

The New Criterion

November 2020

A monthly review *edited by Roger Kimball*

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Volume 39, Number 3, \$7.75 / £7.50

The New Criterion *November 2020*

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The New Criterion. ISSN 0734-0222. November 2020, Volume 39, Number 3. Published monthly except July and August by The Foundation for Cultural Review, Inc., 900 Broadway, New York, NY 10003, a nonprofit public charity as described in Section 501 (c) (3) of the Internal Revenue code, which solicits and accepts contributions from a wide range of sources, including public and private foundations, corporations, and the general public. Subscriptions: \$48 for one year, \$88 for two. For Canada, add \$14 per year. For all other foreign subscriptions, add \$22 per year. Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY, and at additional mailing offices. Postmaster and subscribers: send change of address, all remittances, and subscription inquiries to The New Criterion, P.O. Box 3000, Denville, NJ 07834. Notice of nonreceipt must be sent to this address within three months of the issue date. All other correspondence should be addressed to The New Criterion, 900 Broadway, Suite 602, New York, NY 10003. (212) 247-6980. Copyright © 2020 by The Foundation for Cultural Review, Inc. Newsstand distribution by CMG, 155 Village Blvd., Princeton, NJ 08540. Available in microfilm from University Microfilms, 300 N. Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106. Internet: www.newcriterion.com Email: letters@newcriterion.com

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Notes & Comments: November 2020

Keywords: hoist, petard

Perhaps we ought to have included “chickens” and “roost” among the keywords as well. For many years now, woke administrators, professors, and other activists at all the toniest colleges have been like the parade of flagellants in *The Seventh Seal*: skirling in public about their sins, above all their institutional or (as we have lately been taught to say) their “systemic” racism. Their cries are accompanied by the demand for alms—\$50 million at Yale to support “diversity,” \$100 million at Brown for kindred exercises in political penance, and so on.

On September 2, Christopher L. Eisgruber, the president of Princeton University, made a major contribution to this emetic genre. In an open letter to the university “community,” he beat his breast about America’s overdue “profound national reckoning with racism.” He didn’t exclude his own university. Indeed, he beat himself harder as he bemoaned Princeton’s long history of “intentionally and systematically exclud[ing] people of color, women, Jews, and other minorities.” Nor, according to him, has that history ended. “Racist assumptions from the past,” President Eisgruber sobbed, “remain embedded in structures of the University itself.”

His confession did not go unnoticed. On September 16, the Department of Education sent President Eisgruber a letter. The letter minutes an interesting discrepancy. Since Christopher

Eisgruber became president of Princeton in 2013, the university has received more than \$75 million in taxpayer funds. It has also “repeatedly represented and warranted to the U.S. Department of Education . . . Princeton’s compliance with Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.” What’s Title VI? Among other things, it’s the law that stipulates that no institution receiving federal funds may discriminate against anyone because of “race, color, or national origin.”

But here we have Christopher Eisgruber wailing in a public letter about Princeton’s long history of racist behavior and its current “embedded” racist structures, and then announcing his intention to launch new race-based “diversity” initiatives. Uh oh. “Based on its admitted racism,” the letter proceeds, “the U.S. Department of Education . . . is concerned Princeton’s nondiscrimination and equal opportunity assurances in its Program Participation Agreements from at least 2013 to the present may have been false.” We wonder whether President Eisgruber had gotten outside his morning coffee and kipper before reading this missive. It gets better, or at least more vivid:

The Department is further concerned Princeton perhaps knew, or should have known, these assurances were false at the time they were made. Finally, the Department is further concerned Princeton’s many nondiscrimination and equal opportunity claims to students, parents, and con-

sumers in the market for education certificates may have been false, misleading, and actionable substantial misrepresentations in violation of 20 U.S.C. § 1094(c)(3)(B) and 34 CFR 668.71(c).

“Actionable.” You know that government chaps are serious when they start citing statutes by number, especially when they include those nifty section symbols. And serious it seems to be. “Therefore,” the letter’s prologue ends, “the Department’s Office of Postsecondary Education, in consultation with the Department’s Office of the General Counsel, is opening this investigation.” Neatly put, what?

And somewhat ironical, since, just a few months before, President Eisgruber had joined the sweaty mob buying for the head of Joshua Katz, a professor of classics who’d had the temerity to question the wisdom of a proposal, signed by some three hundred fifty Princeton faculty and staff, demanding, among much else, that junior faculty “of color” (who makes that determination, we wonder?) be “guaranteed” more sabbatical and institutional support than their presumably color-deprived colleagues. Katz, a popular teacher and one of the most academically distinguished members of the Princeton classics faculty, pointed out in *Quillette* that such proposals, if implemented, “would lead to civil war on campus and erode even further public confidence in how elite institutions of higher education operate.” The response to Katz was as swift as it was irrational. Not only did many of his colleagues, students, and former students join the chorus of repudiation, but the administration also announced darkly that it would be “looking into the matter further.”

The threatened official investigation was quietly withdrawn in the face of widespread public support for Katz, but he remains a pariah on a campus wedded to wokeness. As of this writing, the university’s public response to the DOE investigation has been little more than bluster: they “stand by” their statements. They find it “unfortunate” that the Department of Education should break in upon their little melodrama (our paraphrase), etc.

We will be interested to see how Princeton responds to the demand for, *inter alia*, “A spreadsheet identifying each person who has, on the ground of race, color, or national origin, been excluded from participation in, been denied the benefits of, or been subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance as a result of the Princeton racism or ‘damage’ referenced in the President’s Letter.” You said there were many people discriminated against because of their race, so let’s have a list along with a précis of just how they were excluded or discriminated against. And that’s just one of nine requests for “Records Production.”

We will also be fascinated to see how Princeton responds to the demand for answers to various sticky questions. President Eisgruber admitted that racism does “damage” to “people of color” at Princeton. The DOE wonders: “Do these admissions mean Princeton’s nondiscrimination and equal opportunity assurances and representations to the Department and/or to students, parents, and consumers in the market for education certificates have been false and misleading?” Inquiring minds want to know. The list price to attend Princeton is \$71,960 per annum. We’d wager that many check-writing parents will be interested in President Eisgruber’s answers.

And of course it’s not just Princeton. It looks like Betsy DeVos, the Secretary of Education, is about to rain on a lot of college pow-wows. Early in October, the news came down that the Department of Justice had sued Yale University for discrimination. “For at least 50 years,” the thirty-two-page complaint began, Yale “intentionally subjected applicants to Yale College to discrimination on the grounds of race and national origin.” Moreover, for the last few decades, “Yale’s oversized, standardless, intentional use of race has subjected domestic, non-transfer applicants to Yale College to discrimination on the ground of race,” disfavoring “in particular most Asian and White applicants.”

The suit is the follow-through on the DOJ’s two-year investigation into Yale’s admissions

practices. “Yale’s use of race is anything but limited,” a DOJ press release noted. “Yale uses race at multiple steps of its admissions process resulting in a multiplied effect of race on an applicant’s likelihood of admission. And Yale racially balances its classes.” The DOJ suggested the university undertake “voluntary compliance” but concluded that “Yale declined even to propose any changes to its pervasive use of race.”

Yale, like Princeton, like the overwhelming majority of colleges and universities, receives federal funds. In the case of large institutions like Yale and Princeton, it is millions upon millions of federal, i.e., taxpayer, funds. Our friend Title VI prohibits institutions that receive federal funds from discriminating on the basis of race and several other categories. Yet Yale, again like Princeton and the overwhelming number of American educational institutions, does discriminate on the basis of race, even though they tell the government that they do not. Peter Salovey, Yale’s president, said that he and his colleagues “look forward to defending [their] policies in court.” We look forward to that, too.

You might be thinking, “Isn’t this just affirmative action, and isn’t that just business as usual in the university?” (And, we might add, throughout corporate culture, other non-profits, and wherever progressive virtuecrats and budding social engineers congregate.)

In one sense, the answer is yes, at least superficially. The more honest answer is that it is a perversion of affirmative action as it was originally understood. Affirmative action was originally undertaken in the name of equality. But, as always seems to happen, it soon fell prey to the Orwellian logic from which the principle that “All animals are equal” gives birth to the transformative codicil “but some animals are more equal than others.”

The whole history of affirmative action is instinct with that irony. The original effort to redress legitimate grievances—grievances embodied, for instance, in the discriminatory practices of Jim Crow—long ago mutated into new forms of discrimination. In 1941, Frank-

lin Roosevelt established the Fair Employment Practices Committee because blacks were openly barred from wartime factory jobs. But what began as a 1961 Presidential Executive Order directing government contractors to take “affirmative action” to assure that people be hired “without regard” for sex, race, creed, color, etc., has resulted in the creation of vast bureaucracies dedicated to discovering, hiring, and advancing people chiefly on the basis of those qualities. War is peace, freedom is slavery, “without regard to” comes to mean “with regard for nothing else.”

Affirmative action is Orwellian in a linguistic sense, too, since what announces itself as an initiative to promote equality winds up enforcing discrimination precisely on the grounds that it was meant to overcome. Thus we are treated to the delicious, if alarming, contradiction of college applications that declare their commitment to evaluate candidates “without regard to race, gender, religion, ethnicity, or national origin” on page 1 and then helpfully hint to you on page 2 that it is to your advantage to mention if you belong to any of the following designated victim groups. Among other things, a commitment to woke identity politics seems to dull one’s sense of contradiction.

Had he lived to see the evolution of affirmative action, Alexis de Tocqueville would have put such developments down as examples of how in democratic societies the passion for equality tends to trump the passion for liberty. The fact that the effort to enforce equality often results in egregious inequalities he would have understood to be part of the “tutelary” despotism that hovers like a malign bureaucratic shadow over modern democratic regimes.

That’s putting it in somewhat elevated terms, however. Closer to earth, we espy a grubby skirmishing for power and social prerogative, cloaked, to be sure, in the rhetoric of justice and equality but deployed in an acrid atmosphere of fanaticism and petty betrayal, incidental byproducts of the larger betrayal of the university’s fundamental mission to form responsible citizens, pursue truth, and preserve and transmit the highest values of our civilization.

The Founders' priceless legacy

by Myron Magnet

Editors' note: The following is an edited version of remarks delivered for The New Criterion's second annual Circle Lecture on September 30, 2020.

However unfashionable to say so at the moment, the American Founding is one of the noblest achievements of the Western Enlightenment. It created something breathtakingly new in history: a self-governing republic that protects the right of individuals—not serfs, not subjects, but equal citizens before the law—to pursue their own happiness in their own way. Who could have imagined that such a triumph would come under the violent attack that now seeks to deny and besmirch it? Whether it flies the banner of The 1619 Project, Black Lives Matter, or Critical Race Theory, the new anti-Americanism condemns the Founding Fathers' project as conceived in slavery, not liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that we can never be equal citizens with equal rights.

It is a militant anti-Americanism, too. Like the iconoclasm of the most violent English Puritans, who smashed the faces off the carved saints and angels in one sublime medieval church after another, or of the French *sans-culottes*, who dug up and desecrated nine centuries of royal bodies from their tombs in the Abbey of Saint-Denis, defacing for good measure the statues of the Old Testament kings on the façade of this first great Gothic building, today's anti-Americanism seeks to pulverize and obliterate our national past as something too offensive and obscene to have existed.

The current upheaval is the latest paroxysm of a cultural revolution that has gained momentum for half a century or more, and its trajectory from the universities to popular culture is too well known to need repeating. What I want to discuss here is the precious value of our inheritance from the Founding Fathers that today's vandals want to destroy. If they succeed—since history, even our own, doesn't always go forward and upward, despite the claims of the so-called “progressives”—we will find ourselves in a new Dark Age of constraint and superstition.

At the heart of the Founding was a thirst for liberty. In announcing our national freedom from imperial domination, the Declaration of Independence began by asserting our right to *individual* liberty. For the Founders, that liberty was not some vague abstraction. They understood it concretely, as people do who've suffered its opposite. They grasped it like those Eastern Europeans who once lived under Communist tyranny, for instance, or like Jews who survived the Holocaust.

Remember that the Plymouth Pilgrims were only the first of many who came to America to escape religious persecution. Hard as it is to believe today, British law once forbade non-Anglican Protestants from worshiping freely, and it barred them from the great universities and from political office for holding and professing the wrong beliefs. In response, thousands of Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Baptists, Quakers, and others fled. They brought with them their

Dissenting tradition of governing their own congregations, and hiring and firing their own ministers—in other words, they brought to these shores a political culture of self-government. Moreover, because they were accustomed to reading the Bible and feeling free to judge its meaning for themselves—to believing that they had a direct relation to God and his word independent of any worldly institution or authority—they also brought a deeply rooted culture of individualism and personal responsibility. For them, the individual and his conscience, his freedom of thought and belief, were preeminent.

The longtime New Jersey governor and signer of the Constitution, William Livingston, for instance, wrote to readers of his hugely influential mid-eighteenth-century journal, *The Independent Reflector*, that it was “the countless Sufferings of your pious Predecessors for Liberty of Conscience, and the Right of private Judgment” that drove them “to this country, then a dreary Waste and barren Desert.” One such exile for the right to think and believe for oneself was his own Presbyterian grandfather.

John Jay, our first chief justice, grippingly recalled how his grandfather, a French Protestant, returned from a foreign trading voyage to find his family and neighbors gone. Their homes were occupied by soldiers, their church destroyed, their savings confiscated. While he'd been abroad, he learned, France had revoked its toleration of Protestants. Only by luck did he sneak aboard a ship and sail away to freedom in the New World. Two of Jay's other grandparents similarly had to flee anti-Protestant persecution, one from Paris and one from Bohemia. Jay's son and biographer recounts this proudly; it was a living family tradition.

As Edmund Burke warned his fellow members of parliament four weeks before Lexington and Concord, when it was already too late, “All protestantism . . . is a sort of dissent,” but American Protestantism “is a refinement on the principle of resistance; it is the dissidence of dissent, and the protestantism of the protestant religion.” Whatever might be the differences among the American

Protestant sects, they all agree, he said, “in the communion of the spirit of liberty,” so don't push them.

Long before Emma Lazarus wrote about the huddled masses yearning to breathe free, George Washington noted that, for “the poor, the needy, & the oppressed of the Earth,” America was already what he called “the second Land of promise.” This Promised Land offered, said James Madison, “an Asylum to the persecuted and oppressed of every Nation and Religion.”

In fact, for Madison—trained at Princeton by the radical Scottish-born Presbyterian minister John Witherspoon—it was red-hot outrage over a remnant of religious oppression in the New World that drove him into a political career. Virginia, where Anglicanism was still the official, established religion until the Revolution, had jailed a group of Baptist preachers for their unorthodox religious writings. If you aren't free to think your own thoughts and believe your own beliefs, fumed Madison, you aren't free, period, since freedom is seamless. And as a practical matter, there can be no progress, either material or moral, without intellectual freedom. So when the twenty-five-year-old revolutionary took part in drafting Virginia's Declaration of Rights, he rejected its original provision for religious toleration. It's not government's business to “tolerate” somebody's belief or not. You are unconditionally free to think whatever your reason convinces you is true, government or no government—and that's what the Declaration of Rights ended up saying.

After Independence, Madison shepherded through the Virginia Legislature the Statute of Religious Freedom that Jefferson, then serving as ambassador to France, had drafted. No one can deny, Jefferson's statute declared, echoing Milton's sublime *Areopagitica* and prefiguring Mill's *On Liberty*,

that truth is great and will prevail if left to herself; that she is the proper and sufficient antagonist to error, and has nothing to fear from the conflict unless by human interposition disarmed of her natural weapons, free argument and debate; er-

rors ceasing to be dangerous when it is permitted freely to contradict them.

Madison would never use Jefferson's high-flown language, but he would certainly agree with his friend's sentiment that "I have sworn upon the altar of god, eternal hostility to every form of tyranny over the mind of man." These Virginia neighbors knew what it meant to individuals and to a whole culture to have to parrot an official orthodoxy, or else shut up—and they knew what further physical tyrannies such unfreedom of belief could unleash, as Milton had seen when he visited the aged Galileo, imprisoned for saying the Earth revolved around the sun. All history teaches this simple and obvious truth about freedom of thought and speech, but can one find a college administrator or newspaper editor with the courage to say this to politically correct mobs howling down unorthodox speakers or writers today? Today's slogan seems to be: speak power to truth.

The Founders' conception of liberty rested on their Lockean political philosophy, which got diffused throughout the colonies by journals like William Livingston's—ones that John Adams believed had created the real American Revolution, the decades-long revolution of sensibilities that sharpened the "principles, opinions, sentiments, and affections" of the colonists and ultimately led them to take up arms in 1775. At Princeton, Madison and his classmates were still quoting Livingston's articles twenty years after publication: talk about the political power of freedom of speech and of the press!

