the more “realist” depictions of vases, vessels, nudes, and eggs.

And there is something mesmerizing in the repetition, in seeing these forms repurposed in ever-changing ways. The compositions become increasingly familiar and, yet, all the more strange. Curated by Mark D. Mitchell, “Looking Through Time” flattens the distinctions between now and then by mixing work from different periods, just as Bailey seems to paint in a time out of time. Instead, the subtly shifting forms of color and light tell their own story. I was particularly struck by *Eggs* (1974), with Bailey’s wonderful *ova*, on loan from the Whitney Museum, here alone on a table without their usual crockery companions. This painting is the first in the exhibition, or the last, all depending on how you look at it.

“Bilious” is the word that comes to mind whenever I see the sculptures of Bruce Gagnier. His distended figures all look as if they swallowed something disagreeable. Their humors are off, sometimes way off, as they sway along and toddle about. Gagnier comes out of a classical and Renaissance sculptural tradition. His nude figures and portrait busts are created in plaster and clay and cast in bronze. But with their misshapen heads and out-of-proportion limbs, these are the opposite of Vitruvian men and women. Unusually small in stature, they are not ideal forms but all-too-real creatures of our downtrodden world, nearly verging on caricature but comforting us in their shared burdens and imperfect body image.

Now at the gallery of the New York Studio School, where he is on faculty, “Bruce Gagnier: Stance” brings together ten of these figures in bronze. “Life-size” but seemingly smaller, these

sculptures slump and shuffle through the gallery rooms as projected and exaggerated versions of ourselves, craning and bending and trying to ignore everyone else around. We look at them as they glance at us, putting into question the seeing and the seen, and just who is better off and who is the worse for wear.<sup>2</sup>

Somewhat concurrent to the Studio School run, “Good Figure, Bruce Gagnier: Plaster Works from 2019 and 1983” was on view last month at Thomas Park gallery on the Lower East Side.<sup>3</sup> Compressed into a tiny upstairs room, these small figures were arranged in rows facing the door like a terracotta army, along with a few of his paintings and portrait busts arrayed on a table beyond. Gagnier’s art straddles that fine line between subjects and objects. As both figures and sculptures, his works seem equally worn down, in a way that becomes even more apparent in plaster. Whether as bodies or statues or something in-between, these men and women appear to have been dug up from some contingent state, as though at one time drowned in a peat bog or buried in Vesuvian ash. The wear and tear that Gagnier builds into his work reminds me of Elie Nadelman, the modernist sculptor who also understood that objects need to have a past, even if you must invent it. What results is an unearthing of form and an archaeology of emotion.

Graham Nickson paints snapshots of time through a lush abundance of expression. The moments he depicts can be uncomposed portraits that are recomposed in chroma. Very often his figures are turning away or otherwise off view, but in “Graham Nickson: Eye Level,” now at Betty Cuninghams Gallery, Nickson focuses on the face head-on.<sup>4</sup> The off-moments are still here, even more apparently so. Nickson works from

2 “Bruce Gagnier: Stance” opened at the New York Studio School on September 9 and remains on view through October 13, 2019.

3 “Good Figure, Bruce Gagnier: Plaster Works from 2019 and 1983” was on view at Thomas Park, New York, from August 21 through September 22, 2019.

4 “Graham Nickson: Eye Level” opened at Betty Cuninghams Gallery, New York, on September 4 and remains on view through October 13, 2019.

observation, not photographs, but his portraits have the feel of passport images—unflattering, half-blinking, non-smiling, head and shoulders squared up. The captured moments are not necessarily how we want to be remembered. They are rather how we are now identified and recorded. What gives them some life is the expression Nickson puts into them in paint. Nickson balances the awkwardness of these images, which feel like studies, with the richness of his compositions. In the mix here are also some of his paintings of bathers—faces partially obscured.

Gary Petersen combines the histories of hard-edge abstraction and mid-century design to arrive at compositions that dazzle and dazzle like flickering signage and televised animation. I cannot help but hear that old drumroll of “a CBS special presentation” whenever I see his acrylics flash and spin into view. His second exhibition at McKenzie Fine Art, “Gary Petersen: Just Hold On,” presents the artist’s increasingly dense compositions, where bursts of color press in rather than spin out.<sup>5</sup>

There is a lot of electricity here, a neon jungle that is barely contained in the edges and layers that Petersen builds into his work. In addition to featuring rectangles on top of rectangles with not quite squared-off edges, paintings such as *Wonder Lust* (2019) and *Nowhere Near* (2019) introduce curvilinear forms and shapes in oil that add to the dynamic snap. A favorite is *Asbury Park* (2019), a smaller painting where a free-form line of ink adds an extra layer of whimsy to this roller coaster of abstract expression.

William T. Williams is having a moment, deservedly so. His bold geometric compositions of interlocked shapes and swirling lines are hard to miss. As black artists are being written into the canon of American abstraction, Williams’s contributions from the 1960s and ’70s mark out an important chapter. Abstraction is abstraction, of course, but artists such as Williams faced specific circumstances in their reception in American art. Primary among them was an expectation that black artists should be engaged in social content.

5 “Gary Petersen: Just Hold On” opened at McKenzie Fine Art, New York, on September 4 and remains on view through October 20, 2019.

Instead, Williams asserted his own place in the abstract sublime. Trained at Pratt and Yale, he moved away from realism towards the freedom of abstract space. “My demographic is the human arena,” he once said. “I hope my work is about celebration, about an affirmation of life in the face of adversity; to reaffirm that we’re human, that we’re alive, that we can celebrate existence.”

Over time Williams looked beyond hard edges for paintings of tiled designs in heavy impasto. An exhibition at Michael Rosenfeld Gallery now features these more recent works.<sup>6</sup> Williams’s craquelure surfaces have the quality of drying earth and aging skin. Their patterns recall the quilts of Gee’s Bend and other folkways. Williams gives his surfaces the suppleness of pottery glaze, working color back into the pits and grooves. The effect is more subtle than earlier work, but the result feels raw and exhumed.

Fifty years ago, in the age of minimalism, Joe Zucker went maximal. He imposed his own grids and limits and then overran those boundaries of artistic decorum, exploding pictorial space with narrative, history, and humor. Now at Marlborough, an exhibition of his *100-Foot-Long Piece* (1968–69) feels like a retrospective seen through a single work.<sup>7</sup> Zucker looked through the black hole of formalism to detect not just the surface of materials but also the shadow of history. Cotton and race were early factors in this investigation of art and form, with the warp and weft patterns of canvas making recurring appearances. His *100-Foot-Long Piece* looked forward as much as back into the wilds of his image-making to come. Timed to the release of Zucker’s major monograph by Thames & Hudson, this focused exhibition also includes drawings and studio ephemera—as well as new examples of the “cotton ball” paintings, gridded reliefs of cotton and acrylic that first made his reputation by surveying the history of art and soaking it all in.

6 “William T. Williams: Recent Paintings” opened at Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, New York, on September 5 and remains on view through November 9, 2019.

7 “Joe Zucker: 100-Foot-Long Piece, 1968–1969” opened at Marlborough, New York, on September 6 and remains on view through October 5, 2019.

## Music

# Salzburg chronicle

by Jay Nordlinger

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The street music in Salzburg is exceptionally good. I have commented on it in chronicles past. I have sung of violinists, jazz ensembles, accordionists. (For some reason, there are a lot of accordionists in Salzburg, and throughout Europe.) This year, I noticed dulcimer players—three of them. One soloist and a duo. I was thinking, “This is the Summer of the Dulcimer.” I also saw a group of girls, in traditional dress, singing—a hint of the von Trapp family, so beloved of us Americans.

Most unusually, I saw dancers—two of them, a man and a woman doing the tango. (I say “tango.” It could have been another Spanish or Latin American dance, but I am not good at discerning the differences.) They danced on a mat, laid out on an ancient street, and they had a box that played music. They were stylish, alluring, intimate. The woman was astonishingly beautiful. At the end of the dance, they kissed like lovers. It was a highlight of the Salzburg Festival, at least for this visitor, and correspondent, and critic.

I will give you a sampler of the festival itself, the festival proper—beginning with an opera. It was *Œdipe* (“Oedipus”), by Enescu. George Enescu, you remember, was the Romanian composer—and violinist and pianist and conductor—who lived from 1881 to 1955. He lavished great care on his opera (his sole opera). He worked on it, off and on, from 1910 to 1931. The opera did not have its U.S. premiere until 2005. It is an opera very much worth hearing and seeing. The score is a blend of Romanticism and Modernism. There is a lot of intelligence behind it, musical and otherwise. There is nothing showy about it; it is

not a crowd-pleaser, though it may be a crowd-satisfier, depending on the crowd. Sometimes, it is dream-like, hypnotic, reminding me of *Pelléas et Mélisande*, the Debussy opera (1902). There are also shades of *Salome* and *Elektra* (the Strauss operas, 1905 and 1909), with their exoticism. (The second of these operas, of course, is another Greek tale.) Yet *Œdipe* is its own thing.

The subject is a great one for an opera. Enescu has a French libretto, fashioned by Edmond Fleg, after the Sophocles plays. *Oedipus rex*, Stravinsky’s “opera-oratorio” (1927), deals with one chapter of this unfortunate individual’s life; Enescu takes him from cradle to grave.

Salzburg presented a production by Achim Freyer, the octogenarian German. It is grotesque, with big, puppet-like figures. It is sometimes hard to look at. It is replete with symbolism, sometimes opaque. It is also brilliant, dare I say, serving both the story and the music.

The title role, Oedipus, was taken by Christopher Maltman, the British baritone. It is one of the roles of his career. He sang and acted with beauty and intelligence. Guts, too. Making a significant contribution in a smallish role (Tiresias) was Sir John Tomlinson, the septuagenarian bass. Touching the heart, with her purity, was Chiara Skerath, a young Belgian-Swiss soprano, who sang Antigone.

Not to be forgotten—not for a moment—is the band in the pit, the Vienna Philharmonic, which had a stellar night. When these guys commit to a work, or a performance, they really commit. Managing all this—and there was a lot to manage, between pit and stage—was Ingo

Metzmacher, a German conductor who did well by a work that, if it should not be a staple, should not be a rarity.

Enescu was featured in a chamber concert, whose program included the Piano Quintet in A minor, Op. 29, written in 1940. In fact, Salzburg programmed a lot of Enescu this year, not because he had an anniversary—a sesquicentennial, for example—but just because. Which is a very good reason. Enescu deserves more time in the sun. His piano quintet is obviously a smart and serious piece, but not necessarily lovable, at least at first acquaintance. Far more winning—you could even say lovable—is his string octet, which was also played at the Salzburg Festival, in another concert.