As Livingston paraphrased Locke, men are born free and equal into the State of Nature, endowed with rights to life, liberty, and property that come from nature "prior to all political Institution." But because fallen human nature is what it is—because the inborn "Depravity of Mankind" gives individuals a tendency to invade the "Person or Fortune" of their neighbors—"the Weak were a perpetual Prey to the Powerful" in the State of Nature. To "preserve to every Individual, the undisturbed Enjoyment of his Acquisitions,

and the Security of his Person," Livingston wrote, men "entered into Society" and appointed magistrates, arming them with "the total Power" of the community to protect everybody's safety and property. Such was the origin of government.

This formulation contains several tightly compressed propositions that need unpacking. First, it includes a psychology. Men are not born with original virtue. They are not peaceful creatures, naturally living together in harmony, before the rise of capitalism or private property or racism sows strife among them. They come into the world with instinctive aggression that can lead them to oppress, rape, steal, and kill. "Man is a wolf to man," as Plautus put it, and such thinkers as Hobbes and Freud have quoted his epigram in drafting their own political philosophies.

Second, government is in essence a police power. On entering society, people authorize officials to protect their lives, liberty, and property, by force if necessary, against the predations of others. The fundamental civil right—a right guaranteed by government, that is—is to be kept safe in your home and streets.

Third, in the Founders' view, economic freedom is an inseparable component of liberty. In their Lockean political scheme, because your natural right to own the private property you have acquired or built is as absolute as your right to life and liberty, its protection by government is no less fundamental a civil right. You are free to accumulate it and do with it what you please, under government protection.

Fourth, government officials work for the citizens, not vice-versa. As Jefferson later put it, "Kings are the servants, not the proprietors of the people." If officials don't do the job government was instituted to do, or if they use the power that citizens have given them for any purpose beyond what the citizens have specified, they lose their legitimacy and, as Locke wrote and the Declaration of Independence emphasized, they can be fired. Government by expert administrators who supposedly know better than the people themselves was no part of their vision. As early as the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson was complaining that

George III “has erected a Multitude of new Offices, and sent hither Swarms of Officers to harass our People, and eat out their Substance.” Might as well be the EPA.

Moreover, because the money that pays officials and supports their activities comes from the property that they are hired to protect, Livingston argued that any “Tax ought to be considered as the voluntary Gift of the People, to be applied to such Uses, as they, by their Representatives shall think expedient.” That’s why, to make an up-to-the-minute aside, “Defund the police” is a logical incoherence. If there is no police power, there is no government, and hence no authority to collect taxes. “Defund the police” means dissolve the government.

Eighteenth-century English Whigs, also Lockeans, believed that their taxes were voluntary gifts, too, made through their elected representatives. Given England’s corrupt electoral system and limited franchise, this was only a partial truth. But the American colonists, with no members of parliament, lacked even this shadow of consent. The Founding Fathers were deadly serious, therefore, when they said “Taxation without representation is tyranny!” It wasn’t a metaphor when George Washington called the stamp tax and the tea tax the “most grievous and intollerable Species of Tyranny and Oppression, that ever was inflicted upon Mankind.” The Continental Congressman Richard Henry Lee didn’t think he was overwrought in comparing the taxes to “Egyptian bondage.” In their explicitly stated view, the British government was stealing the property it was supposed to preserve.

In addition to their Lockean philosophy, the Founders had concrete historical reasons for their outrage over taxation without their consent. Their ancestors had planted a civilization in the New World wilderness on their own initiative and by their own efforts. They *did* build that!

Having forged prosperity out of wilderness, the Founders had a positive, optimistic vision of what economic liberty could achieve. It was a vision that George Washington nicely articulated. The “spirit of commerce,” he noted, lies at the very heart of America’s national

character. How could it not, given that the country’s first settlers were self-reliant, enterprising risk-takers even before they arrived? They had crossed the ocean seeking to live on their own terms and to make their own fortunes, and they created a culture of free enterprise that Washington believed should be vigorously nurtured.

Though a slave-owning Virginia planter, he was also a large-scale entrepreneur. He built a grist mill and a distillery, the latter of which became America’s biggest, he set up a fishery that exported salt herring and shad internationally, and he speculated so successfully in land that he became one of the country’s richest men. He had no patience with Jefferson’s sentimentality about farming’s moral superiority to manufacturing and finance. He had seen beyond mercantilism before the Revolution ended: yes, he remarked, Spain has rich colonial silver mines, but the truth is that “Commerce and industry are the best mines of a nation.” He was the prime mover of a Potomac canal to serve as a highway for the trade of the Ohio country, and the conference he arranged at Mount Vernon for representatives of Virginia and Maryland to plan the canal led to the 1786 Annapolis Convention that in turn set up the Constitutional Convention the next year. His vision of America as “a Land of promise, with milk & honey,” was a vision of opportunity for all.

As president, he fully backed Treasury Secretary Alexander Hamilton’s financial program for fostering the entrepreneurial spirit and turning his dream of a land of plenty into a reality. You know the details of that plan—the funding of the national debt, the bank, the mint, all to create sufficient credit to exploit fully the vast resources of the new nation. It was the key accomplishment, after the Bill of Rights, of Washington’s first term.

As important as Hamilton’s economic vision was, though, his moral one was even more so. Why is it vital to have a highly developed, highly diversified economy?, he asked in his *Report on Manufactures*. The object is not just the production of more goods and services, but of human fulfillment in thinking them up and creating them. So while “a more ample

and various field of enterprize” will certainly increase the wealth of the nation, it will also allow all “the diversity of talents and dispositions which discriminate men from each other” to develop to their fullest excellence. In a society with limited opportunity, he wrote, “minds of the strongest and most active powers for their proper objects . . . labour without effect, if confined to uncongenial pursuits.” But “when all the different kinds of industry obtain in a community, each individual can find his proper element, and can call into activity the whole vigour of his nature.”

To Hamilton, economics was soulcraft. As he put it, “To cherish and stimulate the activity of the human mind, by multiplying the objects of enterprise, is not among the least considerable of the expedients, by which the wealth of a nation may be promoted.” To nurture human talent and realize human potential, to facilitate the pursuit of happiness: has the free enterprise system that is central to the Founding ever had a more magnificent defense? And when he came to set up the mint, Hamilton took care to issue coins of the smallest denominations, so that the humblest Americans could participate in the opportunity economy that this self-made immigrant framed.

It's a grim paradox that the Founders also valued liberty so highly because they lived amid slavery. Even the slave owners among them knew how obscenely unjust the institution was. “The whole commerce between master and slave,” wrote Jefferson, “is a perpetual exercise of the most boisterous passions, the most unremitting despotism on the one part, and degrading submissions on the other.” I needn't detail the toil, the sadistic punishments, the sexual exploitation, the break-up of families, the enforced ignorance, and the regulation of every aspect of life comprehended in Jefferson's decorous statement of the inhumanity of which human nature is capable.

In 1759, more than a century before the Civil War, Richard Henry Lee of Stratford Hall, later the president of the Continental Congress (and a cousin of the Stratford-born Robert E. Lee), made his maiden speech in the Virginia House of Burgesses. His message

to his fellow slave-owners: *end slavery*. How can anyone who calls himself a Christian, he demanded, think that “our *fellow-creatures* . . . are no longer to be considered as created in the image of God as well as ourselves, and equally entitled to liberty and freedom by the great law of nature?”

Jefferson, who had written that all men are created equal and who had tried unsuccessfully at the age of twenty-six to persuade the colonial legislature to allow Virginians to free their slaves, wrote, in words that prefigure Lincoln's Second Inaugural,

When the measure of their tears shall be full, when their groans shall have involved heaven itself in darkness, doubtless a god of justice will awaken to their distress, and by diffusing light and liberality among their oppressors, or at length by his exterminating thunder, manifest his attention to the things of this world, and that they are not to be left to the guidance of a blind fatality.

Like most of the Founders, he himself trusted the advance of Enlightenment to end slavery, but it was exterminating thunder that did the job, after all.

At any rate, when the young and pigheaded King George III began meddling in American affairs after decades of Britain's official policy of “salutary neglect” toward its New World colonies, the Founders had a ready explanation for his intentions. The king, concluded Washington in 1774, aimed “to make us as tame, & abject Slaves, as the Blacks we Rule over with such arbitrary Sway”—a sentiment whose full implications it took the General a lifetime to grasp, before he left deathbed instructions to free his slaves. Even earlier, Richard Henry Lee's brother Arthur, who became one of the Revolution's foreign agents, declared, “I cannot Conceive of the Necessity of becoming a Slave, while there remains a Ditch in which one may die free.” For such men, to repeat, liberty wasn't just a word. Choosing your beliefs, your thoughts, your job, your officials, your laws, your taxes; speaking your mind; being equal citizens before a law that was the same for all: how could they take these freedoms for granted?

Government, the Founders recognized, is a double-edged sword. You arm officials with the power to protect you, but those officials have the same fallen human nature as everyone else, so who is to say that they won't use that power to oppress you, as European governments oppressed the colonists' forebears? Even a democratic republic has to be run by imperfect men, and thus even it can turn into what Richard Henry Lee called an elective despotism. It's important to remember today the Founders' warning that the mere fact that you elect representatives to govern you is no guarantee of liberty. You will readily think of examples.

This danger worried the Founding Fathers constantly, and they struggled to protect their new government from it. Their first experiment was to make that government too weak to oppress them. But it was also too weak to do its chief job of protecting them. The war against Britain proved longer and harder than it needed to be, since the central government lacked authority to tax to pay soldiers or buy arms. With scanty funds, Washington's army starved and froze and died through the nightmare winters at Valley Forge, at Middlebrook, at Morristown. "To see Men without Cloathes to cover their nakedness," Washington wrote, "without Blankets to lay on, without Shoes, by which their Marches might be traced by the Blood from their feet, and almost as often without Provisions as with; Marching through frost and Snow, . . . is a mark of patience and obedience which in my opinion can scarce be parallel'd." Yet they were willing to do this to uphold principles so lightly discarded today. That they won the war was a miracle, made possible by the second miracle of George Washington himself.

(Just as an aside, exploring Philadelphia years ago, I chanced upon Washington Square, an airy expanse with a marble monument at one end. Curious, I went to see what it was. A bronze statue of Washington guarded an everlasting light and a tomb, which read: "Beneath this stone rests a soldier of Washington's army who died to give you liberty." In fact, the two and a half acres of grass cover thousands more unknown soldiers who succumbed to wounds

or disease. In June, some vandal desecrated the memorial with the spray-painted lie "Committed genocide.")

Well, when the Founders set out to write a new Constitution to give the federal government powers sufficient to its purpose, they did so with their hearts in their mouths. They strictly limited those powers to what they deemed absolutely essential, and they carefully spelled out what they were. They divided and subdivided power, and made each branch of government a check on the others, to guard against overreaching. They set frequent elections, gave the president a veto, and in turn made him and other officials subject to impeachment.

No one was more alive to the danger of democratic despotism than Madison. If an elected majority tramples rights to life, liberty, or property given individuals by nature or God, it is still despotism. In the most famous of the *Federalist Papers*, Number 10, Madison confronts the thought that—hold on—taxation *with* representation can be tyranny. "Those who hold, and those who are without property, have ever formed distinct interests in society," he writes. "Those who are creditors, and those who are debtors, fall under a like discrimination. A landed interest, a manufacturing interest, a mercantile interest, a moneyed interest . . . grow up of necessity in civilized nations, and divide them into different classes. . . . The regulation of these differing interests forms the principal task of modern legislation."

The heart of that task is taxation. "The apportionment of taxes on the various descriptions of property," Madison continued, "is an act which seems to require the most exact impartiality, yet there is perhaps no legislative act in which greater opportunity and temptation are given to a predominant party, to trample on the rules of justice. Every shilling with which they overburden the inferior number, is a shilling saved to their own pockets." And you can't count on enlightened statesmen, or morality or religion, to prevent such injustice. They won't.

Nor is unjust taxation the only "improper or wicked project" a democratic majority might

cook up to trample the property rights of the richer minority, Madison noted. There could also be, he wrote, a “rage for paper money, for an abolition of debts, for an equal division of property.” America had seen all of these, as either a threat or a reality, since the Revolution began. During the war, as Congress printed paper currency backed by nothing, inflation had soared. A dollar of gold or silver brought eight paper dollars at the start of 1779, forty-two at year’s end. By then, George Washington wrote, “a waggon load of money will scarcely purchase a waggon load of provision.” The General was all too aware that such inflation meant a huge transfer of wealth from creditors to debtors. Someone who long ago had bought six hundred acres from him “in the most valuable part of Virginia, that ought to have been pd. for before the money began to depreciate; nay years before the War,” he complained, wanted to pay the debt in 1779 in paper money then worth no more than a year’s salary for “a common Miller.” Though fearful “of injuring by any example of mine the credit of our paper currency,” Washington also feared that to accept the deal “is not serving the public but . . . countenancing dishonesty.”

As for the abolition of debts and the equal division of property, a year before the Constitutional Convention, an uprising called Shays’ Rebellion gave the Founders an ominous glimpse of the property-rights invasions citizens could plot. Thousands of depression-squeezed, pitchfork-armed young farmers in western Massachusetts had tried to hijack guns from the Springfield armory to force the courts to close before judges could take their farms for tax delinquency or allow creditors to foreclose. Washington reported to Madison, quoting the Secretary of War, Henry Knox, that the rebels’ “creed is, that the property of the United States has been protected from confiscation of Britain by the joint exertions of *all*, and therefore ought to be the *common property* of all.” Washington’s letter bristles with incredulous underlinings. Further, Knox had written him, “They are determined to annihilate all debts public & private.” In that case, Washington demanded in his letter to Madison, “what security has a man of life, liberty, or property?”

Madison was just as aghast as Washington at the claim that the Revolution should bring about socialist, redistributionist *égalité*, beyond the equality of rights and equality before the law. The Founders aimed only for *liberté*. In fact, Madison insisted in *Federalist* 10, if you want liberty to pursue your own happiness in your own way, as Americans do, you are *bound* to have *inequality*, since people have different abilities and tastes. “From the protection of different and unequal faculties of acquiring property,” he wrote, “the possession of different degrees and kinds of property immediately results.” So the whole constitutional machinery of which he was the chief architect—the extensive republic comprising many competing and mutually opposing interests; the strictly limited, enumerated powers; the checks and balances of branch against branch, and legislative house against legislative house—all aimed to ensure that a government with the power to tax enough to fight wars effectively wouldn’t be so strong that it would threaten the individual liberty and property it was instituted to protect. One of the main purposes of the Constitution, in other words, is to ensure that the unpropertied majority won’t confiscate, by unjust taxation or any other means, the possessions of the propertied minority. That is what he meant by the tyranny of the majority. Thus the redistributionist welfare state of the New Deal and the War on Poverty is not an evolution from his vision but a repudiation of it, a body-snatching whose history I recount in *Clarence Thomas and the Lost Constitution* (Encounter Books, 2019).

As the Constitution’s chief designer, Madison constructed his exquisitely balanced mechanism to work by the power of ambition countering ambition, and interest countering interest. A realist about human nature, he devised a government for ordinary men as they really were, not for prodigies of virtue. Perhaps because the Founders recognized that they had to work within the limits of human nature, instead of trying to change it, their revolution was the only great one that succeeded. Still, Madison conceded, there had to be at least a smidgen of virtue somewhere. If “there is not sufficient virtue among men

for self-government,” he wrote, then only “the chains of despotism can restrain them from destroying and devouring each other.”

Washington was even more explicit about this, the last great Founding idea we need to protect: a democratic republic requires a special kind of culture, one that nurtures self-reliance and a love of liberty. Constitutions are all very well, the Founders often observed, but they are only “parchment barriers,” easily breached if demagogues subvert the “spirit and letter” of the document. They can do this dramatically, in one revolutionary putsch, or they can inflict a death by a thousand cuts, gradually persuading citizens that the Constitution doesn’t mean what it says but should be interpreted to mean something different, even something opposite. That’s how the Framers’ Constitution of limited and enumerated powers morphed into Woodrow Wilson’s, FDR’s, and Earl Warren’s unlimited, so-called “living” one.

The ultimate safeguard against such usurpation is the vitality of America’s culture of liberty. In his first State of the Union speech, Washington stressed this point, emphasizing a view universal among the Founders. The “security of a free Constitution,” he said, depends on “teaching the people themselves to know and to value their own rights; to discern and provide against invasions of them; to distinguish between oppression and the necessary exercise of lawful authority; . . . to discriminate the spirit of liberty from that of licentiousness,” and to unite “a speedy, but

temperate vigilance against encroachments, with an inviolable respect for the laws.” If citizens start to take liberty for granted, if their culture—molded by reporters and writers, preachers and teachers—starts to hold other values in higher esteem, then the spirit that gives life to the Constitution will flicker out. Americans, Washington advised, should guard against “listlessness for the preservation of natural and unalienable rights,” for “no mound of parchm[en]t can be so formed as to stand against the sweeping torrent of boundless ambition on the one side, aided by the sapping current of corrupted morals on the other.”

The Founders well understood, as John Adams had said, how crucial were the “principles, opinions, sentiments, and affections,” of Americans to the character of our republic. That’s why today’s all-out effort to persuade us that America is the opposite of a shining city on a hill, that our Founding Fathers were self-interested and oppressive schemers rather than heroes, that our national enterprise has been shameful from the start, is so dangerous. For the boundless ambition, the lust for power, that Washington feared doesn’t drive only the various radicals whose agitations have set our cities aflame. It also impels a powerful and ruthless competitor for world hegemony. We can’t overcome these threats if we don’t believe we have something precious, something worth defending. And we most emphatically have inherited just such a priceless and exceptional treasure.

One hundred years of “We”

by Jacob Howland

Yevgeny Zamyatin wrote *We* in 1920, during the Russian Civil War. Composed at the dawn of the Soviet era—a not-so-distant mirror of our own troubled and dangerous times—*We* was first published in the USSR in 1988, at its dusk. The manuscript, a stunning prophecy of totalitarianism and a classic of dystopian literature, was one of several works that prompted a newspaper and magazine campaign against the author. The campaign intensified considerably in the late 1920s, after several translations of *We* had been published abroad. In a letter of appeal to Stalin in 1931, Zamyatin stated that he had been subjected to a “manhunt . . . unprecedented in Soviet literature. . . . Everything possible was done to close to me all avenues for further work.” His long-running play *The Flea* was pulled from the stage; a volume of his collected works was denied publication; and his books, stories, and essays were removed from libraries, catalogues, literary histories, and syllabi, joining the swelling ranks of literary *desaparecidos*. *Attila*, a tragedy that Zamyatin believed “would finally silence those who were intent on turning me into some sort of an obscure artist,” was canceled just before its opening. He was even barred from doing translations. This “atmosphere of systematic persecution,” he told Stalin, amounted to a “death sentence.”

Despite all that, Zamyatin was lucky. Other writers who (to quote from the same letter) earned a “criminal name” because they chose “to serve great ideas in literature without cringing before little men” suffered even more. Osip

Mandelstam died in the Gulag in 1938; Isaac Babel was shot in the head in a Moscow prison in 1940. All three men were courageously defiant, but only Zamyatin’s boldness saved his life. Stalin approved his request for exile—a good word from Maxim Gorky, a champion of the official Soviet aesthetic of socialist realism, must have helped—and he spent his last years in unhappy obscurity and ill health in Paris, where he died in 1937 at the age of fifty-three.

Mikhail Bulgakov remarked that “manuscripts don’t burn.” At least, incandescent ones don’t. *We* was smuggled out of the USSR and first published in 1924, in an English translation. A Czech translation appeared in 1927, a French one in 1929. George Orwell reviewed the latter, misleadingly titled *Nous Autres*, in 1946, and used the book as a model for *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Orwell claimed (but Aldous Huxley denied) that *We* also influenced *Brave New World*. *We* is the greatest dystopian novel of the twentieth century, but also one of the least known.

Zamyatin is among the few gifted twentieth-century writers who responded to ideological tyranny by poetically integrating mathematical science into a philosophical anthropology. Dostoyevsky’s literary topographies of the soul are the *fons et origo* of all such endeavors. His Underground Man is suffocated by the totalizing utilitarian calculus of the “normal” rational, positivistic, and progressive European: $2 + 2 = 4$ as mathematically infallible social policy. Yet Ivan Karamazov rebels against what his willfully Euclidean mind regards as Christianity’s

morally unintelligible response to ultimate matters of human freedom, suffering, and the choice between good and evil. Primo Levi, whose knowledge of chemistry and Dante provided food for his soul and bread for his body at Auschwitz (his scientific training got him an indoor job at the Buna industrial site), created new fusions of science and poetry in *If This Is a Man* and *The Periodic Table*. The chemical engineer Vasily Grossman was a master of this sort of literary alchemy; his *Life and Fate*, a novel centered on the Battle of Stalingrad, describes the totalitarian social physics of both the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany.

A trained scientist, Zamyatin designed and supervised the construction of icebreakers in England during the Great War. In *We*, mathematics (the language of the totalitarian One State) and poetry (the language of its revolutionary opponents) are the antipodes around which humanly fundamental oppositions coalesce: necessity and freedom; order and chaos; entropy and energy; rationality and irrationality; utility and beauty; force and love; tameness and wildness; social totality and individual infinity. The drama of *We* plays out in the charged space between these poles: a field of electrical attraction and repulsion where opposites merge, unities split apart, and nothing stands still for long.

We takes the form of the diary of D-503, the builder of the *Integral*, a spaceship whose mission—to bring the “mathematically infallible happiness” of the One State to “pink-cheeked, full-bodied Venusians” and “Uranians, sooty as blacksmiths”—will “integrate the infinite equation of the universe.” (I quote the Mirra Ginsburg translation of *We*, Viking Press, 1972.) The diary answers an official call for tracts extolling the “beauty and grandeur” of the regime—founded six centuries earlier, after a world war that eliminated 80 percent of the human population—to be included as cargo on the vessel. D-503 faces a unique authorial challenge: “Some wrote for their contemporaries; others for their descendants. But no one has ever written for ancestors, or for beings like his primitive, remote ancestors.” Zamyatin wrote for all these audiences at the historical

moment when a humanly unsupportable ideology threatened to crush the cultural vertebrae linking past and future, memory and hope, and another kind of “fire-breathing, electric” ship was preparing forcibly to assimilate multitudinous peoples (the Soviet Union was founded in 1922). *We* demonstrates that no mathematical or political formula can express the volume of meaning enclosed by the irregular surface of human lives. Only the free poetic imagination can perform this necessary integration.

The antithesis of poetry and mathematics plays a central role in the *Republic* of Plato, the philosophical poet from whom (besides Dostoyevsky) Zamyatin is most directly descended. The Greek word *poiēsis* just means “making”; knowledge, however, is acquired rather than fabricated. In the *Republic*, this philosophically fundamental distinction breaks down; the dialogue’s images, myths, and dramatic action are primary vehicles of knowledge, while the mathematically educated philosopher kings who rule Callipolis, the Noble and Beautiful City, are theoretical and political constructivists. Ancient prototypes of modern ideological totalitarians, they are abstract and dogmatic in theory, brutal and manipulative in practice.

Callipolis employs politically useful lies to clothe itself in an aura of religious sanctity; spies on its citizens; abolishes private property, marriage, and the family; eugenically regulates reproduction (while simultaneously encouraging sexual libertinism within the police class of Guardians); raises children in herds; and tolerates artists and poets only insofar as they serve the State. The One State has all these features and more. In *We*, Zamyatin reimagines the ideological constructivism of Callipolis for an age of advanced technology and scientific management. All good things flow from the Benefactor, whom D-503 regards with sacred awe and downcast eyes (“I saw only His huge, cast-iron hands upon His knees”). Residents of the One State are called “numbers.” Male names are composed of a consonant followed by an odd number, females by vowels and an even number. Children are not nurtured and raised in a herd, but formed and polished in the Child-Rearing Factory. The regime is a panopticon: apartments, streets, and even the

spaceship *Integral* are made of glass, and conversations are recorded by sensitive mechanical membranes placed on the streets. (Yet spies or “Guardians” are still necessary.) Criminals are reduced to chemically pure water in ceremonies of civic religion and justice, where poets sing hymns to the One State specially composed for the occasion. These technological marvels vividly demonstrate the power of the regime and the efficacy of its mathematical science. Even the problem of human happiness, formulated as $h = b/e$ (bliss divided by envy), has been solved by effectively reducing the denominator to zero: the *Lex Sexualis* declares that “Each number has a right to any other number, as to a sexual commodity.” As in Callipolis, incest—a practice the ancients regularly associated with tyranny—is a foregone conclusion.

Zamyatin is further indebted to Plato and the Greeks for his understanding of the tension in the human soul between *thumos* (spiritedness, including pride and aggression) and *erōs* (erotic love). In plays like Euripides’ *Bacchae*, these passions produce great suffering; for Aristophanes, their collision is laughable as well as tragic. In *Lysistrata*, a comedy frequently performed during the Vietnam War era, the women of Athens and Sparta go on a sex strike to stop the Peloponnesian War. Aristophanes explores ideological aggression as well. The predicament of *We*’s protagonist D-503, who is repulsed by the possibility that he may be obliged to have intercourse with the older U (whose sagging cheeks remind him of fish gills), is taken straight from Aristophanes’ *Assemblywomen*. Inspired by the Greeks, Freud locates erotic passion and spiritedness in the murky depths of the psyche; in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, published three years before Hitler’s rise to power, he suggests that the future of civilization turns on the question of whether love or aggression will prove victorious.

Playful and tragic, *We* is informed by all these authors. *We* tells the story of D-503’s terrifying and joyful discovery of primordial, incalculable forces—the psychological equivalent of irrational numbers, or even imaginary ones like $\sqrt{-1}$ —that cannot be sat-

isfactorily controlled when they burst forth from within him. Centuries of eugenics have not weeded out certain primitive traits: D-503’s hairy hands, or the thick, “Negroid” lips of his closest friend, the poet R-13. (These men may also be descended from numbers who mated illicitly with the wild and shaggy people who live beyond the city’s Green Wall.) Plato, too, compares individual human beings to irrational numbers, which Callipolis’s indoctrinating education attempts to make calculable and commensurable, in accordance with what the Russian Symbolist author Andrei Bely called “the plane geometry of the state.”

Callipolis degenerates because its citizens engage in illicit sexual reproduction. In *We*, it is the love of irreducibly particular individuals that causes every main character to break the law in one way or another, and the One State to collapse into a kind of pregnant chaos. Over the course of the novel, D-503 becomes entangled with a revolutionary sect called Mephi and develops a soul—an “incurable” sickness rooted in the imagination, as he learns in a comic scene at the Medical Office. The One State’s numbers lack souls for the same reason they “don’t have feathers, or wings; only shoulder blades, the base for wings. . . . Wings are for flying, and we have nowhere else to fly.” But D-503’s imagination is evident even in the first diary entry: “I write this, and my cheeks are burning. This must be similar to what a woman feels when she first senses within herself the pulse of a new, still tiny, still blind human being.”

D-503’s wings begin to sprout when he meets the mysterious and alluring I-330, who affects him like an unknown x , “an irresolvable irrational member that has somehow slipped into an equation.” The doctor who examines him at the Medical Office explains that a soul is like “a plane, a surface—this mirror, say.”

“But imagine this impermeable substance softened by some fire; and nothing slides across it any more. . . . The plane has acquired volume, it has become a body, a world, and everything is now inside the mirror—inside you: the sun, the blast of the whirring propeller, your trembling lips, and someone else’s.”

When I-330—whose name Zamyatin writes in the Latin rather than the Cyrillic alphabet, and mostly shortens to I—gives him a mouthful of (illegal) absinthe during a kiss, D-503 begins to whirl like a planet rushing along “an unknown, uncalculated orbit.” That’s when it occurs to him that we “walk constantly over a seething, scarlet sea of flame, hidden below, in the belly of the earth. We never think of it. But what if the thin crust under our feet should turn into glass and we should suddenly see . . .” This recalls the symbol of Mephi, “a winged youth with a transparent body and, where the heart should be, a dazzling, crimson-glowing coal.” Within his own newly transparent soul, D-503 sees a double of himself, a savage inflamed with love and jealousy—one that “had barely shown his hairy paws from within the shell; now all of him broke out, the shell cracked.”

Wings, of course, belong to fallen angels as well as fledgling philosophers. D-503’s experience of erotic love as an attractive and repulsive magnetism culminates not in a philosophical vision of the Good beyond being, but in the revelation of an unconquerable element of transcendence at the heart of human existence. He learns that individual human beings are real, incomprehensible, yet not unknowable infinities. In *We*, this epiphany coincides with a political apocalypse that shatters the glassy abstractions and totalizing constructions of the One State. D-503’s experience of suffering and betrayal confirms I-330’s observation that “only the unsubduable can be loved”—and that paradox, as the Christian existentialist Søren Kierkegaard declared, is “the passion of thought.”

Zamyatin’s greatest debt is to Dostoyevsky, whom he references indirectly on virtually every page of *We*, and whose unsurpassed portrayal of the religious psychology of revolutionary socialism informs the whole. The One State is the completed Tower of Babel foreseen by the Grand Inquisitor of *The Brothers Karamazov* as the final solution to the riddle of history. It is the ultimate political embodiment of what Dostoyevsky characterizes as a Christian heresy that storms the heavens in the name of man—

each and every man and woman—only to raise up, in place of the God whose incarnation exemplifies the dignity and worth of every human life, the abstract, fundamentally quantitative idea of Humanity. The homogenous multitude replaces the single individual in his or her inner infinity. This swindle—the deceptive substitution of quantity for quality—is characteristic of ideological tyranny, and indeed of modernity as such. As Dostoyevsky wrote in his notes for the novel, “Those who love men in general hate men in particular.”

The Legend of the Grand Inquisitor reflects the spiritual torment of its author, Ivan Karamazov. Like the Inquisitor, Ivan “accept[s] God pure and simple,” but rejects God’s creation. To borrow again from Kierkegaard, he finds the whole of actuality incommensurable with the love of God. He can find no intellectual solution to the problem of theodicy, which for him boils down to the impossibility of redeeming the suffering of even a single innocent child. “If God exists,” Ivan insists, “and if he indeed created the earth, then, as we know perfectly well, he created it in accordance with Euclidean geometry.” Yet Christians “dare to dream that two parallel lines, which according to Euclid cannot possibly meet on earth, may perhaps meet somewhere in infinity.” But Ivan would have known (as Dostoyevsky surely did) that parallel lines can meet on earth. Through the Inquisitor, he advances a Euclidean or planar solution to a problem of spherical geometry—the problem of the human soul as “a world.” That forced political solution, a flattening and leveling of human life, rests on the deliberate neglect of an entire dimension of our human being.

Jesus, so the Legend runs, returns to earth in Seville, at the height of the Spanish Inquisition. The people recognize him and flock to him, but tamely stand aside when he is arrested by the Grand Inquisitor. The Inquisitor informs Jesus that he will be burned at the stake and then pours forth his heart after ninety years of silence. Jesus, he says, desired that man “decide for himself, with a free heart, what is good and what is evil, having only your image before his as a guide.” (I quote from the Pevear and Volokhonsky translation of *The Brothers*

Karamazov, North Point Press, 1990.) In this, he vastly overestimated the “weak, eternally depraved, and eternally ignoble human race.” Jesus chose “everything that was beyond men’s strength,” as if he “did not love them at all.” For while freedom of conscience is a precondition of heavenly bread, “freedom and earthly bread in plenty for everyone are inconceivable together, for never, never will they be able to share among themselves.” Ever since the Church “took Rome and the sword of Caesar,” it has sought to correct Jesus’s mistake under the cover of his name. But “free reason and science,” he prophesies, will yet lead to “horrors of slavery and confusion.” In the aftermath of starvation, anthropophagy, and wars of extermination, the remnant, “feeble and wretched, will crawl to our feet.” A new regime will then arise, one that, with the help of Promethean “fire from heaven” (technology), will secure indisputable authority as the sole provider of earthly bread, take over men’s anguished moral conscience, and unite human beings in an “incontestable anthill.” Only then will the “terrible Tower of Babel” be completed, and “the kingdom of peace and happiness come for mankind.”

The Inquisitor’s conviction that the new Tower of Babel will resolve “insoluble historical contradictions of human nature all over the earth” is an article of faith. It is rooted in what he regards as the superhuman wisdom of the “three questions” with which “the dread and intelligent spirit, the spirit of self-destruction and non-being” tempted Jesus after his forty days of fasting in the wilderness (Matthew 4:1–11; Luke 4:1–13). Formulated by “a mind not human and transient but eternal and absolute,” the Devil’s offer of “*miracle, mystery, and authority*” constitutes nothing less than a revelation of “the entire future history of the world and mankind.” In this scientific and political trinity lies not the spiritual salvation of the “tens of thousands” strong enough to forsake earthly bread, but the physical salvation of the “thousands of millions” who are not.

The Inquisitor embraces revolutionary millenarianism with religious fervor. His future “kingdom of peace and happiness” is an earthly

Eden populated by adults who have never tasted the accursed fruit of good and evil and who will be rewarded for their childlike obedience with “innocent” animal pleasures, including “wives and mistresses.” But one bargains with the Devil at the cost of one’s soul, and this earthly bread is paid for by spiritual starvation. The Inquisitor claims to surpass Christianity in wisdom and compassion—“we will say that they [Jesus’s followers] saved only themselves, while we have saved everyone”—yet he refuses to acknowledge the freedom and dignity of the human person. He regards the future course of history as a necessary consequence of man’s insect-like nature, and therefore as a “problem” for which there is a “solution.” He employs a political calculus of earthly bread, “noble” lies, and force—crude distortions of the spiritual miracle, mystery, and authority at the heart of Christianity—that restricts the scope of moral agency as far as possible. In all these respects, he is the model of the late-modern humanitarian Antichrist.