The pianist and lead violinist in the quintet were Nicholas Angelich and Renaud Capuçon. They began the evening with two sonatas for violin and piano. Capuçon is a Frenchman, the older brother of Gautier Capuçon, who is enjoying a strong career as a cellist. Angelich is an American educated in France. Glancing at the program, I saw that they were going to play the Fauré sonata and the Brahms D-minor. But when they started, I had to look at the program again. What was *that*? It was the Fauré Sonata No. 2 in E minor, Op. 108, not the Sonata No. 1 in A major, Op. 13—which is widely considered *the* Fauré sonata.

When I checked my program, I noticed that the critic sitting next to me was doing the same. He too, I bet, was fooled.

The second Fauré sonata deserves its moment—many moments—in the sun, and our duo played it with care and panache. They gave us a steady stream of French Romanticism. (By the way, you can hear some of Fauré’s songs in this piece.) Capuçon played with particular beauty of sound. The second movement, *Andante*, was almost a prayer. Capuçon played it angelically without trying to make it pretty. (It is already.) I should not leave out the pianist, however, because these two were “full partners,” as we say. I might add that Mr. Angelich looks somewhat like John Cleese, the British actor.

During the Brahms sonata, you could hear one or two of the players’ colleagues warming up backstage, for the Enescu quintet to come. That was unfortunate. But I smiled at a memory:

Years ago, the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra was playing in my hometown of Ann Arbor, Michigan. Maestro Levine’s guest soloist was Jessye Norman, the soprano (who is an alumna of the university in that town). During Berg’s *Three Pieces for Orchestra*, we could hear Norman warming up backstage. Some chuckled, which was awkward, but what can you do?

The Salzburg Festival always offers a slate of piano recitals. Many of the same pianists are invited back, summer after summer. Five of them this year were Pollini, Sokolov, Kissin, Levit, and Volodos. Let me tell you about the last of these, Arcadi Volodos, the Russian pianist born in 1972. If he is not the best pianist in the world, he is unsurpassed. Who might tie him? Grigory Sokolov, for example.

At Salzburg, Volodos played a recital whose first half was all Schubert—Volodos is a devotee of Schubert, like many a profound and songful pianist. He began with the Sonata in E, D. 157. This sonata is unfinished, missing a last movement. You recall that Schubert left a symphony unfinished, too. He was careless that way. The recital moved on to the *Moments musicaux*, a set of six, D. 780. I could go through Volodos’s playing piece by piece—almost bar by bar—but let me speak in general terms. He has nearly unerring taste. He plays in a singing line (where appropriate, as it often is). He commits no wrong accents. He gets the most out of the music—whatever it is—without forcing anything on it.

Some of these *Moments musicaux* are student pieces. I mean, kids learn them. Volodos made them profound, almost shockingly so. But I have not said it correctly: he did not *make* them profound; they just are, and his playing revealed it.

The second half of his program consisted of Rachmaninoff and Scriabin. But these pieces included nothing virtuosic, really. Volodos would go on to play four encores—not one of them virtuosic. Volodos is a virtuoso, mind you. He has a staggering technique. No one has more. But he won’t use it, not anymore. (He did when he was younger, and making a name.) Volodos is like a guy with the hottest Ferrari on the planet who won’t take it more than fifty miles per hour or so.

In his Rachmaninoff and Scriabin, Volodos showed any number of colors. He pedaled with great shrewdness. The piano, under his hands, was hardly a percussion instrument. You had no sense of hammers moving up and down. The instrument was liquid. Sam Snead once boasted (truthfully), “When I was in my prime, I could do whatever I wanted with a golf ball.” Arcadi Volodos can do the same with a piano.

I have never heard better piano playing in my life than on this evening. As good, yes—from Horowitz, for example, and Kocsis, and the aforementioned Sokolov. Better, no way. He is an immortal, this pianist. Long has been, honestly.

Let me give you a curious footnote. Evidently, Volodos likes to play in a blackened hall. I thought of Florestan, in *Fidelio* (Beethoven’s opera): “Gott! welch’ Dunkel hier!” (“God, what darkness here!”) It was so dark in the hall, you could not read your program, and you could hardly see your hand. And there was just a bit of light onstage, for the pianist to play by. Whatever Volodos is doing, he should not change it.

Another of the operas was *Médée*, composed by Cherubini at the end of the eighteenth century. Most of us know this opera, if at all, as a Callas vehicle, performed in Italian (“Medea”). Luigi Cherubini was an Italian, true, but he had a French career. He was also greatly admired by Beethoven, which is high praise, or high admiration, indeed.

I had heard about the Salzburg production before I saw it. I heard words for and against. Sitting down with a friend of mine, who had already seen the production, I said, “Tell me about *Médée*—but first the singing, playing, and conducting, without reference to the production.” He said, “It’s impossible, to tell you the truth. The production overwhelms everything.” I found just the same.

The production was the brainchild of Simon Stone, an Australian. (Not to be confused with “Austrian.” In Austria, they sell T-shirts that say, “No Kangaroos in Austria.”) Stone updates the Greek tale to contemporary Salzburg. He has videos, giving the background of the story, and filling in the story as it goes along. In the audience, you have the sense of watching a movie, or a TV show. The music is like a soundtrack. Medea is

stuck in an airport for a while, as she attempts to return to Corinth. Elsewhere, her children play videogames and ride skateboards. It is very interesting, and very well executed.

But I do not think it serves the opera, for this reason: while everything we see is contemporary, the characters sing of gods, and the Golden Fleece, and human sacrifice. The juxtaposition is jarring. The very sound of the music jars with the contemporaneity we see before us (although, you are right: today’s Salzburg is a lot closer to Cherubini than Cherubini was to ancient Greece). All in all, I thought the music took a backseat to the production, which I regard as backward.

Elena Stikhina, a Russian soprano, was Medea, giving it her all, and she has a lot to give, musically and theatrically. The Vienna Philharmonic was superb—absolutely superb—under the baton of Thomas Hengelbrock, a German conductor, like Ingo Metzmacher. I had to force myself—try really hard—to listen. Because the visual, the show, wanted to dominate, and surely did.

On another night, Manfred Honeck conducted the Camerata Salzburg. He is a native son, an Austrian, a former violist in the Vienna Philharmonic. His brother Rainer is a concertmaster of that orchestra. Manfred is a music director in America, at the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra. In Salzburg, he opened his concert with another native Austrian, Schubert: the overture to *Die Zauberharfe*, or *The Magic Harp*—not to be confused with that magical flute, which Mozart treated. The overture, from Honeck and the group, was graceful, disciplined, and lively. Classic Honeck.

This was followed by a Beethoven concerto, the Piano Concerto in B flat, whose soloist was Lang Lang. He was not at his best, indulging in assorted eccentricities: harsh accents, excessive rubato, overpersonalization. His worst critics say he is always this way. Not true. When you show up at a Lang Lang performance, you never know what Lang Lang will show up. This is part of the excitement, I suppose. In any case, Lang Lang provided many wonderful moments in the Beethoven, as a talent at that level can’t help doing, even when he is disappointing overall.

After intermission, Honeck returned to Schubert, and not just any Schubert, the mightiest Schubert piece of all, probably: the

Great C-major Symphony. Now, the Camerata Salzburg is a chamber orchestra—which means that the symphony could only be so grand, or “great.” It was unusually brisk and chamber-like, which was fitting. You go to war with the army you have. Also, I have never heard the third movement—the Scherzo and Trio—so rustic. It came right from the Austrian soil, enjoyably.

At the end of the first movement, some in the audience applauded, as is only natural—as is practically demanded. Others in the audience shushed them, which is more annoying than any applause could be.

Let us continue with our Greek theme, as the 2019 Salzburg Festival did. Among the operas was *Orphée aux enfers*, or *Orpheus in the Underworld*, Offenbach’s romp from the mid-nineteenth century. This is the opera that gives us the “Can-Can.” The Salzburg production was in the hands of Barrie Kosky, a talented Australian director, like Simon Stone. This production is campy, clever, and very, very busy. It comes at you like a firehose. It is tedious and exhausting, or so I found. I begged for a theatrical let-up, or further space for the music (not that *Orphée aux enfers* is the Bach B-minor Mass). Also, a little genitalia goes a long way, in opera productions and other areas of life. I wanted to say to the director, “Yeah, we’ve all seen it.”

John Podhoretz, the writer, editor, and critic, speaks of the “intolerable genius.” Danny Kaye, for example, and, later, Robin Williams and Jim Carrey. So much talent—and so relentless, so exhausting.

A coloratura soprano from America, Kathryn Lewek, starred as Eurydice. She was very effective, in all aspects of her performance. Appearing in the small role of Public Opinion was Anne Sofie von Otter, the great Swedish mezzo-soprano, keeping her dignity, as she always would.

Speaking of public opinion, how did the audience feel about Barrie Kosky’s *Orphée*? Most were enthusiastic, as far as I could tell.

Martha Argerich, now in her late seventies, occupies a position attained by very few (William F. Buckley Jr. comes to mind). She is both *enfant terrible* and *éminence grise*. The legendary pianist is an honorary member of the West–Eastern Divan Orchestra, which is

composed of young musicians from Israel, Arab lands, and elsewhere, and is led by Daniel Barenboim. She came to Salzburg to play the Tchaikovsky Concerto No. 1 with the orchestra. The next night, she played a concert of chamber music with some of the musicians. Can you imagine the thrill for them? Can you imagine how they will regale their grandchildren?

One of the pieces was Schumann’s Violin Sonata No. 1 in A minor, Op. 105. The violinist was Michael Barenboim, son of Daniel. Years ago, some people snickered at Elena Gilels, a pianist who played with her great father. They also snickered at another Elena, Rostropovich, another pianist, who also played with her great father. Does young Barenboim deserve snickers? He acquitted himself creditably.

The final piece on the program was more Schumann, the Andante and Variations for a most unusual combo: two pianos, two cellos, and horn. Joining Argerich as the other pianist was Barenboim (Daniel). Argerich hit a real clinker—a honking wrong note—and smiled widely. She can afford to, given her status. At another point, Barenboim pointed to something in his score, commenting to the page-turner next to him. My hunch is, he was saying, “Do you recognize that tune from *Frauen-Liebe und Leben*” (the great Schumann song-cycle)?

About *Simon Boccanegra*, the Verdi opera, just a word. Salzburg had a production by Andreas Kriegenburg, a German director. It is modern, with people bearing smartphones, texting. Fine. But they also, as of old, fight with daggers and swords. This is a head-scratching juxtaposition. Salzburg’s cast had Luca Salsi (in the title role), Marina Rebeka (Amelia), René Pape (Fiesco), and Charles Castronovo (Adorno). The pit had Valery Gergiev and the Vienna Philharmonic. One word? You can go many, many a moon without hearing an opera, any opera, so well performed. Masterly from first note to last.