When the Devil confronts Ivan as a hallucinatory double late in *The Brothers Karamazov*, he describes himself as a ghostly “ x in an indeterminate equation” who travels through the cold vacuum of outer space (“just imagine: a hundred and fifty degrees below zero!”) simply in order “to negate.” Zamyatin picks up on these hints and makes the necessary thermodynamic adjustments. Located in the far north, where solar radiation and converging lines of polar magnetism combine to produce the aurora borealis, the One State—the towering “crystallization” of the Inquisitor’s prophecy—is associated with entropy and “minus 273°,” absolute zero. The totalitarian paradise is the frozen bottom of Dante’s Hell, where three-faced Satan, taller than a skyscraper and trapped in great sheets of ice, forever gnaws on dead souls. But while the One State’s uniformed and shaven-headed numbers march rank and file under the banner of frozen abstractions, tramping to work like convicts in a labor camp, *We*’s revolutionaries are associated with heat, energy, and “tormentingly endless movement”—in short, with life.

D-503’s diary has a biblical forty entries; it ends as Mephi’s advance from the western parts

of the city has been halted by “a temporary barrier of high-voltage waves” erected at “the Fortieth cross-town avenue.” The great purifications of the Flood and the Exodus (which took two generations to weed out slavish idolatry) inform *We*, but the temptation of Jesus remains paramount. In basing *We*’s central moral drama on this episode, Zamyatin writes a new literary equation whose impossible solution is $\sqrt{-1}$ —a number that can be conceived only as simultaneously positive and negative. He thus repudiates the binary logic of totalitarianism, which turns every matter of conscience into a choice between inhuman extremes.

D-503 declares that the Christians are the One State’s “only predecessors”; I-330 describes the revolutionaries as “anti-Christians.” Yet the Inquisitor chastises Jesus for choosing “everything that was unusual, enigmatic, and indefinite.” In the “irritating X” formed by I-330’s mouth and eyebrows, D-503 sees “a slanting cross. A face marked by a cross.” Goethe’s Mephistopheles, who revives the pulse of life in the spiritually exhausted Faust, observes that man resembles “a long-legged cicada/ that always flies,” and uses reason only to be “more beastly than any beast.” This is borne out in *We*’s ending, which presents in the starkest possible terms the crucifying choice that every human being—and certainly every writer—is compelled to make in a totalitarian society. I-330 maintains her freedom and dignity even in the Gas Chamber, where, repeatedly subjected to a vacuum, she refuses to betray anyone. D-503 is forced to undergo the Great Operation, which destroys the imagination. One dies in body, the other in spirit. Who is drowned here, and who is saved?

Yet even after the Operation, D-503 is still able to write that “a kind of splinter was pulled out of my head.” This barest glimmer of his old imaginative self suggests that there may be no perfect technological solution to the problem of the human soul. Then again, he has lost the capacity to laugh, a natural and spontaneous response to absurdity that is evidenced even in babies, and that can transcend

the most banal forms of evil. The One State’s cruel and humorless maternalism is embodied in the character of U, who reports the children in her charge at the Child-Rearing Factory to the Guardians for drawing a caricature of her as a fish, and later submits them to the Operation. Laughter not only reveals to D-503 that the Benefactor is just a man “with tiny drops of sweat on his bald head”; it even saves him from murdering U with a piston rod wrapped in the metafictional manuscript of *We*.

For Zamyatin, mathematics is fatality. The paradox of history is that it arises from the free actions of human beings but ends up being the eternal return of the same. Like planets tracing elliptical orbits around the Sun, societies are always approaching or retreating from the heavenly light that Plato calls the Good and the Bible calls God. D-503 believes his diary will be “a derivative of our life, of the mathematically perfect life of the One State.” This is a powerful image of the general relationship between the individual and society in any age. But the gift of freedom is more than the possibility of conformity. It is also the possibility of transcendence, of refusing—in small ways and large, and perhaps at some crucial and defining moment—to allow one’s life to be merely a regular function of a curve determined by the aggregate of all lives.

Zamyatin wrote at an uncertain hour when speech and deed—or silence and inaction—counted more than ever in determining the shape of things to come. At stake were the things that make our lives human: memory, conscience, thought, and, in a fundamental sense, the soul itself. Today we rush once again into what Grossman called “the cruel sky, the sky of ice and fire,” aiming at heaven but steering toward hell. All things have become confused, including the word and the fist. But as *We* reminds us, revolutionary instability is temporary. If we do not at this very moment rise to defend individual liberty, as Zamyatin so courageously did, this brief period of fluidity will doubtless be succeeded by a hard freeze.

Taking leave of the socialism of fools

by Leonard Kriegel

Fifty years have passed since I sat talking to a bespectacled young man in a café on Berlin's Kurfürstendam. I was in the city to talk of Faulkner's America at the urging of my friend Heinz Scheer. Long before he had settled into his role at the Amerika Haus in Freiburg, Heinz had served as a sixteen-year-old soldier with the Wehrmacht on the Russian front. He had been visiting in New York when, at lunch on a spring afternoon six months before I was to leave for the Netherlands for a second Fulbright year, I suddenly began to savage Germans for the murders of those uncles, aunts, and cousins whom I knew only as stiff, brown photographs clinging like moss to a mountain wall in the apartment I lived in as a child. Heinz listened silently until I finished. Then he said, "Come meet our young people." I shrugged, then grudgingly nodded. A bargain had been struck.

I arrived in the Netherlands three days before Russian tanks rolled into Prague in August 1968. As promised, Heinz had arranged a series of lectures for me over the next nine months at a number of German universities. And as he suspected, German students impressed me. Unlike my passive Dutch students, for whom politics seemed a mere matter of fashion, the Germans seemed to be struggling to understand the importance of the choices they were being asked to make—perhaps because their nation stood at the heart of the Cold War.

The last of the lecture stops Heinz arranged for me was Berlin, where I was escorted through the city by that bespectacled

young man. Over coffee and strudel, we were discussing the effects of the Wall on life in Berlin, until, from out of nowhere, he began to speak of how pained he was by the absence of those who had served as the cultural heart of Berlin. It took some time before I realized that he was speaking of the Jews. The anguish in his voice was genuine—unlike my bizarre experience a month earlier, where at a student party in a dingy candlelit room in Freiburg I was greeted by a scratchy recording of Sophie Tucker singing *My Yiddish Mamma* as a young man with a wispy goatee and thinning blond hair handed me a glass of wine and said, "We young people love Yiddish." After that, I was quite willing to embrace the Jewish ghosts of Berlin.

By 1969 the German young were exploring the country's Nazi past, a journey that would lead some to the lunacies of Baader–Meinhof and others to genuine contrition. The young man turned out to be a man of the Left who dreamed of a humanistic Marxism sweeping through Europe to change the world. Only four at World War II's end, he was now a twenty-eight-year-old penitent scourging his soul, a citizen of that post-Auschwitz Germany from which Adorno had barred poetry. Having assumed the sins of his father's generation, he now saw the past as his personal property. As he raked his father and his father's generation over the coals, guilt roped his voice. But just as suddenly as he had shifted our conversation to the lost cultural heart of Berlin, he began to speak of what Germany could offer Jews and

Arabs. (In 1969, Palestinians were still Arabs, even on the left.) A truly socialist Germany would bring Jews and Arabs together in the Promised Land.

I circled his words cautiously. For any German to speak of what Jews had to do to achieve salvation was obscene. And to hear the dream of Zion cleansed of Zionism by the charity of the German Left was stunning. Purified by the self-righteousness of the penitent, he continued to speak of what Jews were to be permitted in their quest for resurrection. Like so many on the left, he had assumed the burdens of Jewish history with no idea of what Jews had paid for that history. He had read *Das Kapital*, but was blissfully ignorant of *The Ethics of the Fathers*. Still, there he was, willing to sacrifice the aspirations of the same people his father's generation had murdered.

I said nothing—in part because like him I considered myself a man of the Left, in part because of the peculiar cowardice that afflicts American academics abroad. In May 1969, Israel was still eager to exchange the territory it had conquered in the Six-Day War for peace. And like most Americans, I simply assumed that Jew and Arab would somehow make peace. But like most Jews, too, I didn't know that a seismic shift on the left would soon transform *Arab* into *Palestinian* and *Zionist* into *Zio-Nazi*. Two years after the Six-Day War, it was no longer possible to view Israel as a Jewish David battling an Arab Goliath. Conquerors cannot demand sympathy. Underdogs can. Yet for this child of executioners to assume the right to tell Jews what they *had* to do in order to survive was beyond me. He apparently felt no irony that Germans should decide what Jews were to be allowed in the future he was outlining. Like his Nazi father, he was willing to place the Jews under history's yoke.

I keep thinking about that afternoon in Berlin, because more than fifty years later I find myself in a world in which anti-Semitism, posing as anti-Zionism, has been reinvigorated to the point where it is now quite fashionable on American colleges and universities. German students, French farmers, English actors, American nationalists, Irish rock stars, and

Portuguese novelists all deny Israel's right to exist. With Zion as subject, *Le Monde* can read like *Der Stürmer*. With Zion as subject, the Portuguese Nobel Laureate José Saramago attributed a purported "massacre" in Jenin to history's age-old culprit, Jewish "exclusivity." Where Jews are concerned little seems changed. When I taught in Paris, twelve years after that conversation in Germany, I again experienced that peculiar European disease when Israel bombed the Iraqi nuclear reactor at Osirik. With close to a single voice, French newspapers headlined the death of a French engineer who had been working on the reactor as they condemned the Jewish State. *Le Monde* was particularly savage in attacking the country de Gaulle had willfully betrayed in 1967, when he chose Arab oil over French commitments. Unlike the Left, however, de Gaulle had never pretended sympathy for Jews or Zionism. And yet, however vehemently self-righteous it was, the Left was still not as comfortable as it would soon become in its distaste for Israel. As a Communist colleague at the university sighed after faithfully parroting the Party line, Israel had admittedly eliminated what he called "a delicate problem." Not even the French Left was at ease with the prospect of a Saddam Hussein in control of nuclear weapons in 1981.

The backlash to the Israeli destruction of that Iraqi reactor should have been the point at which I could no longer lie to myself about the Left and Israel. But, true believer that I was, I managed to find excuse after excuse for the faith to which I had adhered since childhood. It wasn't difficult to understand why the Palestinians had become the new darlings of the Left. What was difficult to understand was why I remained so desperate to think myself a man of the Left. No matter how peripheral a relationship I might have then allowed to memory, how could I, how could any Jew, dismiss the Holocaust? Perhaps it was because, both as a writer and teacher, I had long since learned to accommodate myself to the anti-Semitism of Western culture. It was so nakedly present, even when not consciously anti-Semitic—as when George Bernard Shaw in the 1930s blithely dismissed Hitler's Jew-hatred as "a bee in his bonnet."

But I ignored the growing anti-Semitism of the Left in much the same way as I forced myself to believe that T. S. Eliot's contempt for Bleistein with his Baedeker was simply a minor wart on the literature I loved.

I suspect that such cultural schizophrenia, conscious or unconscious, is part of the training of any Jew who teaches literature. But while the casual anti-Semitism of an Eliot is one thing, hatred of a Jewish state as a core article of one's political faith is quite another. Perhaps anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism are, as the Left stridently insists, not the same. But anti-Zionism so narrowly skirts the boundaries between them that it is difficult not to listen to the growing anti-Israel chorus as evidence that the Left has now chained itself to what the German trade unionist Auguste Bebel called "the socialism of fools." For much, if not most, of the Left, Zionist and Zionism are now perceived as *The Jew*.

Like so many secular Jews, I am appalled at how Zionism is now treated by such organs of the Left as *The Nation*, a magazine for which I used to write and which I have seen move from avid partisanship of the Jewish State to worrying about the power of that insidious creature, "the Zionist lobby." To some extent, this reflects the Left's pathological suspicion of any nation allied with the United States. Yet even when *The Nation* viewed Zionism for what, warts and all, it was and remains—the national liberation movement of the Jewish people—it was never truly comfortable with the idea that a state could be Jewish. And what was obvious in the two decades after Auschwitz is apparently no longer obvious. Among its numerous faults, Israel is "Western" an unforgivable sin for a Left intent on finding salvation in its rhetorical embrace of the Third World. However questionable as geography or ethnicity, sin is sin—and Israel is now a sinner.

Like most Jews who came of political age in the 1950s, my allegiance to Zionism is simple. I am a Jew who lived through the bloodiest war in the bloodiest century in history. The Zionism that claimed my allegiance has proven to be one of the more successful na-

tional liberation movements of the twentieth century. But my belief in its fundamental precept, the right of Jews to return to Israel and to rebuild their ancient homeland, now has me wondering why it took me so long to say farewell to the socialism of fools. The Left's appeal was best expressed for me by that great Italian writer Ignazio Silone when he called socialism "a new way of living together among men." History had disabused me of that idea long before I sat in that Berlin café with that child of murderers. I should have said goodbye to the Left many years earlier, especially since, in my Jewish working-class family, "Justice, justice, shalt thou pursue!" resonated more powerfully than "Workers of the world, unite!" The writers who drew me to the Left—Silone, Orwell, Camus, the now almost forgotten Milovan Djilas—were writers who managed to keep its orthodoxies at bay. They were all atheists, yet they affirmed for me that the quest for justice was religious—and that even non-believers could lose their hearts to a God who judged man by his pursuit of a just, not merely a classless, world.

"Matzos, matzos, two for five/ That's what keeps the Jews alive!" was the doggerel that would greet me on my return from Hebrew school when I was a boy of ten. In 1943, anti-Semitism needed neither Portuguese Nobel Laureates nor white supremacists insisting they would not be displaced by Jews to make its presence felt. For the Irish boys on my street—most of them from families as working-class as my own—the doggerel was as natural as the chestnut trees in Van Cortlandt Park. I'm not sure why it comes to mind as I recall drinking coffee in Berlin in 1969 with that bespectacled young man. Maybe as a way for memory to ogle the past. Or maybe because my growing sense of political homelessness, of belonging neither to Left, Right, or Center, reminds me of how I used to react to my grandmother's invariable response to the news of the day in 1943. "*Siz git fahrn Yidn?*": "Is it good for the Jews?" Nothing infuriated me more, even when I was ten. "*All* people suffer!" I would yell at her, enraged because I knew that she was and would remain oblivious to my youthful egalitarianism.

My father shared her parochialism. For him, Zionism had nothing at all to do with politics. Voting for Roosevelt was politics. The number of cops on the street was politics. His union local's contract with the supermarket he worked in was politics. But Zionism? Zionism was survival, based not on the universal suffering of all people but on the specific Jewish suffering that had taught him fear at an early age. For him, as for his mother-in-law, "Is it good for the Jews?" was a question that had to be asked and answered, over and over again.

For all my anguish at the suffering of Palestinians, I confess that I do not feel for that suffering what I feel for Jewish suffering. It is not an easy confession to make, not even as I take my leave of the socialism of fools. But necessary. And truthful. And a reflection of the increasing anger I now feel for those Jews on the left who echo its anti-Israel chorus. I am appalled to remember that there was a time when I aspired to be the kind of "non-Jewish Jew" Isaac Deutscher extolled. Not that I have any illusions about what the Palestinians now face. I know that there is no such thing as a "humane occupation" of one people by another. Still, my sympathy for the Palestinians is checked by my memory of that young man grieving for Jewish ghosts even as he decided what living Jews were to do in order not to join those ghosts. And it is also checked by the memory of how Israel absorbed the 800,000 Jews forced to flee Arab lands, while those same Arab lands allowed their 550,000 Palestinian "brothers" to wallow in U.N. refugee camps.

Next to those pictures of my dead European family on the foyer wall was a photo of a boy on a pony. That boy is not one of the dead Jews of Poland. That boy is me. I do not know why I took that photograph from the apartment in which the last of my European family, my Uncle Moishe, died. Maybe as an act of fealty to a man who used to insist, in both English and Yiddish, that the working class was God's class. Or maybe I simply needed to see the

shape of my own shaping. Whatever the reason, it shows me at three, dressed in a sailor suit, sitting on that pony, smiling a smile that is more grimace than smile.

History is nothing if not personal, and the Left I once called home now seems contemptuous of history. Seventy-five years after the Shoah, the existence of the Jewish state inspires rage in a Left that increasingly looks at the world through eyes conditioned by what one of its number, Trotsky, called "the plot mentality of history." The socialism of fools is alive and well. And it reminds me that while I was right to tell my grandmother that all people suffer, she was equally right to question whether the news was good for the Jews. God does not play dice with the universe, said Einstein. Maybe God doesn't, but history often does—even as memory frames the past. As the remnants of Europe's Jews stared out at the world from barbed-wire holding pens on Cyprus after the war, the English Foreign Secretary, that good socialist, Ernest Bevin, criticized their desire to leave Europe for the Promised Land. "Jews must not try to get to the head of the queue," he scolded. Teaching Jews manners is an old European habit that, as early as 1947, had already outlasted the ashes of the death camps, ashes that were still smoldering when Ezra Pound wrote of the "yidd" leading the "goyim" "to salable slaughter/ with the maximum of docility." As it was for Pound and for that Portuguese Nobel Laureate fulminating about Jewish "exclusivity," the need to correct history was evident in Bevin. As it remains today, in the ways in which Israeli descendants of those same European Jews and Israeli descendants of Jews forced to flee Middle Eastern lands in which they had lived for thousands of years, and the Ethiopian Jews who fled their homeland, are lectured on the suffering of Palestinians by mad poets, communist novelists, and anarchist farmers—all filled with the rage of their virtue as they adapt their rhetoric to the pursuit of what they really hate, despise, and fear: the *Jews*.