And now, a final word, personal. I heard about fifteen performances in Salzburg, and then—silence. No concert or opera for many days. Was I glad for the respite? The opposite, actually. I thought of Cleopatra, who “makes hungry where most she satisfies.” So it is with music. The more you hear, the more you want, greedily, but I hope understandably.

The media

## Revolutionism redux, part II

by James Bowman

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Way back in January 2018, *The New York Times* marked the first anniversary of President Trump's inauguration by publishing (under the amusing headline "Vision, Chutzpah and Some Testosterone") a selection of letters from supporters of the President with the following rationale:

The *Times* editorial board has been sharply critical of the Trump presidency, on grounds of policy and personal conduct. Not all readers have been persuaded. In the spirit of open debate, and in hopes of helping readers who agree with us better understand the views of those who don't, we wanted to let Mr. Trump's supporters make their best case for him as the first year of his presidency approaches its close.

Such fair-mindedness had its limits, however. As if the editors were afraid that even this tiny island of pro-Trumpery in the vast media sea of anti-Trump vitriol might drive their readers to their fainting couches, on the following day they also published letters from disillusioned Trump supporters and from readers reacting negatively to the pro-Trump correspondents, the latter under the heading: "The Furor Over a Forum for Trump Fans."

Furor it was, too. One of these indignant letters asked if the paper was also offering the hospitality of its columns to the Flat-Earth Society. Another, similarly outraged and fairly dripping with contempt, inquired: "Why do you keep asking questions of Trump voters?"

Who cares what they think?" Obviously, even at that point, few who were still bothering to read *The New York Times* cared. But perhaps the most salient response, and certainly the most poignant, was also the shortest. "Dear *New York Times*," wrote Robyn Lipman of New York, speaking for all her many Trump-hating brethren, "please don't ever do that again."

I don't think you have to worry, Robyn. Whether from you or from someone else, the *Times* has received the message loud and clear. I suspect they had a pretty good idea of it before they ever sought out a few Trump voters for an alternative view, and that they only printed the result in order to demonstrate, with the help of people like Robyn Lipman, that their otherwise uniformly anti-Trump coverage was only what readers were demanding. "What can we do?" the editorial board seemed to be asking. "The new digital subscribers that make up the 'Trump bump,' who have saved us from the fate of so many lesser newspapers, want nothing but partisan attack, and they want it hot. See? You on-the-one-hand—on-the-other-hand, fair-minded types who still assume the good faith of those you disagree with are living in the past. Welcome to the new media world."

It's a plausible argument, and one that others are making more explicitly on the paper's behalf. Matthew Continetti of *The Washington Free Beacon*, reviewing Jill Abramson's book *Merchants of Truth* in *The Claremont Review of Books*, wrote:



If readers are not particularly interested in reporting, then money-losing publications have two choices. One is patronage, i.e., find a rich donor. Another is somehow to monetize the prestige associated with certain titles. . . . Subscribe to *The New York Times* and you can help resist Donald Trump. People will pay for status, though not very much. And status is elusive. Only a few brands can offer it.

Holman Jenkins of *The Wall Street Journal* further generalized the *Times*'s experience to that of newspapers in general, desperate to make up for the loss of advertising revenue to digital media. "It's readers nowadays who pressure newspapers to toe a line," he wrote. "Publishers pine for the era when advertising dollars insulated us from such pressures."

The occasion for Mr. Jenkins's column was a closed-door "town hall" meeting of *New York Times* staff members presided over by the executive editor, Dean Baquet, a recording of which was leaked to *Slate*; the transcript was published there in mid-August. The meeting was called after the *Times* newsroom was thrown into a tizzy over a headline—"Trump Urges Unity vs. Racism"—which, though strictly factual, was deemed insufficiently anti-Trump and was accordingly changed to "Assailing Hate But Not Guns."

Reading the transcript, I thought it pretty clear that what was offensive about the original headline—at least the point Mr. Baquet was most concerned to address—was that it stepped on the new "narrative" being wheeled out by the *Times* about President Trump immediately after their disappointment with Robert Mueller's testimony to Congress in July. This was the same old "new" story of Mr. Trump's supposed racism or, better, his "white supremacism"—both as much treated as matters of indisputable fact as Russian collusion had been before them. Here's how Dean Baquet put it (emphasis added):

Chapter 1 of the story of Donald Trump, not only for our newsroom but, *frankly, for our readers*, was: Did Donald Trump have untoward relationships with the Russians, and was there obstruc-

tion of justice? That was a really hard story, by the way, let's not forget that. We set ourselves up to cover that story. I'm going to say it. We won two Pulitzer Prizes covering that story. And I think we covered that story better than anybody else. The day Bob Mueller walked off that witness stand, two things happened. Our readers who want Donald Trump to go away suddenly thought, "Holy s\*\*\*, Bob Mueller is not going to do it." And Donald Trump got a little emboldened politically, I think. Because, you know, for obvious reasons. And I think that the story changed.

I wouldn't be surprised to learn that the recording was leaked on purpose. Not only was Mr. Baquet, in this allegedly confidential setting, keeping up the public pretense that the "hard story" the *Times* covered "better than anybody else" was a story at all and not, as the world now knows, a complete non-story, but he also made Holman Jenkins's point for him: that the *Times* editors are the prisoners of their readers' hatred for Mr. Trump and eagerness to see anything to his detriment in print. Some of the "staffers" present at the meeting made the same point. As one of them put it:

I'm wondering what is the overall strategy here for getting us through this administration and the way we cover it. Because I think one of the reasons people have such a problem with a headline like this—or some things that *The New York Times* reports on—is because they care so much. And they depend on *The New York Times*. They are depending on us to keep kicking down the doors and getting through, because they need that right now. It's a very scary time.

Which is to say that, at least in their own minds, these people have turned a once-great publication into a vehicle for anti-Trump propaganda for the sake of the readers who depend on getting their fix of Trump hatred every day.

But look at the word "frankly" in the quotation from Dean Baquet. As so often, it is used for misdirection, or so it seems to me. In other words, the frankness comes before it, not after: it is really these newsroom "staffers"

themselves, and not the readers, for whose sake the constant drumbeat of Russian “collusion” was kept up for two and a half years. For their sake, too, the focus was now shifting. “Collusion” having failed to dislodge the President, the “story changed” to racism. The new narrative was to be led by the paper’s “1619 Project,” launched in the following Sunday’s *New York Times Magazine*, the point of which, according to Mr. Baquet, was “to try to understand the forces that led to the election of Donald Trump.”

Behind the euphemisms and the therapeutic jargon, Mr. Baquet was signaling to his rebellious staff members that the old journalistic variety of scandal-mongering—whereby you try to find something illegal, immoral, or simply embarrassing in your target’s past—had been tried on President Trump and failed. Naturally he didn’t mention that it failed because it was founded on a fiction. That didn’t matter anyway. The point was that the paper had given the old-timers, those Watergate-era romantics, their chance to do it again, and they couldn’t. So now we move on to the newer kind of scandal hunt based on “racism.” This makes the revolutionaries’ work much easier, since the target needn’t have done anything wrong or even embarrassing. “Racism” (or any other of the new cardinal sins of intersectionality) may be imputed on almost any basis you like, including—as intimated by the 1619 Project—the very existence of a country in which slavery had once been permitted.

Now it may be that Dean Baquet really believes that the advent of slavery in what was to become, over a century and a half later, the United States was among “the forces that led to the election of Donald Trump,” but I beg leave to doubt it. The muted cynicism of his whole performance here suggests that he is simply offering the Young Turks of the newsroom a new propaganda line to pursue as an apology for the failure of the old one. As I noticed in these pages some months ago (see “Geography lessons” in *The New Criterion* of February 2019), Jill Abramson had already suggested in *Merchants of Truth* that those who were driving the *Times*’s propaganda

effort were (according to Howard Kurtz) “younger staffers, many of them in digital jobs,” pressuring the higher-ups. “The more ‘woke’ staff thought that urgent times called for urgent measures,” claimed Ms. Abramson. “The dangers of Trump’s presidency obviated the old standards.”

This is also the general impression created by the transcript of the meeting—in which, for example, Staffer A asks:

It appears to be that the public narrative around the headline is different from the internal narrative that I’ve been hearing. So for example, I know that the copy desk thing was a slip. But I have also heard that someone actually raised concerns about the headline and was overruled. So, I’m just trying to reconcile what I’m hearing from my co-workers internally and what I’m hearing from my other co-workers in the public.

Then, when Dean Baquet explains that the internal objection before the external (i.e., Twitter) objections was more on the grounds of the story itself as leading the paper than about the headline, Staffer B pipes up:

I just kind of wanted to return to the internal debate before the headline went to print. Do you think there was a breakdown there other than space pressure or time pressure? And if so, I wonder what you think that that breakdown was?

Then there is more back and forth on the genesis of the offensive headline in what is called the “print hub” before Mr. Baquet calls on Tom Jolly, who runs the print hub. Mr. Jolly tries to calm the troubled waters by suggesting that what is needed is better coordination over the “storyline”—here a euphemism for the anti-Trump narrative—between the editors writing headlines and journalists submitting their stories. Then Mr. Baquet intervenes again to assure the staffers:

I talked to the editor who wrote the headline. He’s sick, you know. I mean he feels terrible. He feels more terrible than he should, to be frank. But it feels terrible, and I don’t want to walk away from this with all of us thinking that they’re a

group of fumble fingers on another floor of *The New York Times* secretly f\*\*\*ing up *The New York Times*. They're not.

That's all very well, thinks Staffer C, but . . .

When it came to actually changing that headline, how much influence did the reader input have? I mean, OK, all you guys didn't like it. You were unhappy. But was a change in the works, or was it the response?

Oh, yes, yes, yes. On that point, the executive editor is emphatic: "We were all—it was a f\*\*\*ing mess—we were all over the headline."

Now whether the "reader input," as Staffer C describes it, was anticipated by the editors themselves or not, it seems pretty clear to me from this exchange that the staff input was. And that Mr. Baquet and the other powers that be at the *Times* were terrified of it. What we are hearing here sounds like nothing so much as an impromptu revolutionary tribunal made up of those young, "woke" staff members mentioned by Jill Abramson, nosing out the source of a thought-crime committed by one of their nominal bosses—someone of whom the very least that could be expected was that he should be "sick" and feel "terrible," times three, about his egregious error. Mr. Baquet's refusal to name him can only be an attempt to shield him from a fate at least equally "terrible" at the hands of the newsroom's *Comité de salut public*.