Liberals on trial: Rebecca West & Alistair Cooke

by Peter Baehr

Perplexed as we are by an age of splintering identities, it is tempting to look back on the Cold War as an ideologically simple time. The battles between liberal and Communist intellectuals—epitomized by the bitter dispute between Raymond Aron and Jean-Paul Sartre in France—are legends of Cold War history. So, too, are the stories of those that renounced Communism to *become* liberals or liberal-inflected conservatives, people like Sidney Hook, Arthur Koestler, François Furet, and Leszek Kołakowski. Yet the more we focus on liberalism’s conflict with Communism, and liberalism’s victory over it, the less likely we are to recall how liberals fought among themselves—about Communism.

One cleavage, and my topic here, concerns liberal attitudes to Communist conspiracy in Western lands. How should governments respond to it? The question was complicated by divergent appraisals of the threat. Was the Communist menace overdone and hysterically orchestrated, a Red Scare? Or was the threat real and in urgent need of attention? What was the proper balance to be struck between the rights of states to self-protection and the rights of a state’s members to civil liberty?

A polemic that dramatized these questions pitted Rebecca West (1892–1983)—the novelist, literary critic, and political commentator—against Alistair Cooke (1908–2004), the journalist born and raised in Britain who became a U.S. citizen in December 1941. At issue was the House Committee on Un-American Activities’ (HUAC) investigations into Com-

munist subversion. Cooke condemned HUAC as a more immediate danger to the Republic than Communism itself. Rebecca West accused Cooke of factual inaccuracy and political sleight of hand. Show me your preferred procedure to expose subversion, West demanded of Cooke and other HUAC detractors: otherwise your outrage is a sham.

The clash of the two writers turned on accusations that Alger Hiss, a former State Department official and the President of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, had spied in the 1930s for the Soviet Union. Hiss’s nemesis was the ex-Communist and, at the time he was subpoenaed by HUAC, senior editor of *Time* magazine, Whittaker Chambers. As well as at the HUAC investigation, Hiss testified before a grand jury and then endured two court trials. The second (which took place from November 17, 1949, through January 21, 1950) ended in Hiss’s being convicted for perjury, on account of his claim that he had never been a member of the Communist Party. Because the five-year statute of limitations for espionage had expired by the time of his trial, Hiss escaped the more serious charge of treason.

Conducted in the Cold War atmosphere of the late 1940s, Hiss’s trial inflamed passions and simplified complex issues. In precisely such times, Rebecca West declared, it was vital that fair, serious, and accurate reporting clarify both the facts and the political stakes of the controversy.

On West’s reading, Alistair Cooke’s presentation of the HUAC inquiry, and the trials that

followed, was a travesty of the liberal calling. The facts Cooke adduced were tendentiously selective when they were not simply garbled. Quotes were wrenched from their contexts. Cooke, so West alleged, misled his audience, played on their anti-American prejudices, and summoned a myth of Communist idealism to cloak and excuse rank treason. She was determined to correct the record.

A seasoned navigator of transatlantic cultural waters, Cooke reported extensively on the Hiss–Chambers scandal as the chief American correspondent for that flagship of British liberalism, the *Manchester Guardian*. After Hiss’s sentencing, Cooke consolidated his reports in a book. Today, Britons over sixty remember Cooke as an urbane, intelligently affectionate radio commentator on all things American. As time passed, he became a mirror to Americans themselves; from 1971 to 1992 Cooke was the host of PBS’s *Masterpiece Theatre*, and in 1972 he presented the thirteen-part BBC documentary series *America: A Personal History of the United States* to much acclaim. West considered him a fraud; his liberalism, she claimed, was illiberal. Their enmity was sufficiently obvious for Richard Crossman, the Labour Party MP and intellectual, to seek to organize a radio debate between the two writers; it came to naught.

What, then, of the book that so exercised her? *A Generation on Trial: U.S.A. v. Alger Hiss* (1950) plays on a double entendre. First, Cooke states, it is “a record of the trials of Alger Hiss, from the first accusation [by HUAC] to his conviction.” Second, it declares that on trial with Hiss was the generation of New Dealers accused by American conservatives of joining domestic reform with domestic subversion. Considered both as a person and a symbol, Alger Hiss was caught in “a political trial” that went beyond the question of individual innocence and guilt.

The reader might expect Cooke to draw a simple lesson from that compression, namely, that individual innocence and guilt is all that courts are able to establish. But Cooke has a different lesson to impart and, oddly, it follows a similar logic to that he attributes to conservative critics. Cooke urges readers to consider Hiss not simply as a man in the dock but as a

man of his time, an epoch guided by its own moral integrity. To make this case, *A Generation on Trial* divides into five parts of which the first—“Remembrance of Things Past: The 1930s”—is wholly contextual. Its message is stated baldly in the opening sentence: “We are about to look at the trials of a man who was judged in one decade for what he was said to have done in another.” Cooke then reconstructs the chief events of the Thirties: the Great Depression, the rise of Fascism, and the civil war in Spain. At a time when predatory nationalism was the greatest enemy of freedom, it was natural for the internationalist ideology of Bolshevism to attract the disillusioned. “Most fellow travelers in the late thirties were not badgered by a conflict” that pitted loyalty to the Soviet Union against loyalty to their own country; instead “they were excited by a fusion of loyalties, which, in fact, most Americans felt or at least acquiesced in during the wartime alliance with the Soviet Union.”

And, if this is true, any responsible journalist, aware of the pitfalls of political anachronism, is taxed with a difficult undertaking. A reporter has a duty not to take sides in an ideological conflict. Readers “looking for a revivalist tract or for ammunition for a side already chosen” will be sorely disappointed. Yet Cooke concedes that a liberal reporter cannot be indifferent to principles fundamental to a free and decent society. Where these principles are threatened by “the gallivantings of a drunken press” and “the interference in personal liberty of Congressional committees undoubtedly sweating in the cause of virtue,” he finds it “hard to be temperate.”

That admission is commendable for its honesty. Yet Cooke is anything but even-handed. His commentary crackles with prejudicial editorializing against HUAC and with animus towards the ex-Communists. Quotations are shorn of the context required to make honest sense of them. Time and again, Cooke transfers questions of law into metaphysical tokens. Thus, following the guilty verdict delivered by jurors of the second trial, he reflects on “the alternative fates possible to all our characters.” The implication is that we are all potential Hisses. But is that true? Fate is not a legal

concept. Nor is a person critical of Communism ever likely to hand over documents to the Soviet security services.

Cooke's penchant for Freudianism is another feature of his report. An example comes near the beginning of the book, where Cooke offers reflections on the competence of juries to make informed decisions of innocence and guilt. The problem lies not in the intelligence of the jury so much as in the assumption parleyed to them by prosecuting counsel that "a man is more or less the master of his memory." Lawyers point to discrepancies in a defendant's statements, and juries are prompted to see such inconsistencies as evidence of lying rather than as gaps in memory or confused recollections. But the "immense assumption" that a person is in control of their memory has been "badly and permanently damaged . . . by the lifework of Freud and his followers." Memory has an unconscious dimension that courts at present are unable to comprehend and judge. By such reasoning, Cooke makes it appear that juries have to be experts in mind reading before they can make reasoned decisions. In fact, the jury is not required to search the deeper motives of Hiss, any more than a teacher is required to discern the motives of a student who heavily plagiarizes a term paper. Did Hiss lie? *Why* he lied, if he did, can be left to psychologists.

Finally, Cooke's bias is evident in the alacrity with which he moves past the seriousness of treason to the unwanted consequences of its discovery. In one dense paragraph, Hiss's conviction merits one hedged sentence on "the bitter realization of the native American types *who might well be* dedicated to betrayal from within" (italics added) followed by five sentences on the ills brought by the conviction—an expanded license to politicians keen to use "vigilance as a political weapon," legitimacy for public informers, new powers for the FBI to poke into private lives, and incentives towards conformity that quash "the curiosity and idealism" of society's young. The conviction of Hiss, in short, helped "usher in a period when a high premium would be put on the chameleon and the politically neutral slob."

Even by West's pugilistic standards, her review essay of *A Generation on Trial* is particularly

hard-hitting. It was commissioned by *The University of Chicago Law Review*. "It is never possible to serve the interests of liberalism by believing that which is false to be true," she begins, before adding: "The liberal must have as exact a view of the universe on the common-sense plane as it is possible for his perceptions and his intellect to give him, because it is the aim of liberalism to grant each individual the fullest degree of liberty which can be enjoyed without damage to the claims to liberty justly presented by other individuals." Liberalism seeks a balance between the individual and the community. Where that balance goes awry, intelligence must be applied to restore equilibrium; this in turn requires an honest accounting of what went wrong. An authoritarian regime is under no such obligation. It can claim, for instance, that either individual or community is compensated for by the loss of liberty. Or it can impose its will by force. "The fact-finding powers of liberals have, therefore, always to be at work," and it is "hard to think of any recent event which calls for more careful attention from liberals than the case of Alger Hiss."

Cooke's partisanship fails to provide it. Over several pages, comparing HUAC transcripts with Cooke's account of them, West shows his errors and bias. Repeatedly, Cooke misleads Britons innocent of the stakes of the case and further poisons minds receptive to lazy condemnation of American politics and law. Cooke is also symptomatic, West argues, of the broader malaise of British journalism. Consider, by way of contrast, the example of G. W. Steevens, the foreign and war correspondent for the *Daily Mail* in the late 1800s, a contemporary of Alfred Dreyfus, and his finest British interpreter. In contrast to Cooke, Steevens was able brilliantly to convey to the British public the "tremendous conflict of conceptions of the public good." He was also fortunate to live in a time when canons of literary taste had not been corrupted by superficiality. Alas, "the advance made by literary criticism during the past half-century, particularly on the technical side has destroyed this sign-posting."

It might be said that many young men and young women leave their universities having learned

nothing but the art of giving a good surface to what they write, and having learned that well. Mr. Cooke's book is a typical product of this phase. It looks very good indeed. Its prose suggests precision, deliberation, impartiality. But, alas, here is no emotion recollected in tranquility. . . . The book is likely to be a serious stumbling-block to historians of the future by reason of its constant vagueness and inaccuracy.

Before describing the grounds of West's objections to Cooke's analysis in greater detail, it is important to note her attitude to the HUAC proceedings more generally. West was convinced that the hearings were necessary to get to the bottom of the Communist conspiratorial network that had permeated, and might still permeate, parts of the American state. She also believed that broad-brush criticism of the proceedings and their leading Congressmen, was unjustified. Allegations of a "witch hunt" were all too convenient hyperbole that allowed Communists to plead victimization and repeat their self-serving propaganda.

At the same time, the anomalies of HUAC were plentiful, and some of them were serious. One problem, West pointed out, was that the tribunal mixed legal and political roles. While HUAC counted lawyers among its number, it was essentially a body of career politicians whose point-scoring and speechifying deflected them from objectivity. Persons mentioned in evidence by or before HUAC were unable to avail themselves of counsel to represent them in front of the Committee or cross-examine witnesses. Some of HUAC's phrasing resembled a dragnet to catch as many suspicious people as possible, while, in one case, the committee's subpoena of a witness's attorney to establish the nature of his political beliefs struck at the "roots of legal representation." But Cooke's readers, says West, get very little help with judging these flaws, and Cooke himself appears clueless about them.

The HUAC investigations also opened up a disturbing unintended possibility. As she wrote later: "It is impossible to imagine that a civil service will function efficiently if civil servants are constantly haunted by the fear that any act

they perform, in the course of their prescribed routine, may at some future date cause them to be brought before a tribunal and questioned as if by that act they had laid themselves under suspicion." This situation is unfortunate and troubling but, West pleads, let us retain perspective on what has caused it: the Communist Party of America, and the civil servants who do its bidding: "We aid that party and these men if we pretend that the aim of these questions is to persecute liberal opinion and not to inquire into jobbery and espionage." Yet Cooke, she says, writes

as if the whole inquiry had been a mistake, and as if all right-thinking men ought to blame authority for the direction it had taken. Now, we must all agree that authority should have started the inquiry long before it did. If action had been taken when Mr. Chambers told his story [of a Washington espionage ring] to [Assistant Secretary of State] Mr. Berle in 1939, it would have been far fairer to Mr. Hiss. . . . But Mr. Cooke does not make this point, and we must conclude that by his way of thinking authority should have abandoned the inquiry at some stage after it was started in 1948. As he never indicates the appropriate stage we must ask ourselves which it was. At the beginning? Should the Un-American Activities Committee have dismissed Mr. Chambers after they had heard the summary of his evidence in executive session, and never brought the matter to a further hearing? Surely not. The Committee exists to investigate subversive influences which seek to destroy the government and institutions of the United States.

Critics of the proceedings, then, either have to say that the inquiry should never have begun, in which case such critics are giving treason a free pass. Or they have to say at what point the inquiry should have stopped. Alistair Cooke says neither but appears to lean by the weight of his analysis towards the former position. He writes all along "as if the prosecution of Mr. Hiss could only have happened by some deplorable debauchment of the normal legal process."

These flaws in Cooke's report were, she held, regrettable. But worse, on West's account, is the apologetic political gloss of his book; and

at this point, her critique turns bitter, as sharp disagreement about HUAC melds with historical memories of the fate of pre-war socialism, and of Britain's experience in early wartime when, between September 1939 and June 1941, the Soviet Union was an ally of Nazi Germany.

The source of West's indignation is a passage in *A Generation on Trial* in which Cooke invokes the interwar years—"the squalid decade before Munich," he calls it. It was this period that attracted Chambers and Hiss, like "thousands" of other British and American intellectuals, to the Soviet Union, the country that shone as a beacon of resistance to Fascism. Chambers and Hiss, continues Cooke, were "idealists at a time when idealism, and the nature of loyalty, were undergoing an historic test." The government economist Julian Wadleigh, who confessed to stealing State Department documents and passing them to the courier Chambers, is another specimen of this idealistic breed; Cooke calls him "a walking symbol of the shattered gallantry of the idealistic Left, a fugitive from the ruins of the Popular Front and the classless society, an earnest fellow who had now to pay for the pride he felt, a dozen years ago, in trading in the loyalty of his oath of office for the true glory of being in the advance guard of the resistance to Fascism." Hiss, Cooke adds, might better have defended himself if he had admitted his acts and said that he had passed purloined papers with pride so as to confound the Nazis and "quicken the day of deliverance of enslaved populations." In such wise, Hiss "could have been a greater Wadleigh."

Rebecca West is dismayed: "This extraordinary phrase, 'a greater Wadleigh,' speaks of chaotic moral and intellectual values." The notion that the Soviet Union was the spear of anti-Fascism is sheer invention, scoffs West, a mythology that Communists and fellow travelers continue to peddle to remove the taint of the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact and, before that, to deny their central role in the destruction of socialist and democratic opposition to Fascism. The doctrine of "social fascism" equated socialists with Nazis; in one sense the former were considered worse. Bolsheviks considered socialist leaders to be traitors to the workers'

movement and the International, responsible for dousing the revolutionary flame. The historical record will show, West claims, that the "advance guard of the resistance to Fascism did not consist of Communists, in either Britain or America. The vast majority of people who aided the Italian anti-Fascists, the Republican side in the Spanish Civil War, and the anti-Nazi refugees, were neither Communist Party members nor communist sympathizers, and they would have no more stolen state documents than they would have practiced any other form of sneak-thieving."

It is true that Communist cells sought to control anti-Fascist organization, as they sought to control everything else. It is also true that, in the early aftermath of the Bolshevik coup in Russia, Communism fascinated British socialists. But by the time of the General Strike of 1926, their exodus from the Communist Party was in full swing. Very few who took part in the Strike were Communists; some had been, but had already left the Party. Communism struck deeper roots in America because the Labor Left was, unlike in Britain, stymied from achieving power; given the character of the United States, West says, the Left had no "orderly and honorable means of realizing its aspirations." Nevertheless, it is "an absurd perversion of historical fact to suggest that in the nineteen-thirties it was anything but an abnormal action for an American or an Englishman who disapproved of Hitler and Mussolini to show it by becoming a spy for the USSR."

Further incomprehensible to West is Cooke's disapproval of Hiss's conviction on the grounds that it lends stature to the "public informer," endorses an overzealous FBI to invade the privacy of Americans, and, by creating a culture of intimidation, discourages the idealism of young and curious minds. "It is hardly necessary to point out that these disturbed ejaculations of Mr. Cooke, though they are uttered with a vaguely liberal air, are incompatible with liberalism, because they are incompatible with reason." Chambers was not a public informer: he did not work for the police; he was not paid for the information he conveyed to HUAC; he was subpoenaed to give

evidence and reluctant to give it. The United States has effective checks on the FBI if it is seen to abuse its power. The young are unlikely to equate idealism with stealing state secrets.