Which is to say that the "forces" (to use Mr. Baquet's word) at work here are at least proto-revolutionary. They are the same forces that are driving the Democratic presidential candidates toward the hard Left, and which are also behind the Business Roundtable's embrace of political correctness, and thus of the "climate science" intended to put many of them out of business—behind, too, Nike's Colin Kaepernick-inspired anti-Americanism, Gillette's scolding their customers for "toxic masculinity," and American automakers' re-

jection of regulatory relief from the Trump administration. They are also, I think, what make judges, once bywords for sobriety, kowtow to the latest absurdities of the "transgender" lobby.

The Barton Swaim thesis, mentioned in this space last month, that Democrats have taken what they regard as the extremism of the Trump presidency as a permission to indulge their own extremists, presupposes that top-level Democrats have always been secret radicals and revolutionaries and have just been seeking an excuse to break cover—an excuse they imagine they have found in popular revolution to President Trump. This idea certainly fits in with a common conservative view of the party, and of progressivism generally, as a stalking horse for socialism or worse. I'm not so sure. Someone like Dean Baquet is himself a Mueller-like figure, ironically enough: the respectable face of the anti-Trump "resistance" in the media, as Mr. Mueller was for the Justice Department, but really only a figurehead for the zealots behind and beneath him urging ever-more hostile pursuit of the President.

This is a revolutionary dynamic: if you don't want to become a victim of the revolution, you had better become a proponent, and the more zealous a proponent you can be, the better—which is to say, the less likely you are to be purged when what has been made to look like the surging tide of popular outrage breaks over you. It is also the dynamic of the political polarization for which the left-of-the-Left is principally responsible through its moralization of political differences, and it naturally contains within itself an unwillingness to make any concessions to those whom too many have taught themselves to think of as enemies. It's the *pas d'ennemi à gauche* phenomenon familiar from the Popular Front of the 1930s, and its revolutionary purposes are increasingly evident far beyond the newsroom of *The New York Times* where, as is now clear, no skepticism about those purposes is any more likely to appear than is another forum of readers' praise for President Trump.

## Books

# Roman thoughts

by Paul Dean

The University of Illinois can claim to be the place where the modern study of Shakespeare's classicism began, for it was a professor there, Thomas Whitfield Baldwin, whose two-volume work *William Shakspeare's Smalle Latine and Lesse Greeke* (1944) first put the subject on a scholarly footing. By 1984, when Baldwin died in his early nineties, his pioneering research had begotten a small library. Jonathan Bate is well aware of this—"Why add to the groaning shelf?" he imagines the reader asking—and his own previous contribution to the field, *Shakespeare and Ovid* (1993), remains among the most valuable monographs. His new book, based on his 2013 Gombrich Lectures at the University of London's Warburg Institute, casts its net more widely.<sup>1</sup>

Its odd title muddies the waters—*What Shakespeare Made of the Classics* would be more helpful. Besides some new suggestions, of a traditional kind, about Shakespeare's sources, Bate presents "an extended argument about the 'classical' nature of [Shakespeare's] imagination." This he characterizes as "almost always Ovidian, more often than is usually supposed Horatian, sometimes Ciceronian, occasionally Tacitean, an interesting mix of Senecan and anti-Senecan, and . . . strikingly anti-Virgilian—insofar as Virgilian meant 'epic' or 'heroic.'" It's notable that all the named authors are Latin. The extent of Shakespeare's knowledge of Greek literature in the original, as opposed to translation or Senecan adaptation, is still in dispute,

<sup>1</sup> *How the Classics Made Shakespeare*, by Jonathan Bate; Princeton University Press, 384 pages, \$25.

but such literature plays a minimal role in Bate's book, despite his title. The Greek dramatists in his index turn out to have been referenced by writers other than Shakespeare. As for Greek philosophers, their ideas could be found in a variety of sources such as Sidney or Montaigne, while Sir Thomas North's translation of Plutarch could supply the Greek history.

Rather than systematically documenting the debts of a given play to classical authors, Bate examines the ways in which those authors are employed against each other in Shakespeare's mind over the whole canon. This ambitious approach is frequently enlightening, but makes for a sometimes-untidy book, whose chapters feel more like separate essays and do not really build a cumulative case. There is also, I fear, quite a lot of padding. That Shakespeare was taught a classical curriculum at school to what would now be university standard, that he lived in a country where the classical and Christian worlds coexisted, that he belonged to a religious tradition which still bore traces of its Catholic past—all this we know, almost too well. Bate explains that he has the general reader in mind in going into these matters, but how general does a reader have to be in order to be drawn to this book in the first place?

T. W. Baldwin's archaically spelled title refers, of course, to Ben Jonson's well-known estimation of Shakespeare's classical skills in his poem prefacing the First Folio. The immediately following lines are less familiar, but they are crucial. Aeschylus, Euripides, and Sophocles, or Seneca, says Jonson, should be summoned

from their graves to see what Shakespeare could do with tragedy (as noted above, this need not suggest that Shakespeare knew the work of the first three), while as for comedy,

Leave thee alone, for the comparison  
Of all that insolent Greece or haughty Rome  
Sent forth, or since did from their ashes come.  
Triumph, my Britain, thou hast one to show  
To whom all scenes of Europe homage owe.

(“Scenes” here means “stages.”) Far from belittling Shakespeare, as is often mistakenly assumed, Jonson claims for him, and through him for Britain, as great an achievement in drama as any that the ancient or modern world can boast.

Jonson’s tribute is the more impressive because his own reworking of the classical heritage was so different from Shakespeare’s. His Roman tragedies *Sejanus* (1603) and *Catiline* (1611) prove that greater erudition did not make for more gripping drama. Shakespeare acted in *Sejanus*: I was gratified to see Bate backing a long-held hunch of my own that, in a neat self-referential touch, he may have played the historian Cremutius Cordus, rather than Tiberius, as many critics suppose, which seems too major a role for him. Jonson’s barely digested use of Tacitus in *Sejanus*, like his use of Cicero and Sallust in *Catiline*, reflected a steadiness of focus and a consistency of tone that Shakespeare had no interest in emulating. He absorbed his sources more thoroughly and diverged from them more radically. In *Catiline*, Cicero takes center stage; in *Julius Caesar*, he is oddly peripheral, even though Shakespeare can be seen, in Bate’s phrase, as “the Cicero of his age,” warning tirelessly against the destructive effects of civil war (*bellum civile* appears to be a Ciceronian coinage). Cicero’s importance for Shakespeare lay elsewhere, in his rhetorical strategies which served as stylistic models, in his advocacy of a mixed constitution in *De re publica*, and in his analysis of social obligation in *De officiis*. Shakespeare’s Roman plays, tracing the movement from republic to empire, with implicit messages for the Elizabethan polity, are indebted to the first of those Ciceronian works, just as his understanding of political relationships (the partnership of Brutus and

Cassius, the fatal isolation of Coriolanus or Timon) is indebted to the second.

To continue the comparison with Jonson: in his great comedy *Poetaster* (1601), Jonson exalts Virgil (the poet as celebrant of national greatness and counselor to princes) and Horace (the poet as guardian of public morality) above Ovid (the poet as embodiment of amatory idleness). *Negotium*, the conduct of affairs of state or business by the conscientious citizen, is ranked above *otium*, the withdrawal from civic responsibility to the leisured existence of the country gentleman. (In fact, Jonson is weighting the scales here, for Horace was the leading example of the yearning to cultivate one’s garden, far from the squabbles of the capital.) Bates believes that the derogation of Ovid, and of love poetry as a genre, in *Poetaster*, is a sideswipe at Shakespeare, which was repaid in *Timon of Athens* where the Poet is a flatterer courting his rich patron (Jonson and James VI?). There is a second Roman presence in *Timon*, however; the Poet’s dialogue with the Painter, about the merits of their respective arts, is an obvious allusion to the Horatian tag *ut pictura poesis*. The Poet praises the rendering of “mental power” and “big imagination” in the Painter’s portrait of Timon, while the Painter insists that the imagery in the Poet’s verses “would be well expressed/ In our condition”—i.e., in a painting—“more pregnantly than words.” All this, of course, in words; Shakespeare is teasing. “Look not on his picture, but his book,” Jonson urged the reader of the First Folio. Yet both painters and poets deal in images.

Introducing one of his most original ideas, Bate sets Shakespeare’s appreciation of “the verbal pyrotechnics and erotic entanglements” of Ovidian poetry beside the “voice of calm, autonomy, and detachment that may properly be called Horatian.” The trajectory of Shakespeare’s life, shuttling between the *negotium* of London and the *otium* of Stratford, recalls the structure of so many of his comedies and romances. If he celebrates the ideal of pastoral retreat and repose, he also criticizes it. The would-be celibate academy of Navarre in *Love’s Labour’s Lost* is not proof against erotic desire or the intrusion of Marcade, the

emissary of Death, nor is the Forest of Arden in *As You Like It* exempt from “winter and rough weather.” Monarchs and courtiers have the luxury of playing at the simple life, but grinding poverty and back-breaking toil are the reality for the less fortunate. The garden in *Richard II* is an emblem for England, in need of prudent husbandry; the rebel Jack Cade becomes the serpent in the garden of Alexander Iden in *2 Henry VI*; Justice Shallow’s Gloucestershire country seat, in *2 Henry IV*, is the setting for bittersweet memories of mis-spent youth in London. *Otium* may be dearly bought and precariously held. The concept included, for Horace, the Epicurean emphasis on friendship, companionable talk, and a safe distance from politics. Similarly, Shakespeare often sets the claims of love against those of friendship, from *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* at one end of his career to *The Two Noble Kinsmen* at the other, and in several places he celebrates the private haven which love can create as a bulwark against an often harsh and menacing wider world. In comedy this may be blissful (Jessica and Lorenzo, for example), in tragedy only fugitive (Romeo and Juliet, or Antony and Cleopatra).

Other classical philosophies appear briefly. Cynicism, as personified in *Timon of Athens* by Apemantus (“a churlish philosopher” in the First Folio’s list of characters) and later Timon himself, or by Thersites in *Troilus and Cressida*, offers no attractions. (Though no philosopher, Iago may be called a cynic in the modern sense.) About Stoicism Shakespeare was more ambivalent. Bate detects “a strong vein of anti-Stoicism” in his work; that may be too extreme, for the suicide of Brutus has a bleak grandeur, and Hamlet admires Horatio for not being “passion’s slave.” The power to endure, to confront suffering resolutely, looms large in *King Lear*, and is not despised. Admittedly, Shakespeare did not share the Stoic disdain for the physical. He does not shy away from the pleasures and pains of bodily existence. Like Caesar, he is more well-disposed towards fat people than thin ones. He is more generous towards emotional characters than to cold reasoners, and he writes for the supreme art of the body, that of the actor, counterfeiting passion.

The mimetic nature of theater, however, leads us to another classical quandary. As mentioned earlier, Bate’s book is partly a study of Shakespeare’s imagination, a faculty distrusted by both Plato and Aristotle on account of its power to give “to airy nothing/ A local habitation and a name.” Theseus’s speech in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* about the lunatic, the lover, and the poet, who are “of imagination all compact,” is clearly a key text here. Bate notes the double meaning of “compact”; they are all composed of imagination (and, in a play, *by* the author’s imagination), but they are also bound together by it in their common opposition to reason. Therein, according to Plato and Aristotle, lies the danger. Imagination becomes a species of magic-making, seducing the mind away from the search for ultimate wisdom and truth into a secondary world of deceit and illusion, even madness or witchcraft. (One thinks of the exploration of the irrationality of romantic love in the comedies, or the studies of jealousy in *Othello* and *The Winter’s Tale*.) Horace is again relevant here; the contrast between Rome and Egypt in *Antony and Cleopatra* is effectively that between public and private loyalties, *negotium* and *otium*, and Cleopatra is a kind of enchantress who captures Antony’s imagination, as Othello captured Desdemona’s. The love-philtre in the *Dream* works in a similar, albeit benign, way. *The Mousetrap*, in *Hamlet*, is a special case: its effect on Claudius is to recall to him the horror of his own actions, and so to reveal the truth to Hamlet rather than disguise it.

The iconoclasts of the Protestant Reformation had their own reasons for disliking imagination. They held that holy pictures in any medium blocked the soul’s direct access to God, and that the doctrines of Rome were blasphemous fables. Many of them shared the ancient philosophers’ dislike of the stage. Shakespeare treats all this obliquely. Bate is not greatly interested in the Christian subtexts which have been identified by recent scholarship, doubting that the original audiences would have noticed them—but that does not mean they are not there, and there are many other things that could pass unnoticed in performance but are recognized in the plays now.

The supernatural of the classical world is another matter. Bate identifies an interesting link between ghosts and the imagination. Shakespeare greatly complicates the stock ghost of the Senecan tragedy of blood, imitated by Kyd in *The Spanish Tragedy*, which does little more than demand revenge for murder. Hamlet's perplexity about his father's ghost stems from his uncertainty about its ontological status (Bate is excellent on this and on the way the ghost's character changes during the play), but at least its independent existence is proven by the fact that he is not alone in seeing it. Only Brutus sees the ghost in *Julius Caesar* (which calls itself Brutus's "evil spirit" rather than Caesar), just as only Macbeth sees Banquo's. Antigonus in *The Winter's Tale* believes he has seen Hermione's ghost, but—as we only discover ourselves at the end—he is mistaken, for she was never dead. What, moreover, are we to make of the appearance of the Leonati, and of Jupiter himself, in *Cymbeline*? They seem to represent a dream Posthumus is having, but they leave a written message that he finds when he awakes. In all these cases, we share the experiences of the characters, whether they be dreams, hallucinations, or inspired visions. Puck and Prospero remind us that a play offers us participation in a kind of dream-vision (Prospero, the benevolent magus controlling other people, is a stand-in for the creative artist, and his magic is his "art"), and, as the Chorus in *Henry V* repeatedly urges us, we have to cooperate with the actors in giving imaginative depth to the story. If the dramatic illusion is in danger of breaking down, then, as Hippolyta sardonically remarks to Theseus, "it must be your imagination"—that of the spectator—which makes good the deficiency.

Beneath the objections of Plato and Aristotle lies the philosophical issue of the relation of the mind to the external world. Plato's *Ion* denounces the rhapsode as possessed, a madman peddling lies to a credulous audience. This was answered definitively by Sidney in the *Apology for Poetry*: "Now for the poet, he nothing affirms, and therefore never lieth." "Much virtue in 'If,'" as Jacques put it. Works of art never pretend to be real, but they may still in some sense be true. They may convey the

kind of "rare vision" that Bottom experiences. "The truest poetry is the most feigning" we hear in *As You Like It*. Yet our delight in such feigning may also lead us to deceive ourselves by imagining the world is in fact what we wish it to be. This may produce entertaining confusion (as in *The Comedy of Errors* or *Twelfth Night*) or disastrous self-delusion (as in *Richard II* or *King Lear*).

Bate makes an important connection between the Greek word *hereos*, which in Latin became *eros* as personification of love, and melancholy, love as a kind of sickness, from which we see Romeo suffering before he meets Juliet. *Hereos* elides neatly into *heroes*, the superhuman offspring of gods and mortals in Greek mythology, whose achievements were celebrated in heroic (epic) poetry. But what if these heroes were also lovers? Michael Drayton, like Shakespeare a Warwickshire man, maintained in *England's Heroical Epistles* (1597) that *hereos* and heroism were compatible, but for Shakespeare, the heroic and the erotic, Mars and Venus, exist in tension with each other. Antony, again, is an example, but so are Othello, Coriolanus, or Troilus, all of whom are faced with the choice of Hercules, between *virtus* (both moral and military prowess) and *voluptas*. (Hercules is the tutelary deity to Antony and memorably deserts him as his fortunes crumble.)

Virgil was the heroic-epic poet par excellence, "like two Homers for the price of one" as Bate puts it, in offering both an *Odyssey* in the wanderings of Aeneas and an *Iliad* in the exploits on the field of battle. Shakespeare, however, in Bate's view, "had no desire to be the Elizabethan Virgil"—again we note the contrast with the respect accorded to Virgil in *Poetaster*. He displays a consistently skeptical attitude towards epic pretensions. If the history plays form a kind of national epic, they are full of unheroic moments and characters: the ineffectual piety of Henry VI and the naïveté of Edward IV in the first trilogy, the Machiavellianism of Richard III or of Bolingbroke in *Richard II*, the common-sense cowardice of Falstaff with his dissection of "honour," the opportunism of Nym and Pistol at Agincourt. The plays question the value of blind patriotism and nationalistic rhetoric.

They see that calculation and pragmatism can defeat principle and dignity. They are aware that the decisions of the great may wreck the lives of the powerless and insignificant. Aeneas appears initially impressive in *Troilus and Cressida*, but the play subjects the ideal of military glory to a devastating critique—“All the argument is a whore and a cuckold,” in Thersites’ summary, “a good quarrel to draw emulous factions and bleed to death upon.” The Player’s speech about Pyrrhus in *Hamlet*, which Bate calls “the most Virgilian speech [Shakespeare] ever wrote,” is a brilliant parody of 1580s tragedy, whose deliberately fustian style contrasts with the flexibility and versatility of the rest of the play. Hamlet cannot act the part of Pyrrhus to Claudius’s Priam: his Christian conscience intervenes. The classical past, routinely praised by historical scholars as offering patterns of ethical conduct, can only go so far. Striking a heroic attitude, however theoretically admirable, may leave the hero terribly alone.

The play-world ultimately dissolves, like the masque in *The Tempest*, into thin air. It is a world of shadows—the Elizabethan word for actors. Its dissolution points the way we must all go. Shakespeare’s obsession with the nature of illusion, resulting in plays that are uniquely meta-dramatic in their time, is not wholly accounted for by his knowledge of classical drama. Bate’s discussion of Shakespeare’s use of Plautus, Terence, and Seneca is largely confined to formal properties: character-types, plots, rhetorical tropes, here and there a more complex theme such as Seneca’s interest in mastery of the self by willpower, which gave a hint to early modern thinkers about interiority. Arguably—as Emrys Jones showed long ago in *The Origins of Shakespeare* (1977)—the medieval mystery cycles, still available to Shakespeare as a teenager, or the street theater which he could see when strolling players visited Stratford, “made” him in ways that the classics did not. They offered a greater variety of tone, a more multiple set of perspectives, and a broader popular appeal. Bate is not drawn to the medieval aspect of Shakespeare’s imagination, and to make his case he has to leave it to one side. This is no great cause for concern

so long as we can correct the balance in our own minds; and, as Bate outlines in his closing chapter, when Shakespeare in his turn became a “classic” from the late seventeenth century onwards, he was weighed against a neoclassical, rule-based model of criticism, and often found wanting. It took time for his originality to be understood. Now he occupies in our educational system the same place that the Greek and Latin authors occupied in his—but for how much longer? Already, students more often read excerpts than a complete play. Bate well reminds us that the survival of the classical world he has explored is under an even greater threat, as its literature and history recede from our educational curricula. We have even smaller Latin and even less Greek. Then again, the digital revolution is bringing with it a brutally attenuated attention span and an indifference, if not hostility, to temporal distance and cultural pluralism. Shakespeare kept hold of the classics by remaking them. By our neglect, we risk losing them altogether.

## Home on the range

*Richard Lyman Bushman*

*The American Farmer in the Eighteenth Century: A Social and Cultural History.* Yale University Press, 400 pages, \$40

*reviewed by Victor Davis Hanson*

Most histories of the American family farm focus on the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and the great westward expansion of settlers into the newly opened frontier. Those decades were certainly the heady time of American agrarianism. The Homestead Act of 1862 offered the middle and lower classes the chance of becoming independent small landowners. The Grange movement of the 1870s organized farmers to agitate for equitable treatment from railroads, grain elevators, and brokers, and also promoted cooperatives and scientific farming. And the 1902 federal Reclamation Act funded irrigation projects in some twenty western states. What was good for farming, then, was good for nineteenth-century America.



Yet except for a final chapter on the 1860s, Richard Bushman, a Columbia professor emeritus of history, mostly focuses on a much earlier and less well-known period—the eighteenth-century agrarian world of American colonists and the role of farmers during and right after the American Revolution. At the outset, he confesses that neither he nor his immediate ancestors have had any firsthand experience with farming, but that he nevertheless has been fascinated with the role of agriculture in promoting a moral economy that privileged a way of life over material gain. Bushman's sincerity and idealism, along with his lack of any firsthand knowledge of farming, reflect both the strengths and weaknesses of his narrative.

Bushman grasps the central paradox of the American agrarian experience. Family farming promoted and enhanced values of constitutional government such as autonomy, individualism, localism, family solidarity, patience, traditionalism, and reverence for custom and history. Yet homestead agriculture did not, in itself, lead to the wealth, sophistication, diversity, and cosmopolitanism of coastal city life, much less the scientific, technological, and managerial revolutions that later produced such astounding wealth and leisure in the West in general and in America in particular. Americans soon admired in theory what they sought not to do in practice.