West concludes that Cooke's account plays to the gallery of like-minded persons; it shows that the "Hiss case has now split into two." One part concerns the facts of the case itself, on which people are entitled to principled differences of opinion. The other part consists of a fantasy that, far from being confined to Alistair Cooke, is "floating in the American national unconscious" and has "eternal elements."

Foremost among them is "our desire to do what we wish, without fear of the frustrating force of reality." In everyday life, most of us resist the impulse to steal just as we resist other immoral temptations. Deterring our desires and monitoring our actions are the agencies of the state. So there is something especially exciting about a case that involves theft from the state itself, the guardian of our protection; about a theft that can claim really to do no harm; and about a person who "should be considered either as innocent, against the weight of evidence, or as guilty with a guilt mystically more innocent than innocence." This high-minded exculpation is witness to "the infantilist within us." The governing classes of the past could often dispense with the law, believing it did not bind them when inconvenient to their interests. But the governing class of our own time is liberal, and liberalism expressly prohibits the right of any person or group to exercise privilege or claim immunity. By the very same token, the fantasy of a holiday from legality is even stronger than before because its object is far more radical.

Infantilism is particularly evident, West extrapolates, in the "illogical hatred felt by non-Communists for Communists who have left the Party." Cooke shares that loathing. He describes the ex-Communists as "that solemn breed of renegades, the reconstituted patriots who survived their Russian baptism of the twenties and thirties and now are keen for anything that someone will dignify by calling the American Way." To such persons, Cooke states, "all jokes are suspect, honest doubts a weakness, and a

liberal is a Communist on plain-clothes duty." The prose sparkles but the psychology is obscure. West struggles to reveal it. Once more she alludes to "a fantasy of unlimited privilege for liberals." Its mechanism is as follows:

A liberal should think of himself as holding a certain creed; but he may also think of himself as somebody "on the Left" and if he is simple-minded or fatigued he may use that expression as if it were not merely a rough and ready reference to a symbolical political map but an indication of a position he actually occupies in the material world. While he thinks of himself as holding liberal ideas he will recognize the Communist as his antithesis; but if he thinks of himself as "on the Left," then the Communist may seem to him as somebody further to the Left, and therefore an extreme specimen of his own type. . . . Such [a person] naturally turns in wrath on the ex-Communist, who, poor soul, may have fled the Party in order to escape from complicity in actual crime, which is surely an excellent reason, but who is nevertheless spoiling his fun by interrupting his fantasy of unlimited privilege for liberals with a horrid story about reality.

But it is fatal for liberals to claim privilege even in the world of fantasy. The stuff is poison to them. Let nobody think they can take it or leave it. In no time the thing will fuddle them into that state of coarse indifference to the claims of the individual which they must acknowledge, if they are not to cease to be liberal.

West ends her appraisal of Alistair Cooke by urging specialist research on the Hiss case and other cases to determine the limitations of HUAC and FBI procedures and to illumine the role of the press as a medium of communication and obfuscation. She also hopes that a dispassionate analysis of recent events will refute those, at the opposite end of the spectrum from Alistair Cooke, who would like to use the Hiss case to tamp down civil liberties.

But her main point, tirelessly repeated, is that freedom must be defended against all adversaries. Liberals play an invaluable part in this defense not by special pleading but by a truthful reckoning of facts and by conveying them honestly to the public at large.

New poems

by *Henri Cole & Richard Tillinghast*

To a snail

Like flesh, or consciousness inhabited
by flesh, willful, bold, très chic, the skin
on your gelid body is brownish from age
and secretes viscid slime from your flat
muscular foot, like script, as if Agnes Martin
had wed Caravaggio, and then, after rainfall,
you ran away, crossing a wet road with Fiats
rushing past. Where is your partner?
Contemplating your tentacles and house,
gliding on a trace of mucus from some
dark stone to who knows where,
why do I feel happiness? It's a long game—
the whole undignified, insane attempt at living—
so I've relocated you to the woods.

—*Henri Cole*

The horsemen

After the flag juggling and the reading of a challenge,
two horsemen charged the effigy of a Saracen—
striking his shield with their lances. He, then,
rotated, threatening the horsemen with his heavy
whip armed with lead and leather balls.
The horseman disarmed lost all his points.
The horseman struck by the whip lost two points.
The horseman hitting the Saracen won
a double score. Then all the knights, soldiers,
musicians, valets, jugglers, and joustiers assembled
for the presentation of the golden lance,
but none seemed immortal or free. I lay in some
violets for a while and luxuriated in the sun,
until shadows swallowed up everything.

—*Henri Cole*

Mezzogiorno

Full summer.

The umbrella pines show burnt umber underneath
and cicadas scratch out a dry music.

The bells in the valley suspend unmoved,
their tongues hanging out.

Paving stones underfoot on the terrace
blossom salmon-pink, copper-tarnish, verdigris.

Every color goes with every other color,
even the faded football jersey
of the man out taking a stroll.

Children's voices from a hedged garden levitate
and—there!—a white shuttlecock
half-moons over the arrow cypresses.

But who's this
out for an airing?
A butterfly,
heraldic and unheralded,

as if these two wings
and they only
had kept themselves under wraps
while everywhere under the sun
spring edged into summer,

and now they find their moment to appear—
buttercup yellow and bold as a banner.

—*Richard Tillinghast*

Letter from Plymouth

Like a rock

by James Panero

There is nothing particularly impressive about Plymouth Rock. As far as famous rocks go, the seaside boulder on which the Pilgrims may have first set foot in the New World is notably underwhelming. It has not helped that this ten-ton glacial errant, an Ice Age deposit of granite on the morainal coastline of Cape Cod Bay, has been moved and abused, venerated and desecrated many times since the storied passengers of *Mayflower* set down roots here four hundred years ago, in December 1620. And yet it is precisely the Rock's humble appearance that can still evoke the greatest awe. The pilgrims' arrival at Plymouth proved to be the moonshot of the seventeenth century—odds-breaking, death-defying, and ultimately world-shattering. The Rock remains the manifestation of the first step of these spiritual wanderers, not just from ship to shore but also heaven to earth. For the nation's celestial origins, Plymouth Rock is our moonstone.

It took over a century for the Rock to be recognized for its historical relevance, after a Plymouth elder recalled a folktale of the landing. Its importance then grew alongside a burgeoning sense of the central role of the Pilgrims in our national story. In the War of Independence, the stone came to symbolize the endurance of the Pilgrims' separatist faith crystallized in the cause of national liberty. In 1775, the people of Plymouth joined Colonel Theophilus Cotton to "consecrate the rock . . . to the shrine of liberty." In attempting to move the stone from the shoreline, however, the townspeople split it in two, a portent of the coming Revolutionary break. Leaving one half behind in the sand, they relocated the

other to "liberty pole square" by the Plymouth meetinghouse. On July 4, 1834, that part of the rock was moved again, this time to the front of Plymouth Hall. Other pieces went farther astray. Two chunks came to reside in Brooklyn, one at the abolitionist Plymouth Church of the Pilgrims and the other at the Brooklyn Historical Society. Smaller fragments went the way of the souvenir hunters. Meanwhile the original seaside stone came to be buried in sand and port development.

In 1867, an elegant Beaux-Arts baldachin designed by Hammatt Billings resurrected the beach half, which was soon rejoined by the other Plymouth rock of Plymouth Rock as "1620" was etched in the stone. Finally, in 1920, for the tercentenary of the Pilgrims' landing, McKim, Mead & White designed the portico that stands over Plymouth Rock today. The understated design, built into an esplanade and replacing the Billings monument, invites viewers to look down onto the Rock, now again on the sandy beach. At spring tide, through iron grilles in the pavilion's open foundation, the waters of the cold Atlantic can once again lap over the worn stone.

The treatment of Plymouth Rock has reflected the ebbs and flows of our own national conscience. In 1820, at the bicentennial of the Pilgrim landing, Daniel Webster proclaimed, "We have come to this Rock to record here our homage for our Pilgrim Fathers; our sympathy in their sufferings; our gratitude for their labors; our admiration of their virtues; our veneration for their piety; and our attachment to those principles of civil and religious liberty." Pledging "upon the

Rock of Plymouth,” he also called on Americans to “extirpate and destroy” the slave trade.

By 1835, Tocqueville came to observe how “this Rock has become an object of veneration in the United States. I have seen bits of it carefully preserved in several towns of the Union. Does not this sufficiently show that all human power and greatness is in the soul of man? Here is a stone which the feet of a few outcasts pressed for an instant, and this stone becomes famous; it is treasured by a great nation, its very dust is shared as a relic.”

This year’s quadricentenary of the Pilgrim landing has not been so felicitous for Plymouth or its Rock. The pandemic has destroyed the town’s tourist trade and canceled many festivities on what should have been its most eventful year. A million visitors a year usually come to Plymouth Rock. This year that number may be less than half. Chinese, British, and German tourists, all precluded from international travel, are otherwise particularly drawn to the attraction. As I am told, the Chinese come for the American history, the British for the English, and the Germans for the indigenous. In other years, faith-based visitors are also regulars here, making their own pilgrimage to a site of America’s Christian origins. This year, even at the height of tourist season, the glasses at the Pillory Pub are half empty, the John Alden curio shop is in want of the curious, and the on-street parking is abundant.

Beyond just the closures, the Pilgrims’ progress, like the American project itself, has been cast in doubt. For most of our history, the Pilgrims’ first Thanksgiving meal of 1621 has represented the Providence of America and the amity of its native peoples—after Samoset, Tisquantum (Squanto), and Massasoit’s tribe of Wampanoag saved the new arrivals from starvation. In giving thanks for their salvation, George Washington codified the Pilgrims’ holiday into civic religion.

Until recently, the story of this first Thanksgiving was central to our civic education, from elementary-school assemblies to *Peanuts* television specials. Now, a “National Day of Mourning,” a protest march against Thanksgiving first organized by Native American activists, can draw crowds larger than the Mayflower Society’s own Pilgrim Progress procession held in town the same

day. The Plymouth Rock monument has also been the site of attacks and desecrations. So far this year, the Rock has been splattered and sprayed with paint on two separate occasions. Meanwhile, the Pilgrims have been castigated along with Christopher Columbus for the usurpation of native lands and the murder of native peoples. If children are now taught anything about the Pilgrims, the settlers are more than likely to be denounced as a colonizing force—one that never really originated Thanksgiving, never conveyed the spirit of liberty as represented in their “Mayflower Compact,” and never even landed at Plymouth Rock.

The evidence at Plymouth suggests a more nuanced understanding. In Europe, the Pilgrims had drifted around as the backwash of the Reformation. Since taxation also meant supporting the ministers to a false faith, the Pilgrims’ separatist beliefs put them at odds with the monarch and the inseparable church of England. “The king is a mortal man, and not God,” declared the Puritan Thomas Helwys in his challenge to King James I, and “therefore hath no power over the immortal souls of his subjects.” Like others, Helwys was imprisoned and died for his beliefs. From England to Amsterdam, and then to Leiden, the Pilgrims attempted to resettle. In Holland, they found the labors unforgiving and the temptations undermining. Here was a faith that knew more what it stood against than for. A group of Pilgrims struck a deal with the London Company to resettle their families around what became New York. They eventually hired *Mayflower*, a reconfigured merchant ship, for the late fall passage. Their decision to leave the land of Rembrandt—who was then a student just a block from their Leiden church—for lands unknown was propelled by a desperation for religious liberty. “England hath seen her best days,” Thomas Hooker, the Puritan founder of Connecticut, later preached, “and now evil days are befalling us: God is packing up his gospel.”

“Founding a colony was just about the most foolish thing a congregation or any other group of Europeans could do.” So writes John G. Turner in *They Knew They Were Pilgrims*, his new history of Plymouth.¹ What powered these early set-

1 *They Knew They Were Pilgrims: Plymouth Colony and the Contest for American Liberty*, by John G. Turner; Yale University Press, 464 pages, \$30.

ters, especially through the misery of their first winter, was their separatist conviction. “They knew they were pilgrims . . . and quieted their spirits,” explained Plymouth’s Governor William Bradford. Blown off course, and after exploring the area of what became Provincetown (where there is now another Pilgrim monument), the settlers arrived in the protected natural harbor of Plymouth Bay. Regardless of where they took their first actual steps, the Pilgrims “walked into a disaster,” Turner writes. “The poor nutrition during the crossing left their health fragile, and they lacked sufficient food for the months ahead. Exposure to bitter-cold weather and wading in water did not help matters.” Barely half of *Mayflower*’s passengers survived the crossing and the first winter. “The living were scarce able to bury the dead,” Bradford wrote the next fall.

Just down the road from Plymouth Rock, Plimoth Plantation recreates some of these privations. In the 1940s, the museum’s founder, a gentleman archaeologist named Henry (Harry) Hornblower II, announced that “we had bypassed the era of putting a fence and canopy above a rock or some artifacts in a glass case . . . my idea was to create a living museum.” He tore down his family’s estate and converted it into a life-size diorama of the Pilgrims’ first village. Later on, the staff in period costume began to take on period roles. Now as soon as you set foot out of the reconstructed fort and walk down the village road, the Plantation offers its visitors an immersive experience. This year as you come upon Governor Bradford reading English law in his home with Mistress Winslow, the face masks are the only concessions to our present moment.

Yet even this quaint settlement does not fully convey the true extremis of the Pilgrims’ first year, as husbands lost wives and mothers lost children. The Plantation’s research and reconstruction of historic Patuxet, an equally fascinating section of the living museum, goes further in explaining how these privations were overcome. Then as now, a disease had reduced the population passing through Plymouth. An “extraordinary plague,” Samoset informed the new arrivals, had recently killed the people who had lived there. The Pilgrims arrived in the land of the Wampanoag just as the weakened tribe faced off against the neighboring and untouched Narragansetts.

By the 1620s, Europeans were no strangers to American Indians. Traders had been sailing the New England waters for a century. What was new was the arrival of European families. In the early years, the Pilgrim and native populations gave thanks together for their mutual support. Twice as many Wampanoags as Pilgrims joined the first Thanksgiving dinner. Recent excavations have also suggested that the two peoples chose to live and trade next to each other.

This summer, after completing a three-year rebuilding at Connecticut’s Mystic Seaport, *Mayflower II*, a faithful 1956 replica of the Pilgrims’ faith-conveying ship, returned to Plymouth under her own sail power. Plimoth Plantation is once again scheduling tours of the ship, tied up within sight of Plymouth Rock. Four hundred years after the original landing, the craft speaks to the hardships, endurance, and desperation of the settlers who have defined America in myth and memory. Entering the open hold of this tiny replica vessel, where 102 passengers would have endured the Atlantic passage together, reveals much about the death and disease they encountered that first winter in Cape Cod Bay.

Just up the hill from Plymouth Rock, now buried among the trees and residential development, the Monument to the Forefathers offers a final statement on the combination of forces that came to the Pilgrims’ salvation. Hammatt Billings began designing this eight-story-tall granite carving in the 1850s. His brother, Joseph, working with local carvers, completed it in 1889. The monumental site, which now also includes scalloped fragments from Billings’s original Plymouth Rock pavilion, might appear grandiloquent did it not commemorate such an extraordinary event. In addition to relief images from Pilgrim history, the monument is buttressed by the personifications of Morality, Law, Education, and Liberty. Rising above them, facing England to the east, is the colossus of Faith. “Erected by a grateful people,” reads the front inscription, “in remembrance of their labors, sacrifices and sufferings for the cause of civil and religious liberty.” Stone by stone, the monument recalls the Providence of Plymouth Rock. Through sacrifices and sufferings, its blessings continue to land on the country the Pilgrims helped define.

Killing time with Agatha Christie

by *Anthony Daniels*

Under virtual house arrest in Paris during the COVID-19 epidemic, it occurred to me to write an essay on the transcendent meaning and value of crime novels. I happened to have three with me, and one of them was *The Moving Finger* by Agatha Christie, published in 1943, the year of Stalingrad and the apogee of the Final Solution.

I am a great admirer of Mrs. Christie. I enjoy her irony, and she sometimes reveals herself to be an acute psychologist. Quite apart from the pleasure she gives, reading her is not entirely a waste of time. She conveys to the reader the impression of enjoying the human comedy without bitterness or rancor, and thereby acts as an antidote to our resentment of the imperfections of the world and existence. There is also something deeply comforting about her fairy tales in which evil suddenly erupts into a pleasantly settled world only to be quickly defeated and for order to be restored. The world is not really like this, of course, and no one imagines that it is, but which of us never needs imaginative escape from reality?

I have several times considered writing essays about her work: for example, about the doctors in her books, the moral judgments and observations that she makes, and even one proposing that, in fact, both Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple are serial killers, this being the hypothesis that most economically explains why there are so often murders wherever they go, it being the only hypothesis, indeed, that fulfills Occam's Razor, namely that entities (such as murderers) are not to be increased unnecessarily.