Readers should note Bushman's often-academic account is not necessarily easy to read. A fourth of this university press book comprises endnotes and an index (but strangely no bibliography, or formal introduction and conclusion). But Bushman is a fine scholar whose two decades of research have brought to light scores of unfamiliar or little-known primary sources. He mines eighteenth-century wills, deeds, sales, and loans to reconstruct the lives of a few iconic rural American families and particular locales from around 1600 to the beginning of the nineteenth century. Much of the book is family storytelling, but even the dry domestic account books can be fascinating in and of themselves.

Another general theme is that eighteenth-century agriculture, while often subsistence in

nature, was still far more sophisticated than we might expect. Its jack-of-all-trades practitioners were at once keen businesspeople, versatile and flexible craftsmen, and communitarians who saw the stability of their localities as inseparable from their own farming fates. They certainly were not indentured servants, European peasants, or sharecroppers bound to the local feudal manor.

Two overriding impulses guided early American agrarian households: the desire for more land for numerous offspring and the constant effort to keep children on the farm, given that city-life was usually far easier, often more remunerative, and certainly more exciting. One of Bushman's rural newspapermen characterized the city siren song as a narcotic of "some more easy sedentary occupation with the fallacious idea of appearing genteel in the eyes of the world."

Those eternal allurements, along with mechanization and the technological revolution, explain why only 1 to 2 percent of America's 330 million citizens are today farmers. And most, as Bushman notes, are by needs agribusiness people who farm with a different mindset than the agrarians of the past: "Only a small percentage of Americans till the earth, and those who do think differently from their forebears. They are businesspeople who calculate profit and run their fields like factories. They are scientific and rational. Self-provisioning means nothing to them." Still, Bushman's book never quite decides whether America remains a moral nation because of our long history of agrarianism or whether it is rich, powerful, and technologically omnipotent (and also troubled and confused) because it entirely transcended farming and today is largely an urban and suburban nation.

Bushman emphasizes that there was never a monolithic model of the American farmer, although since the ascendance of the *polis* Greeks and the Italian yeomen there has been certainly an ideal of a universal Western agrarian working his own small plot, with the aid of his family, in efforts to ensure his political and economic independence. From Hesiod and Virgil to Wendell Berry, that iconic portrait continues to remind even city dwellers of a romantic and supposedly morally superior alternative to the congestion and crassness of urban life.

Bushman divides his book up into sections to account for the vast diversity of early American farming, whether the huge plantations of the antebellum South or the small, rugged farms in New England or the middling agriculturalists of the mid-Atlantic states such as Pennsylvania. Climate, weather, and terrain initially governed which crops were grown where, and, by extension, the labor and capital requirements of each farming model. Because the United States would come to cover such a vast expanse, and encompass such a diverse climate and geography, it was natural that farming would likewise become diffused. With such radical regionalism, so too would arise sometimes incompatible rural cultures. Agriculture, then, was a catalyst for both the American Revolution and the Civil War.

By the late eighteenth century these farming divides were already apparent. The growing market in Europe for both tobacco and cotton, and the reliance on imported African servile labor, created a quite small but opulent plantation class in the near-tropical South. In this fragmentation of American farming, Bushman notes both the commonalities and vast disconnects. He laments that all land was expropriated from Native Americans, usually through the use of force or sheer demographic heft, often from people, especially in New England, who tragically believed that they could accommodate themselves to the new foreign agrarianism: “Farmers were, on the one hand, the embodiment of the American dream; on the other, they enacted the American nightmare—the decimation of one people by another.”

The rise of slavery in the southern and border states led to greater disequilibria, largely through the disappearance of a vibrant southern middle class, once the few rich planters consolidated land, expanded slave labor, and targeted their crops for lucrative export across the Atlantic. The wealthiest land owners in America were also the fewest, the most vulnerable to overseas markets, and the most disliked, given their reliance on slaves. Bushman notes these ironies to dispel any notion that his sometimes romantic encomium to farming is incomplete, or that it fails to record both the losers and winners of the American frenzy to turn frontier into farms

and sometimes farms into hugely profitable and exploitative plantations.

By the time of the American Revolution, the national contradictions that arose from the plantation model were already anticipated to become eventually irreconcilable. Crop specialization, land consolidation, and slave labor created a leisured, affluent, and highly educated class of aristocrats in rural Virginia, which produced the most impressive of the Founding Fathers such as George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison. Yet their plantation lifestyles juxtaposed their enlightenment views of freedom with the concrete realities of chattel slavery. The leisure necessary for Virginia aristocrats to master the classics and the manners of European gentry often came at the expense of servile drudgery.

In contrast, the stuff of the American Revolution was found in the farmers of the middle colonies and New England, who were long inured to local government, working their own lands with mostly their own muscular labor, and with confidence in their own economic sustainability. For them it was easy to disassociate themselves from a distant constitutional English monarchy and to embrace an indigenous republic in which they lived what they professed. “Although the conceptual leap from monarchy to a republic was huge,” Bushman notes, “little farm communities had lived democracy too long to be anxious about taking the fateful step.”

A universal theme of all the primary documents that Bushman references is uncertainty, given the frequency of unpredictable weather, volatile commodity prices, shortages of labor, war, pestilence, and natural disasters such as drought, fires, floods, and hurricanes. There was little margin for error when mistakes often meant destruction and death. In the pre-scientific age, farmers had to be empirical, and they established farming norms by careful trial and error and constant communications with one another, without abstract and scientific knowledge about the nature of genetics, fertilization, or pesticides.

Such dependence on the tried and true certainly has always explained the conservative agrarian mind, especially its fierce territoriality, suspicion, and independence—all values associ-

ated with the birth of the country and founding principles such as the Bill of Rights and checks and balances on the respective branches of government, as well as natural distrust of hereditary monarchy and a permanent inherited aristocracy. In some sense, one can detect in Bushman's family vignettes that the divides between the "clingers" and the coastal elite are ancient.

What Bushman relates from the eighteenth century seems not all that unfamiliar to me, born as I was on a family farm in rural California in 1953. As the fifth generation to live in the same farmhouse, I associate the century-old sepia photographs on the staircase walls with my own sixty-year remembrances of the family's tragic farm accidents, lost crops, premature deaths, bankruptcies, natural disasters, madness, and depression—juxtaposed with what I learned from the stories of my grandfather (who was born in my bedroom in 1890 and died in the same place in 1976) of the first three generations who suffered through typhus, malaria, polio, the railroad (the Mussel Slough shootout took place about ten miles away), gun fighting over water rights, bank panics, and recessions.

I suppose farmers then and now want to believe that what destroyed them also ennobled them, and that their now-vanished agrarianism built the very country that replaced it.

## Wright in the center

*Anthony Alofsin*

Wright and New York: The Making of America's Architect.

Yale University Press, 352 pages, \$35

*reviewed by Francis Morrone*

Have we reached peak Frank Lloyd Wright? Have we reached peak New York City? How many more books do we need on these two subjects? None, unless the book should break new ground and offer new information and fresh perspectives. And that's the case with *Wright and New York: The Making of America's Architect* by Anthony Alofsin. The subject of Frank Lloyd Wright's complicated relationship with New

York City has been the subject of two other books I've read. Herbert Muschamp's *Man About Town: Frank Lloyd Wright in New York City* appeared from the MIT Press in 1983, nine years before Muschamp became the architecture critic of *The New York Times*. *Frank Lloyd Wright in New York: The Plaza Years, 1954–1959*, by Jane King Hession and Debra Pickrel, was published by Gibbs Smith in 2007.

The fascination with the subject of Wright and New York has two sources. One is that Wright never let slip an opportunity to attack, or to heap calumny upon, New York City, which he set in opposition to everything he championed "In the Cause of Architecture" (the title of his March 1908 essay in *Architectural Record*). At the same time, he could not resist the allure of New York, a city to which he repeatedly returned throughout his long life, and one that he found indispensable to the crafting of Frank Lloyd Wright, the Monument. This seeming paradox fascinates. So too does the period of his early forays into New York, from the 1910s through the 1930s, when his life and career shattered into a million pieces, in part owing to his own marital misbehavior. How he endured what would have ended a lesser man, and emerged from this chaos and—it is the right word—tragedy stronger than ever, is a story that, for some readers, never gets old.

*Wright and New York* follows Alofsin's 1993 book *Frank Lloyd Wright: The Lost Years, 1910–1922*; his new book might have been titled *Frank Lloyd Wright: The Lost and Found Years, 1910–1959*, for it covers much of the terrain of the earlier book, along with all that followed from it. New York, Alofsin contends (as others have, too), was central to Wright's reinvention of himself and his career. What makes Alofsin's book so immensely valuable is its deep dive into the Wright archives held by Columbia University and the Museum of Modern Art. There is much in his book that was new to me. Best of all, Alofsin manages to present as fine-grained a picture of Wright's times in New York (and in many other places) as we have ever had while never falling into the archive-diving biographer's vice of long-windedness and needless discursiveness. His book has clarity and pace, so much so that the thoughtful

chronology appended to the text is scarcely necessary (though nice to have anyway).

The nutshell version of the story is this: By the time of Wright's first visit to New York, in 1909, his "First Golden Age" (to use the subtitle of Grant Carpenter Manson's 1958 book on Wright) was drawing to a close. Based in Oak Park, Illinois, this was the Prairie phase of Wright's career. It culminated with the Frederick C. Robie House, completed in 1910 in Chicago's Hyde Park neighborhood. Though considered among the crowning glories of Wright's career, the Robie House, Alofsin says, owes every bit as much to his colleagues Hermann V. von Holst, Marion Mahony, and George Mann Niedecken as it does to Wright himself, who was, throughout the period of the house's design and construction, preoccupied with non-architectural matters.

On that 1909 visit to New York, in September, Wright rendezvoused at the Plaza Hotel with Mamah Borthwick Cheney before the couple proceeded to Europe, where Wright would work with the Berlin publisher Ernst Wasmuth in the preparation of a pair of important publications, including the famed "Wasmuth Portfolio" (*Ausgeführte Bauten und Entwürfe von Frank Lloyd Wright*) that would spread Wright's influence through a Europe that had decided to be Modern but had not, by then, decided what Modern was. Mr. and Mrs. Cheney were Wright clients from Oak Park. She and Wright had fallen in love, and Wright left his wife, Catherine, and their children to be with Mrs. Cheney. Neither, in their time together, procured a divorce, and so the couple lived in what, *ca.* 1910, the culture regarded as illicit union, with the predictable consequences for their reputations. This was the first of many times that Wright would stay at the Plaza—he eventually, in his last five years, took up more or less permanent residence in the hotel.

The hotel, which had opened two years before Wright and Mrs. Cheney stayed there, was one of Wright's favorite buildings. This surprises people. Weren't buildings like the Plaza the exact thing Wright rebelled against? Wright tended to rebel against everything that wasn't Frank Lloyd Wright. He disdained Art

Deco and International Style Modernism every bit as much as he disdained the Beaux-Arts, indeed perhaps even more so. But it's a mistake to think that Wright categorically rejected historical allusions in buildings, in the way that Bauhaus architects did. After all, Wright frequently employed such allusions, even if they tended to come from non-Western sources. The Plaza, he felt, was a building splendidly suited to its purpose. He loved to dine in the heavily Germanic Oak Room. (Wright's favorite restaurant, his onetime apprentice Edgar Tafel told me, was the über-gemütlich Karl Ratzsch's, in Milwaukee.) He was furious over Conrad Hilton's removal of the Palm Court's stained glass ceiling in the 1940s. (It was beautifully restored in 2008.) And Alofsin quotes Wright's third wife, Olgivanna: "Whenever we were seated for lunch in the Edwardian Room, Mr. Wright never failed to point out to me the beauty of the painted ceiling."

Beginning in 1911, Wright built a house, "Taliesin," for himself and Mrs. Cheney, in Spring Green, Wisconsin. As is well known, in 1914 a servant murdered Mrs. Cheney, her two children from her marriage to Mr. Cheney, and four others, and set fire to Taliesin, while Wright was away on business in Chicago. Then Wright, following his long-delayed divorce from Catherine, married Miriam Noel. That marriage was a disaster. In Chicago in November 1924, not yet divorced from Miriam, Wright met the Montenegrin Olgivanna Lazovich Hinzenberg, a disciple of the Armenian mystic Gurdjieff and thirty years Wright's junior. Two months later Olgivanna became pregnant with Wright's child. Wright would later learn to use New York to broadcast his genius to the world, but New York was initially a place for him to lay low.

In December of 1925 and in December of 1926, Wright and Olgivanna decamped from the rebuilt Taliesin to New York to seek anonymous refuge from the press, the law, and creditors. In 1925 the couple and their daughter lived with Olgivanna's brother, Vladimir Lazovich, in Hollis, Queens. In 1926, they lived with Wright's sister, the artist Maginel (Wright was surrounded by women with exotic names), at 41 West Twelfth Street. Wright and Olgivanna

then moved, for several months, into an apartment of their own, on East Ninth Street, near, Alofsin tells us, the Hotel Lafayette. Alofsin is specific enough in most instances—such as in his description of Maginel’s house—that his failure to provide exact addresses for the Hollis and East Ninth Street homes can only mean that the information was not to be found in the archives. I do wonder if the Ninth Street apartment was in No. 35, a marvelous 1924 building (right across the street from the Lafayette) by Harvey Wiley Corbett, one of Wright’s New York champions. Financial difficulties in the years when all the bad publicity resulted in a dearth of commissions led Wright to New York several times to sell parts of his vast collection of Japanese woodblock prints (some of which went to the Metropolitan Museum of Art).

Alofsin deftly describes Wright’s professional redemption, in which New York played the major role, beginning with Wright’s close friendship with the eccentric pantheistic rector of St. Mark’s in the Bowery, William Norman Guthrie. Though neither of Wright’s collaborations with Guthrie—a wholly impracticable Modern cathedral and the practicable but doomed (by the Great Depression and a recalcitrant vestry) apartment tower (or towers) on the property of St. Mark’s in the Bowery—panned out, the friendship with Guthrie proved sustaining for Wright, as did his friendship with the phenomenally popular writer Alexander Woollcott. Wright and Miriam were divorced in 1927, and Wright married Olgivanna in 1928. Slowly, things began to look up. Scandal receded. The Museum of Modern Art included Wright in its seminal survey “Modern Architecture: International Exhibition” in 1932; also in 1932, Wright formed the Taliesin Fellowship, in which he took on paying apprentices. Most important of all, Wright, in part with Woollcott’s help, fashioned himself into a writer. He wrote for professional and, more importantly, popular magazines, and he wrote books, including his exceptionally well-received *Autobiography*, published by Longmans, Green in 1933. He also took to the lecture circuit. The writing and the lectures brought in much-needed money

and also set the stage for Wright’s comeback as an architect. In 1934, Edgar Kaufmann, the father of one of Wright’s apprentices, commissioned Fallingwater, outside of Pittsburgh. Wright entered a new “Golden Age.”

The three things, says Alofsin, that secured Wright’s status as an American icon all came from New York. The first was Woollcott’s extraordinary profile of Wright in *The New Yorker* of July 19, 1930: “if the editor of this journal were so to ration me that I were suffered to apply the word ‘genius’ to only one living American, I would save it up for Frank Lloyd Wright.” The second was the publication of the *Autobiography*, eagerly read by the young. The third was Wright’s appearance on the cover of *Time* on January 17, 1938, the first time an architect had been so honored. Such was the momentum Wright achieved that even his role as an America Firster during World War II proved but a minor public relations hiccup. (Though it did bring to an end Wright’s important friendship with Lewis Mumford.)

For all that New York served Wright, it seems remarkable that not till the 1950s did he grace the city with a building. That was the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, a building with an uncommonly long gestation. Hilla Rebay, the director of the Museum of Non-Objective Painting, first approached Wright in 1943. The museum opened on October 21, 1959. By then, Guggenheim had died (1949) and Rebay had been ousted (1952) as director of the museum. Sadly, Wright had died six months earlier, in Phoenix, two months after his last visit to the Plaza Hotel. Not one of the three ever set foot in the museum on Fifth Avenue and Eighty-ninth Street.

My quibbles are few. Alofsin twice says “flaunting” when he means “flouting.” He says Maginel’s Twelfth Street house was built in 1901; it was built in 1861. That’s about it. Alofsin tells his story with admirable economy and critical detachment, offers marvelous vignettes (Wright and Olgivanna getting drunk at the Café Lafayette, like Dawn Powell characters), has selected photos with admirable care, and has produced one of the small handful of essential books on Wright.

# Under the Syrian soil

by *Samuel Sweeney*

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Among the many infamous crimes of ISIS—murderous bombings, beheadings, lashings, kidnappings—the destruction of archaeological heritage may seem insignificant. Compared with the barbarism committed against living human beings, surely the destruction of ancient monuments must be of secondary importance? Yet those crimes go hand in hand: ISIS and its affiliates were and are committed to the destruction of society and civilization both, including the memory of times, places, and peoples that contradict some of their most deeply held assumptions and beliefs.

For an American reader particularly, with our country's relatively recent European settlement and general ignorance of the pre-Columbian Western hemisphere, the attachment to history that is felt in most other parts of the world can be difficult to grasp. But in the Middle East, as in Europe, one need not consciously consider the long ebb and flow of history to be affected by it. The mere existence of the ruins of Palmyra—once an important desert outpost on the Roman frontier—places the passerby as one in a long line of inhabitants on a given piece of land.

When ISIS took control of Palmyra, they destroyed the pre-Islamic pagan temples of Bel and Baalshamin and murdered Khaled al-Asaad, the director of antiquities for the city, for refusing to show them where artifacts were stored or hidden. In a full accounting of ISIS's destruction of Syria's archaeological and historical heritage, however, sites of visible past grandeur like Palmyra are the exception,

not the rule. It is the smaller archaeological sites that dot the country—whose names are often known only to locals in the immediate vicinity and a few specialists—where the bulk of Syria's historical and prehistorical heritage is found. These sites, dating back to 10,000 B.C. and further, tell the progression of mankind from hunters and gatherers to builders of monumental cities like Palmyra. For the last century or so, archaeologists have dug up garbage heaps, homes, cemeteries, and occasionally large forgotten cities, uncovering the story of civilization itself along the way.

Prior to the twentieth century, little was known about the prehistoric Middle East. Sources like the Old Testament provided names of peoples and places, but the locations of cities or kingdoms that had long since ceased to exist were often unknown. These documents also provided no information on life before the advent of writing, i.e., prehistory. As archaeologists began digging under the tells—hills that rise above the surrounding plain—of Syria, Iraq, and elsewhere, a more complicated picture of mankind's development emerged than was previously understood. Entire unknown and unnamed cultures were uncovered. Because these peoples had not yet developed writing, there was no way to know what they called themselves or their settlements, or how the people in one settlement engaged with people at other sites nearby. Nonetheless, patterns emerged between sites at differing locations, and links were drawn between disparate areas based on shared customs

like building tools, use of raw materials, or aesthetic styles for decorating pottery. Scholars began to identify common cultural traits over geographical areas and specific time periods. These cultures or periods were often named for the site where they were first identified.

One important site, sitting in the northern Balikh Valley in Syria's Raqqa Province, is Tell Sabi Abyad, about twenty miles south of the Turkish border. Serious excavation at Tell Sabi Abyad, not to be confused with the modern town of Tell Abyad to the north, began in 1986, led by the Dutch archaeologist Peter Akkermans. Dr. Akkermans and his colleagues have attempted to reshape the understanding of cultural development in northern Syria—long believed to be of secondary importance in the progression of Mesopotamian civilization—based on finds at sites like Tell Sabi Abyad. Excavations at the site, conducted from the 1980s through the 2000s, revealed a settlement lasting thousands of years, but the scholarly work there has focused on the seventh millennium B.C.

Among the findings at the site are eleven layers of habitation dating from about 6500 to 5800 B.C. During this time the culture at the site evolved from what scholars would call pre-Halafian into the Halafian culture. One notable group of items from Tell Sabi Abyad are clay sealings, the presence of which is an important phenomenon in the archaeology of the Middle East. As in many other sites around the region, residents of Tell Sabi Abyad impressed images into clay and then closed a container with the clay seal. The image, unique to the owner, could be easily recognized, and only the owner of the seal was permitted to open whatever was inside: a sort of prehistoric safety deposit box. Any tampering with the seal or the contents would be immediately evident.

Drs. Kim Duistermaat and Peter Akkermans posit that the seals found at Tell Sabi Abyad belonged to a communal storehouse, and that the sealed containers may have been used to hold tokens that represented the goods at the storehouse, not the goods themselves. In this way, they would have functioned as a prehistoric balance sheet, in lieu of a writing system. If you had three coins, say, that represented

a certain amount of wheat each, you could retrieve that as you passed through on your travels or when you returned home from a faraway journey. Those coins would be kept in a container bearing the owner's seal, and upon return only he or she could open the container and show the coins representing the number of goods to which he or she was entitled. Of course, given that nothing was written down explaining the system, it could be something entirely different—some scholars have strongly disagreed with their hypothesis on who might have used such a system—but such is the uncertainty of archaeological findings.