The problem with such essays as I have contemplated is that they would require a great deal of work, and I very much doubt that the light would be worth the candle. In the process, I would have turned pleasure into work—work in the sense of being something onerous that one would rather not do, and having an alternative that one would enjoy more. I would feel obliged to read her entire oeuvre in rapid succession so that my memory of it did not decay, and the fact is that reading thousands of pages of any author is likely to sicken and even disgust. A formative experience of my life was a lesson that one can have too much of a good thing. I used to love rose- and violet-petal chocolate creams, and once bought a big bag of them to eat in the theater. I finished them before the curtain went up and sat through the play—Ibsen, I think it was—in a state of nausea. I expect that if I read too much Agatha Christie in succession, I should experience the literary equivalent of that sensation. *Not too much of a good thing*: there must be worse mottos for life.

It is the lack of realism that one appreciates in Agatha Christie. I have had more to do in my life than most with murder and murderers, having been a prison doctor for a number of years, and the sad fact is that most murders are extremely sordid and do not take place in the libraries of country houses. Nor do they approximate the perfect crime that requires brilliant powers of deduction to elucidate. From De Quincey to Leslie Stephen (Virginia Woolf's father) and George Orwell, there has

been literary lamentation over the uninteresting quality of murders—I mean murders in the real world, not in books—and I am afraid that these complaints were all justified. I rarely came across a sophisticated murder; one was lucky if the murderer got as far as disposing of the murder weapon down the drain a few yards from the scene of his crime. Not many interesting puzzles there.

It must be admitted that *The Moving Finger* is not one of Agatha Christie's finest works. On the contrary, it is obviously a potboiler. Given the date of its publication, I imagine that it was intended to lift the spirits of a population that was still under heavy bombardment with no victory in sight. But no amount of admiration for the author can disguise the fact that this is a bad book, even a very bad one. But a book does not entirely lack interest merely because it is bad, for every book tells us something. Fortune favors the mind prepared, said Pasteur with regard to scientific discovery; a mind must be prepared also to find things interesting.

The narrator of the story is an airman who has gone to a small country town with his sister to recuperate after injury in an aircraft crash. It is left unsaid whether he was flying for pleasure or against an enemy, and indeed it is not clear whether there is a war going on at all during the story. This in itself must have been reassuring to the reader in 1943: that the war was not all-encompassing, all-embracing, all-conquering, and that ordinary life continued in parallel with it. In like fashion, it comforts me to think and write about something other than the epidemic of COVID-19 that is raging as I write.

Another comforting aspect of the story is the seemingly unchanging social world in which it takes place. It is a world in which there is a clear social hierarchy, and everyone not only knows, but is also content with his place. The horrors of meritocracy, in which a subordinate position can be attributed only to personal inadequacy, have not yet struck. There are still parlormaids in caps and aprons who are happy in their work and who dream of marrying the butcher's boy. They "walk out" with him, but sex outside marriage is unthinkable because it

would cause a scandal and local tongues would wag. Respectability, not transgression, is what confers social prestige. Hypocrisy is rampant as a result but is the price to pay for stability. And after all, if hypocrisy is the tribute that vice pays to virtue, it at least still appreciates that there is a difference between them.

A static, changeless world never existed, but after a certain age, at least, many of us like to imagine that it once did, by contrast with our restless, dissatisfied, jangling world in which nothing is solid, predictable, or lasting, and everything beautiful (we think) is in the process of being destroyed. Of course, such a vision will not appeal to those who do not believe that present mirth hath present laughter, and believe instead that what's to come is sure to be better; when *they* turn to murder books, they want something grittier, more truthful to reality, and possibly even more sordid. If squalor be the root of crime, give me excess of it.

Into the life of the quiet, arcadian, and static little town where the airman of the story has gone to recuperate from his crash intrudes a writer of nasty anonymous letters, all of a sexual nature, for example claiming that the relations between the airman and his sister are not those of siblings only. The local lawyer's clerk, Miss Ginch, "forty at least, with pince-nez and teeth like a rabbit," is accused of an affair with her employer, the dry and seemingly unemotional Symmington (note how Christie is able to conjure up not only the appearance but the character of Miss Ginch in a mere ten words). Miss Ginch is so disturbed, or titillated, by the allegation that she changes jobs to remain above suspicion, though to nasty gossips her change of employment might indicate a guilty mind.

The local doctor lays out a typology of anonymous letter-writers, dividing them into two classes: those who target a particular person against whom they have a definite grudge, and the generalists, so to speak, those who work off some kind of frustration by sowing alarm and mistrust in an entire community.

Is this typology valid? I think it might well be: Christie, whatever her defects, always knew what she was writing about. Certainly there

have been cases of poison-pen letter campaigns in small villages, for example that of Dr. James Forster, half a century after Christie wrote *The Moving Finger*. He was a retired university lecturer who was sentenced to imprisonment in 2001 for having conducted such a campaign over a period of twelve years in an otherwise peaceful village in the north of England; he sent at least one letter to sixty-eight of the eighty-four houses in the village. Taking great care not to be detected, for example by wearing gloves to avoid leaving fingerprints (just as did the writer of the letters in *The Moving Finger*), he set villagers against one another and caused a great deal of misery to no obvious advantage to himself other than the sheer pleasure of seeing it. He was said to have been motivated by anger at the refusal of one of the villagers to sell her house to him (she sold it to another buyer), after which he took an obsessive interest in the peccadilloes of the villagers, which he carefully recorded in notebooks. But disappointment over a house sale as an explanation of his conduct is hardly better than no explanation at all. We are faced by the attraction to the human heart of evil for its own sake.

He desisted from his letter-writing after his release from prison, which proved either that he suffered no irresistible impulse to write them, or that he was cured of that impulse by his imprisonment. It is possible also that he considered his return to the village after imprisonment, living there for sixteen years until his death aged eighty-four, to have been a sufficient means of causing misery to his former victims and present neighbors.

The village in which Dr. Forster conducted his malicious campaign was widely described as a rural paradise, except for his activities. Here is Christie describing her country town through the words of her narrator: "It's full of festering poison, this place, and it looks as peaceful and as innocent as the Garden of Eden."

Did Christie know, or intuit, that at the very time she wrote her book untold thousands of anonymous denunciations to the police in Germany and Occupied France were being written, all for the most sordid or vicious rea-

sons? The anonymous letter has always been a literary genre favored by amateurs, and it is a genre that awaits only its opportunity to flourish. Is this not what the social, or antisocial, media have given it? The extremity of insult, the menace implicit or explicit, the impossibility of knowing how seriously to take what is written in anonymous communications, all this must sow the seeds of neurosis in many a susceptible mind. (I hesitate to mention this, but there are websites that give instruction in how to write anonymous letters, as once there were manuals of how to write business correspondence.)

Even a bad Agatha Christie novel such as this contains observations that are shrewd and worth having. The doctor says of the letters: "I'm afraid . . . of the effect upon the slow, suspicious, uneducated mind. If they see a thing written, they believe it's true." This is highly pertinent in the age of the internet and declining educational standards.

I was startled to discover from reading this book that in 1943 the public was still permitted to buy cyanide for the purpose of killing wasps, which suggests that either there was no alternative available or that the government trusted the population a great deal more than it does now. (In this case, the trust was unjustified, because Symmington the lawyer poisons his wife with wasp-killer insinuated into her capsules of soporific, then making it look like suicide by putting cyanide in her bedside glass, she having been driven to it by the receipt of one of the anonymous letters.)

The speed with which the coroner conducts his inquests into suspicious deaths also surprises the contemporary reader. An inquest into Mrs. Symmington's death is held within three days; nowadays it wouldn't take place for eighteen months at the soonest, by which time all memories of the events will have been expunged from the mind or made up. True, we are more thorough nowadays, in the sense of being more painstaking, but are we more accurate? I cannot help but suspect that our giant bureaucratic apparatus has done little overall for the administration of justice, at least if speed of administration is a necessary condition of justice in the abstract.

Despite the comforting apparent timelessness of the social dispensation depicted in *The Moving Finger*, the harbingers of change are nevertheless present. There is an incipient feminism in the book, on at least three occasions. For example, the doctor's sister permits herself an outburst to the narrator:

"You're like all men—you dislike the idea of women competing. It is incredible to you that women should want a career. It was incredible to my parents. I was anxious to study for a doctor. They would not hear of paying the fees. But they paid them readily for [my brother]. Yet I should have made a better doctor than [he]."

The doctor's sister is not an attractive character, any more than is Shylock, and yet her outburst is not without its rhetorical power.

There is also a depiction of the fateful reversal of sympathy by the educated upper-middle classes from the victim to the perpetrator of crime as a sign of superior sensibility. The vicar's wife, Mrs. Dane Calthrop, says, "Poor thing, poor thing," to the narrator after Mrs. Symmington's death, only for us to realize that she is not referring to Mrs. Symmington. To whom is she referring, then?

"Don't you realise—can't you *feel*? Use your imagination. Think how desperately, violently unhappy anyone must be to sit down and write these things. How lonely, how cut off from human kind. Poisoned through and through, with a dark stream of poison that finds its outlet in this way . . . that black inward unhappiness—like a septic arm physically, all black and swollen. If you could cut it and let the poison out it would flow away harmlessly. Yes, poor soul, poor soul."

Mrs. Dane Calthrop's reaction to crime in the country town is that which predominates, at least in today's intellectual circles. Yet here it is gently and humorously, if effectively, satirized by Agatha Christie.

I persuade myself, then, that I have not entirely wasted my time while under house arrest by indulging a taste for crime fiction, even if one of the books I selected for the honor of being read was not of the highest quality, or one of the author's best.

A last reflection: one of the characters in the book, a servant, has such a terrible apprehension of evil that she is put off her appetite for seed-cake. Can evil have worse effects than that? Happy the land where it cannot.

Forthcoming in *The New Criterion*:

Art: a special section in December

with essays by Eric Gibson, Marco Grassi, James Hankins, Michael J. Lewis, James Panero, Benjamin Riley, Andrew L. Shea, Karen Wilkin & more

Capitalism's continuation *by Daniel Hannan*

Pierre Manent on Montaigne *by Daniel J. Mahoney*

Reconsiderations

A sergeant abroad

by *David Platzer*

Stuart Preston was one of the more curious figures of London during the Second World War, the U.S. Army Sergeant who featured in James Lees-Milne's and Maud Russell's wartime diaries and inspired "the Loot," Lieutenant Padfield, in Evelyn Waugh's *Unconditional Surrender* (retitled *The End of the Battle* in America), the last and best volume of Waugh's war trilogy. Until leaving in July 1944 to take part in the liberation of France, Stuart lived in the U.S. Army Headquarters, conveniently located in North Audley Street, only minutes away from Heywood Hill's bookshop on Curzon Street, where Nancy Mitford and Bridget Parsons were holding the fort, and the Dorchester, where Emerald Cunard continued to host parties. An eager, well-informed American, he was enraptured with everything Edwardian. In the 1940s, there were still survivors of the period, and Stuart, notwithstanding his duties, traveled the country to stay with Lady Desborough and Maurice Baring. Like Kilroy, the "Sarge" was always there, in his case at every literary or social party in London, ever amiable and unassumingly knowledgeable, even if Emerald Cunard, herself American-born, complained to Harold Acton that he never said anything memorable and was too educated to be a Sergeant. His legend even reached George VI's ears. "Oh, never mind. I daresay you've been to see the Sergeant," the king said when an aide arrived late. The "ample leisure" mentioned by Waugh with regard to the Loot may have had something to do with Preston's possible position in counter-intelligence, directed by Eisenhower

himself. One wonders if many of the Sergeant's admirers suspected that the charming GI might be reporting overheard gossip to his superiors.

Notwithstanding her professed distaste for Americans, Nancy Mitford had a soft spot for the "Serge," who dismissed Nancy's anti-Americanism as "part of the *image*." "You are horrid about that good old Serge & I'm afraid he'll *mind*. So naughty making him talk American," Mitford wrote to Waugh. Indeed, the Loot's clumsy jargon, reminiscent of Nancy's own Hector Dexter in *The Blessing*, is most unlike Stuart. Damningly, Waugh paints the Loot as a social climber: "Now some days back I was at a Catholic Requiem in Somerset county. It was the live people there I found significant. There were a lot of them." Waugh's Loot is no linguist, something untrue about Stuart, who read as much, if not more, French than English—though he spoke it with an American accent—and knew German and Italian, too. Waugh's description of the Loot's ubiquitous social success is closer to the mark:

He was in every picture gallery, every bookshop, every club, every hotel. He was also in every inaccessible castle in Scotland, at the sick bed of every veteran artist and politician, in the dressing-room of every leading actress and in every university common-room.

Even if Stuart was spying for U.S. intelligence on aristocratic bohemia, he was firstly a Jamesian "passionate pilgrim" lapping up a world he had admired from childhood. Not

a parvenu, he and his family were discreetly rich and distinguished. “We couldn’t afford the Ritz or the Crillon when we stayed at in Paris,” he recalled to me. “We stayed at the Vendôme,” a hotel in the same area as the Ritz and the Crillon and no less elegant, though of four rather than five stars. He had been reading Proust since childhood. An art history graduate of Yale’s class of 1937, he visited England in 1938. There he had seen Harold Nicolson, always favoring personable, cultivated young men, and Nicolson introduced him to other friends in his circle including James Lees-Milne. Nicolson, a staunch anti-appeaser, told Lees-Milne that “the next time we see Stuart over here, we will be in uniform.”

Little is known about his exploits with the Twelfth Army during the liberation of France, but they were valuable enough for France to give him the Croix de Guerre. In March 1945, he was sent to Germany as one of the “Monuments Men.” In the months after, he inspected museums and private collections in the U.S. Zone of Occupation and assisted in finding archives that had been stored all over Germany. Amusingly, the illustrator Ian Beck told me he was present when the artist Glynn Boyd Harte asked Stuart if he had ever been to Potsdam. “I took Potsdam!” Stuart said.

On returning to New York in 1946, he became a writer for *Art News* and in 1949 an art critic for *The New York Times*, where he remained until 1965. The pre-Pop Andy Warhol made a portrait of him in 1958, capturing him as a haunted, bald Casper the Ghost, painfully sensitive and tentative. The sketch makes it clear there was a good artist in Warhol before he went Pop. Harold Acton saw Stuart in New York at some point, and the two explored the current art scene. Acton found most of the paintings “mere daubs,” but Stuart sought merit where he could. Rumors persist that he ghost-wrote Consuelo Vanderbilt Balsan’s *The Glitter and the Gold* (1953), but he denied it. That year he did publish a little book on El Greco and in 1966 a text on the old Metropolitan Opera House, *Farewell to the Old House*. His best book was his monograph on Vuillard (1972), and he wrote occasionally for the *Burlington Magazine* and Denys Sutton’s

Apollo. In 1976, he left New York forever, soon settling in Paris.

It was there that I encountered him in 1990. He lived in a small apartment, packed with books and a little bust of Edward VII, on the rue Saint-Dominique, the Invalides on one side, the Champs du Mars and the Eiffel Tower on the other. Then in his mid-seventies, tall, gaunt, and rather gloomy-looking, he appeared a soldier retired into a monastery. He seemed severe until something amused him. Then he would chuckle, giving a glimpse of the charm that had beguiled hostesses and elderly men of letters. His heady early successes must have left him ill-equipped for later disappointments. He was happy to welcome younger visitors, but they may have disappointed him by questioning him about his own heyday instead of opening new doors. He had little wish to be a relic of the past. Stuart read *Le Figaro* and the *International Herald Tribune* daily and *The Spectator* weekly, and scanned the waves in the hope of something worthwhile. “Do you know someone named Mick Jagger?” he asked me. Alvide Lees-Milne had restored the garden at Jagger’s château in Tours and found him charming, and her husband was touched that Jagger had read his book on William Beckford. Diana Mosley also liked Jagger, though she made a face when my then-wife playfully asked her if she liked his music. “Who is Michael Jackson?” Stuart asked. “Is he like Bing Crosby or Frank Sinatra? Does he croon?” Not precisely, I said. “His way of life seems very different from ours,” Stuart observed. Stuart was more at ease with Cole Porter, whom he had known, and the James Bond and Hitchcock films which he loved and went to see whenever they were shown in the art houses of Paris’s Latin Quarter.

There were rumors that he had attempted London before Paris, only to be dismayed that London had not welcomed him in the same way it had during the war. The promising young are more likely to be embraced than the middle-aged and the old. He gave me another reason for his choosing Paris, saying that it would have been too easy for him to blend into English life and become English. “There is not a chance of becoming French,” he said. “The Sitwells always invited me, but

Julien Green lives around the corner and he'll never ask me to tea." In 1943, Stuart had given his condolences to Osbert Sitwell on hearing of the death of Sir George Sitwell, Osbert's father. "It was the right man in the right place at the right time," Sir Osbert quipped.