Alas, as scholars dig through the remains of places like Tell Sabi Abyad, the sites do not exist in a vacuum, cut off from the contemporary events going on all around them. Threats to the preservation of Syria's archaeological heritage, essential to future discoveries, have been numerous over the last century. Around the turn of the twentieth century, artifact smugglers began looting ancient sites and selling what they found, like the famous medieval pottery of Raqqa, on the black market. The next big threat to archaeology in Syria came in the 1970s, as the government moved forward with a dam project on the Euphrates River that would flood many potentially valuable sites. Teams of archaeologists were invited to do emergency excavations, requiring them to complete in the course of several years what might otherwise have taken decades. We will likely never know what was missed, but many important revelations came out of this effort. West of Raqqa, at a site called Abu Hureyra, the oldest known instance of domesticated farming was discovered, now buried under the waters of Lake Assad.

Unfortunately, recent events in Syria, starting in 2011, have proved more challenging to the protection of the archaeological heritage than anything prior. Tell Sabi Abyad is one of many sites that fell within the territory taken over by ISIS in 2013, and it suffered significantly under ISIS rule. Most notably, the terrorist organization built a refueling station there, consisting of several cement-block walls and a fuel tank at the base of the site. Equip-

ment used at the site was stolen from a nearby storehouse. There are also signs of illegal digging at the site, where ISIS or others probably looked for pottery or other antiquities to sell. It is unlikely they found much of value there, according to Olivier Nieuwenhuijse, an archaeologist who previously worked on excavations at the site, since prehistoric sites rarely produce large intact pieces with significant resale value. More lucrative were the thousands of artifacts from area sites housed at the Raqqa Museum, almost all of which disappeared during—and even before—ISIS's takeover of the city. Tell Sabi Abyad was fortunately spared the fate of other sites in Syria where ISIS planted landmines that made examining them dangerous and difficult. Tell Hammam al-Turkman, another archaeological site a few miles away, was mined by ISIS and is inaccessible for the time being.

In 2015, Tell Sabi Abyad and the surrounding area were liberated from ISIS by the Syrian Democratic Forces, a conglomeration of armed groups backed by the United States and its allies tasked with defeating ISIS in the areas of northern Syria east of the Euphrates. During and after the campaign against ISIS, which came to an official end on March 23 of this year, staff of the Authority of Tourism and the Protection of Antiquities (ATPA) worked to document the damage done to sites that had fallen under the control of ISIS, including Tell Sabi Abyad. ATPA's staff allowed me to follow them around for a few days in December of last year, and I got a glimpse of the challenges they face in undoing the damage done by one of the most destructive wars in recent memory.

ATPA is part of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, which governs the areas liberated from ISIS by the Syrian Democratic Forces. They have discreetly worked with the foreign archaeologists who used to come to Syria to protect what remains and document what has been lost. This work is politically fraught, as the Syrian government and opposition alike have accused ATPA of various transgressions, without evidence or substantiation. Having seen them at work, however, it is obvious to me that they view it as a calling and do not see the protection

of their country's archaeology as a political project. They realize that excavations will not continue until the political situation in Syria is settled, and are simply working to preserve what is left of sites like Tell Sabi Abyad so that some day archaeologists, Syrian and foreign alike, can continue the work they were doing before the war started in 2011.

Alongside the obvious threats of deliberate destruction, archaeological preservation in Syria faces a number of other challenges. Many people simply do not see the value in expending resources to preserve sites abandoned thousands of years ago; the value of agricultural activity on the surface, or of the sale of artifacts on the antiquities black market, is much more tangible than knowledge about life on a prehistoric site. Furthermore, the study of archaeology often seems inaccessible to the layperson, filled as it is with technical language and abstract concepts. Archaeologists write articles addressing only a handful of other academics who will pore over the data and the conclusions drawn, and respond with vehement agreement or disagreement to the argument presented.

Additionally, when archaeologists finish excavating a small prehistoric village, for example, there is often not much left of interest to a passerby. These sites generally consist of layers upon layers of past human communities. One layer is uncovered and documented, and then work begins on the layer below. In the end there is little left to look at. The layers are often reburied, either deliberately or through natural processes. At most one might find some broken remains of pottery or vague remains of an old house that has been refilled with earth as a result of wind and rain.

These issues keep archaeology at an arm's length from the community and as a result facilitate antiquities smuggling. As ISIS and other groups took over vast swaths of northern Syria, locals complied with demands to dig for artifacts that could be sold on the black market. To be sure, these collaborators were in an impossible position, but many simply did not know any better; to them, the historical value of the sites was abstract at best. But to



ISIS and other enterprising individuals, the value was not in the meaning and history of the site itself but rather the economic value of the artifacts therein—paradoxically, since the economic value comes from someone else placing a symbolic value on the artifacts. If only buyers realized that by purchasing those artifacts they also contribute to their decimation. Despite ISIS's public destruction of large monuments that they deemed heretical, they also realized the economic value of old pottery and tablets that could be easily smuggled and sold. Their iconoclasm ended where profits began. Antiquities trading is an old business, and it thrives in war zones.

It is precisely this disconnect from local communities at many archaeological sites that makes another site in northern Syria, Tell Mozan, so unique. Tell Mozan is about a hundred ten miles east of Tell Sabi Abyad, near the town of Amuda, and the site offers a unique contrast to other archaeological sites in the area.

The pioneering twentieth-century archaeologist Max Mallowan and his wife Agatha Christie (yes, that Agatha Christie) visited Tell Mozan in the 1930s as they were surveying sites to excavate. They ultimately declined to excavate at Tell Mozan. Half a century later, in 1984, excavations finally began at Tell Mozan, led by the husband and wife Giorgio Buccellati and Marilyn Kelly-Buccellati, both professors at UCLA. The team suspected that the site might in fact be the ancient city of Urkesh, whose name was known from textual references but which had not yet been located. Others believed Urkesh to be at nearby Tell Amuda, but by the early 1990s the team at Tell Mozan was able to say definitively that their site was indeed Urkesh. Seals, like those at Tell Sabi Abyad, confirmed the city's identity.

While the site of Tell Mozan has remains of habitation from various eras, including the Halafian era so important to Tell Sabi Abyad, it is the city of Urkesh that distinguishes the site. Urkesh thrived in the third millennium B.C.; the inner city wall dates to about 2700 B.C. and the palace to about 2200 B.C. An older temple may date back to 2800 B.C., but the

temple that remains can be confidently dated to 2400 B.C. The people that inhabited the city were called Hurrians, and Urkesh is the most important Hurrian city, both religiously and politically, that has been uncovered archaeologically. The city was the seat of several Hurrian kings; the seals of a king named Tupkish and his queen Uqnitu were prominent in the royal storehouse.

The site of Tell Mozan/Urkesk itself gives a sense of the importance of the city. Much of the city remains covered; when, someday, the situation in Syria allows for a return of archaeological digs, there will be much more work to do. At the base of the site the visitor first encounters the service wing of the royal palace, where the storehouse was found that identified the city as Urkesh, and it is here that the servants would have maintained the daily functions of the palace. Just above the service wing sits one of the most unique features at the site. Called an *abi*, it is a deep, round hole in the ground, lined with a stone wall. How deep exactly is not yet known, as excavations are not yet complete. Initially believed to be a well, it was eventually revealed to have a religious function: the people of Urkesh would come here to talk to their dead ancestors. Above the *abi* sits the royal wing of the palace, which has not been uncovered. No doubt that will be an area of particular interest for the excavation team when work resumes. Above the royal wing of the palace, however, sits the most striking section of the site: the temple.

To a visitor in the third millennium A.D., the temple's staircase is perhaps the most impressive part of a visit to Tell Mozan. To a visitor in the third millennium B.C., it must have been an even more spectacular site, rising up to the temple which is currently only partially uncovered. The timeline of the temple's existence is a reminder that Urkesh was no blip on the radar screen: while there was likely something at the site of the temple from at least 2800 B.C. onwards, the primary temple was in use from about 2400 to 1400 B.C. Around 1400 B.C., buildings near the temple collapsed and prompted another shift in the layout of the site, though it continued to be used. According to the Buccellatis, when excavations resume,

the temple will be the first place to be further uncovered, and no doubt the site will be even more impressive to a contemporary visitor.

While working at such a visibly striking and historically unique site, the archaeological team at Tell Mozan seized the opportunity both to preserve the site and to engage the local community with archaeology in a more meaningful way. As more and more of Urkesh was uncovered, the landmarks of the city were preserved in their original state so as to allow visitors to come see the site and feel what it would have been like in the third millennium B.C. In 2008, the Syrian first lady Asma al-Assad visited the site, and, in 2011, Giorgio Buccellati won the inaugural Best Practices in Site Preservation award from the Archaeological Institute of America. That same year the Syrian conflict began, presenting the biggest challenge yet to the site's preservation.

Because excavation work at the site is on hold, the Urkesh Archaeological Project has focused on preserving the site and connecting with the community. Local staff maintain the site; presentations on the finds have been displayed in the nearby city of Qamishli, Damascus, and places further afield like Beirut, Lebanon, and Rimini, Italy, at a conference that drew twenty thousand visitors to the exhibit on Urkesh. School groups, and occasionally foreign writers like myself, visit the site and can read the display signs that explain the city's history. The Buccellatis facilitated an exchange between middle schoolers in Qamishli and in Domodossola, Italy, to discuss the history of their respective areas. The project has provided scaffolding and cloth sheets that hang over the

exposed walls of Urkesh and protect it from the elements. When Max Mallowan and Agatha Christie visited the site, they described having to lure local men into helping with the dig by telling their wives of the jewelry they could buy with the extra money they would earn; now Syrians, men and women alike, understand the importance of the site and come from near and far to see it, while also working hard to protect it.

If the original inhabitants of sites like Tell Sabi Abyad and Tell Mozan could see the interest their lives draw now, thousands of years later, what would they think? One imagines that some of the conclusions drawn from the patchwork of evidence still available—archaeological and textual—would confound. But scholars can only deal with the evidence at hand, making guesses that collate evidence and logic, while also realizing that findings could be upended when further discoveries are made. Those discoveries are more difficult, however, in the face of war and instability. Evidence is destroyed or made inaccessible, necessitating the rehashing of old evidence and conclusions; archaeologists can only squeeze so much out of old data points. The tragedy of the Syrian war is the pain and suffering of living human beings, of course, but to Syrians and non-Syrians alike who have invested their lives in studying the country's distant past, the destruction of that heritage is painful, too. The sooner that pain ends, the better; all should be able to agree on that, even those who care little for what lies under the soil of Mesopotamia.