He did not always please. "An awful man!" Philomène d'Arenberg said when he complained about her white Russian wolfhound, Bacchus, on the rue Saint-Dominique, though Philo admitted Bacchus might have intimidated an old man. He could drink large quantities of wine, but he seemed to me to hold his drink. Others disagreed. Yette Byng told me that Jane Abdy told her never to invite her with Stuart. Even in 1943, James Lees-Milne was irritated when Stuart, drunk, talked about the lords and ladies he was meeting. Evelyn Waugh, seeing Stuart in New York in 1950, suspected that the aging Dorian Gray, now bald, had turned to drink, and Lees-Milne, meeting Stuart again, regretted that his own friend and sometimes lover was a bore in his cups. My then-wife complained about Stuart arriving before the hour appointed—in Paris, it is acceptable to arrive late but never early. He could be carelessly rude, and my ex-wife banished him when, while having dinner at our flat, he invited our other guests Francis King and Terence Cooper but not us to lunch with him at the Petit Saint Benoît a few days later. In fairness, he did invite me to meals on several occasions. Even in his youth, Stuart had a reputation for tightness with money. In 1943, Lees-Milne observed that Stuart "is either very poor or very mean." "Very mean, I should think," King said. His miserliness prevented him from using any but the cheapest postal rate when sending a letter. More than once, I went to an appointment with him in vain. The first time this happened, I rang him. "I sent you a note, canceling," he said, hanging up without a word of goodbye, an abrupt way of signing off that Stuart must have learned in his youth from then-surviving members of the Bloomsbury Group. The chucking postcard arrived two days later.

I sometimes saw him in the Paris British Institute's library. "See anything by Rowse?" he asked. "Anything by Fleming?" He was happy to borrow my copy of the Edward Chaney–

Neil Ritchie *Festschrift* honoring Harold Acton. He was punctilious in returning books and generous in making photocopies of items he thought would interest me. In that mode, he introduced me to *The New Criterion*, which he loved and which was then edited by Hilton Kramer, who had joined the *Times* art pages in the year Stuart departed.

He was delighted when Diana Mosley moved to a flat in the rue de l'Université, near the rue Saint-Dominique, after decades in a pavilion in Orsay. "Diana is a perfect person," he said with a twinkle in his eye, "except for one thing—Hitler," rather a serious qualification, one would think. Diana was his favorite Mitford, though he maintained "there was something touching" about Nancy. One evening he pointed out the Hotel Madison in Saint-Germain to me. "Nancy Mitford lived here when she came to Paris," he said. "I used to tease her about living in a hotel with an American name," though there is also a hotel of that name on Curzon Street.

When I knew him, Stuart hadn't been back to the United States for years. When he did return, it was for John Richardson's seventieth birthday in 1994. He was disinclined to linger: "I was happy to see my friends, but the city has become impossible." He was severe with regard to Bill Clinton, especially when Clinton, visiting Paris, emerged from the U.S. Embassy with a hapless guard, both dressed in their underclothes to jog round the Place Concorde. Clinton was the bee's knees for *The New York Times*, which loved him as much as it now hates Donald Trump, and it was just as well that Stuart had left the paper years before.

Anthony Powell was a favorite of Stuart's among contemporary novelists, and Stuart made a selection from Powell's reviews which, translated into French, José Corti published in 1995. At the same time, Francis King suggested Stuart write his memoirs. It could have been fascinating, for he might have told us about his war experiences and the many interesting people he had known. Ten years later, Stuart died, just short of his ninetieth birthday. He deserves a toast for the pleasure he gave to members of the older generation when he was young and for his encouragement of the young when he himself was in old age.

Art

Pollock, Guggenheim & the “Mural”

by Karen Wilkin

In 1943, Peggy Guggenheim commissioned her newest protégé, the thirty-one-year-old Jackson Pollock, to paint a mural for the entrance hall of her apartment in a townhouse on East Sixty-first Street. Earlier that year, the truculent young Westerner had exhibited a canvas of an abstracted reclining figure—or, possibly, two upright figures on opposite sides of a table—in the Spring Salon for Young Artists at Guggenheim’s recently opened Art of This Century gallery. The painting, now known as *Stenographic Figure* (1942, Museum of Modern Art, New York), impressed the exhibition’s jurors, Marcel Duchamp and Piet Mondrian. Mondrian, who had been resident in New York since 1940, called Pollock’s submission “the most interesting work I’ve seen so far in America.” This enthusiasm probably influenced Guggenheim’s support of the aspiring painter, which, in addition to the commission, included a stipend that allowed him to paint full time for the next four years, as well as his first solo exhibition, to be held at the end of 1943. Pollock’s career was launched.

Pollock wrote to his artist brother Charles that the mural commission came “with no strings as to what or how I paint it. I am going to use oil on canvas. They are giving me a show November 16 and I want to have the painting finished for the show. I’ve had to tear out the partition between the front and middle rooms to get the damned thing up. I have it stretched now. It looks pretty big but exciting as all hell.”

“Pretty big” was an understatement. The painting was conceived to fill the entire wall

in Guggenheim’s entry, and at eight feet high by a couple of inches short of twenty feet long, *Mural* was and remained Pollock’s largest painting. Its rhythmic procession of over-scaled sweeps and full arm gestures, its luminous pales and emphatic darks, and its unstable structure are prescient, pointing towards the pulsating skeins and webs of the poured paintings with which the artist is most closely identified. According to his wife, Lee Krasner, Pollock was initially daunted by the sheer expanse of the canvas and didn’t begin working on it immediately, an idea graphically brought to life in the one convincing moment in the otherwise silly Ed Harris movie about the artist, when Pollock confronts the huge stretched canvas and the entire screen stays blank and white for a long moment. Krasner’s recollections, repeated in the problematic Stephen Naifeh and Gregory White Smith biography of Pollock, combined with the movie, perpetuated the myth that the immense painting was completed in a single burst of energy in one night.

Pollock himself never claimed that *Mural* was a one-shot effort. To the contrary, he said that he painted it over the summer of 1943. The record has been definitively corrected by conservation and technical studies conducted at the Getty Conservation and Research Institutes in 2012 to 2014, confirming that, not surprisingly, given the painting’s size and the importance of the commission, Pollock worked on *Mural* over an extended period. There’s physical evidence that he not only

applied wet paint onto still-wet areas, rapidly, but also allowed layers to dry (this can take days or even weeks) before approaching the canvas again. In fact, this can be seen if we look closely at *Mural* and concentrate on the way its radiant pinks, varied blues, sharp yellows, and forthright black and blue-black swipes are imposed on each other, remaining distinct and crisp as they intersect and surround zones of lighter hues that melt together. There's none of the dense piling up of pigment so characteristic of Pollock's early easel paintings, nor is there any of the dragging and smudging that later became a signature of Abstract Expressionist angst, especially among Willem de Kooning's followers—a method ultimately so common that it was dismissively termed “the Tenth Street touch” by Clement Greenberg, but one that was never of interest to Pollock.

The fact that *Mural* was made with deliberation and consideration rather than in a headlong rush may not accord with the popular characterization of the admittedly troubled and alcoholic Pollock as tormented, driven, and prone to working in a drunken frenzy—a view described by a colleague as arising from “the van Gogh's ear school of art history.” It is, however, perfectly congruent with the graceful man we see pouring controlled trickles and delicately tapping and flicking paint off the end of sticks in Hans Namuth's celebrated film of Pollock at work in 1950. It is supported, too, by his friend and champion Greenberg's frequently repeated assertion that Pollock was always cold sober when he painted. Certainly knowing that *Mural* evolved over a period of time does nothing to weaken the impact of its ample, calligraphic brush marks—unscrolling across the entire length of the canvas and arcing from top to bottom—or to slow the unpredictable play of its light-struck palette. Pollock himself described the roiling rhythms of *Mural* as “a stampede . . . every animal in the American West . . . cows and horses and antelopes and buffaloes. Everything is charging across that goddamn surface.” Was he thinking of the powerful, economically rendered animals on the walls of prehistoric caves? Or of cave painting filtered through his own experi-

ence of the landscape and wildlife of the West when he accompanied his father on surveying trips, growing up in California?

After conservation of *Mural* was completed, the painting was shown at the Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice, in 2015, and was then featured in a large survey of Abstract Expressionism at the Royal Academy, London, in 2016–17, before being exhibited at the National Gallery, Washington, D.C. Now we can see Pollock's magnum opus in New York, in “Away from the Easel: Jackson Pollock's *Mural*” at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum—the first showing of the canvas here since the Museum of Modern Art's Pollock retrospective in 1998–99.¹

The vast picture is installed more or less at its originally intended height, in excellent light, in one of the upper-floor galleries off the rotunda, so we can not only admire its sheer size and audacity from a distance (farther than was possible in Guggenheim's hallway, it would seem, which is a good thing), but also come close enough to scrutinize its subtleties. We can get lost in the complexities of its surface and discover its nuanced color. We can take in its chalky pinks, green-tinged blues, and acidic yellows, applied opaquely, in contrast to the pastel, softly brushed, more transparent hues that escape from beneath the generous gestural “drawing” or were added as infill in areas surrounded by loops and curves. We can savor *Mural*'s unexpected variations in paint application, noting trickles and bubbles that sit on top of the surface, reminding us that the label itemizes the mediums as oil and casein—a water-based, opaque pigment that would remain distinct and spattery when applied over oil paint. We note a few drips and splatters, signs of energy and speed, but mostly we revel in the assurance and fluidity of the biggest marks—the oversized, dark swoops and slashes, obviously made in the final stages of the painting, that unify the shifting expanse

1 “Away from the Easel: Jackson Pollock's *Mural*” opened at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, on October 3, 2020, and remains on view through September 19, 2021.

and assert the “stampede” of movement that Pollock clearly sought. Making suave marks with conviction, at the scale of the rhythmic “procession” of *Mural*, is not easy. The vigor and energy of those big arcs and flourishes are testimony to both Pollock’s fearlessness and energy. (In the section of the Ed Harris movie devoted to *Mural*, those last marks are the actor’s first interventions on the canvas; I said it was silly.)

Spend some time looking closely, and we can be completely absorbed by trying to figure out how the picture was made. If we pay attention, we quickly notice that even though the dominant chromatic colors—pink, blue-green, acid yellow, and notes of cinnabar red—are distributed fairly evenly in looping strokes across the surface, there is nothing systematic about the sequence in which they appear to have been applied. Pink is on top of blue-green in some places, underneath in others. Pollock may have worked across the entire expanse of the canvas with a single color—as he seems to have done in his poured paintings—but he also appears to have returned later to a particular hue, perhaps in response to what developed when he added strokes of another color. The result is a pulsing fabric of touches, both bold and delicate. It’s as if Pollock thought of the literal fact of the canvas on which *Mural* was painted neither as something to be dissembled—to be dissolved by the viewer’s imagination, as in Renaissance paintings—nor as an inviolable flat expanse. Instead, the surface plane becomes something that could be penetrated freely or hovered against to create an ambiguous, constantly shifting, indeterminate space that can hold our attention endlessly.

Peggy Guggenheim’s commitment to Pollock continued even after she closed Art of This Century in 1947 and moved to Venice; in 1950, she arranged for his first European exhibition to be held at the Museo Correr. But she didn’t take *Mural* with her. Instead, she donated it to the University of Iowa, which seems to have dithered about the gift, probably because of the size of the painting. Initially, the university objected to what it saw as the high price of shipping the work

from New York, but it eventually relented. *Mural* was first installed in the university’s School of Art and Art History and finally moved to the university museum in 1969. (A small mystery: The exhibition wall text gives 1951 as the date of the donation, while the painting’s accession number is 1959.6. Assuming that the University of Iowa agreed to accept the work in 1951, was it then officially transferred to the museum in 1959 and left hanging in the School of Art and Art History for a decade, before being physically moved to the University’s Stanley Museum?)

At the Guggenheim, *Mural* is contextualized by three additional paintings. *The She-Wolf* (1943, Museum of Modern Art, New York) was featured in Pollock’s solo exhibition at Art of This Century at the end of that year and purchased by MOMA at the end of 1944, making it the first of his works to enter a museum collection. The mythological reference—to the wolf who suckled Romulus and Remus—is typical of the period. Think of Adolph Gottlieb’s variants on the story of Oedipus or Martha Graham’s improvisations on Greek tragedies. Pollock’s four-square beast, in stylized profile, all but fills the canvas, nearly subsumed by brushy swirls, strokes, scribbles, scrubs, and assertive black drawing, rather like the big gestures of *Mural*, with relatively broad areas of opaque dark gray alternating as background and as imposition, employed to clarify and cancel. *The She-Wolf* shares, too, the horror vacui of *Mural* and most of Pollock’s other works—his insistence on filling just about every inch of the canvas with full-throttle incident—a characteristic that transubstantiates into the sensuous all-over webs of his strongest paintings. Greenberg reviewed the Art of This Century show in *The Nation*, singling out several canvases (but not *The She-Wolf*) as “among the strongest works I have yet seen by an American” and writing that “There are both surprise and fulfillment in Jackson Pollock’s not so abstract abstractions.”

How those surprises evolved can be seen at the Guggenheim in the tough, confrontational *Ocean Greyness* (1953, Solomon R. Gug-

genheim Museum), with its heaving knots and coils of near-primary hues submerged in an expanse of brushy grays and scrawls of black, a painting whose insistent rhythms echo, at a very different scale, the thundering progression of *Mural*. In the context of the Guggenheim installation, *Ocean Greyness* stands for Pollock's return to applying paint with a brush and, probably, to working on a vertical surface, as he did on *Mural*, after years of pouring on canvas laid on the floor. The only letdown in "Away from the Easel" is the small *Untitled (Green Silver)* (ca. 1949, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum), included as emblematic of the poured paintings. Unfortunately, it's clotted, airless, and pretty obviously a not-too-felicitous crop from a larger field. At the National Gallery, *Mural* was accompanied by the museum's own radiant *Number 1, 1950 (Lavender Mist)*, one of Pollock's most transcendent, diaphanous expanses of fragile swirls and trails, which read as both descending from and expanding upon the pictorial ideas announced by Peggy Guggenheim's commission. If the intention of the Guggenheim's Megan Fontanella, the curator of "Away from the Easel," was to denigrate the poured paintings and emphasize the significance of Pollock's brush marks, then the presence of *Untitled (Green Silver)* makes sense. But while I realize there are few things more irritating than critics who try to rethink carefully considered exhibitions, it's impossible not to wonder why the airy *No. 18* (1950) or the assertive *Alchemy* (1947), both in the Guggenheim's permanent collection, wasn't co-opted to stand for the poured paintings in general. Neither comes close to *Number 1, 1950 (Lavender Mist)*, but the muscular, horizontal *Alchemy*, in particular, with its syncopated rhythms and counterpoint of white marks, would have demonstrated the persistence of *Mural*'s DNA very effectively. And, since it is fairly modest in size, it would have almost certainly fit on the wall where *Untitled (Green Silver)* is installed. Still, it's churlish to complain. *Untitled (Green Silver)* may not add much, but it's exciting and nourishing to see *Mural*, both for its own merits and with its other companions.

Exhibition notes

"Jordan Casteel: Within Reach"
The New Museum, New York.
February 19, 2020–January 3, 2021

Strolling through "Jordan Casteel: Within Reach," I was reminded of my time as a graduate student in the mid-1980s, a moment when Neo-Expressionism was just past its peak and the vacuum-sealed truisms of Post-Modernism were gaining a toehold in the collective consciousness. Among the controversies of the time was whether certain artists deserved their reputations, given their relative youth. David Salle and Julian Schnabel—there are others, but these two are lodged in memory—were fêted with museum exhibitions at the respective ages of thirty-five and thirty-six. Serious Artist-types harrumphed at the audacity. How could a Young Turk survive, let alone carry, a retrospective when history favors late bloomers? Titian, Matisse, Willem de Kooning, and Romare Bearden were settling into middle-age when they became the figures we now esteem. There have been Young Masters, of course: Raphael and Vermeer died before the age of forty, and their achievements were, to put it mildly, remarkable. Still, artists tend to gain in range and depth from prolonged experience with life. Posterity smiles, only occasionally, upon the whipper-snapper.

The Eighties were a signal time in the art world; strange, too. But the New York scene has become stranger still—political grandstanding coupled with a hyperbolic marketplace will do that to a subculture. Young artists are no longer frowned upon, and they are regularly (as a dealer of acquaintance put it) "cradle snatched" by curators, collectors, and critics. Are young folks more in tune with our kaleidoscopic world—as we are often led to believe—or are they more apt to latch onto it? The former connotes prescience; the latter, a chase after the bandwagon. Jordan Casteel is an interesting case in point. She has achieved astonishing success in a short span of time. Months after earning her MFA from Yale in 2014, Casteel had a solo exhibition in Manhattan, went on to a prestigious residency at The

Studio Museum of Harlem, and was picked up by the art world *macher* Casey Kaplan. Jerry Saltz, the art critic for *New York* magazine, wrote that Casteel is “prepared to take a rightful place on the front lines of contemporary painting.” *The New York Times*? Casteel has received half a dozen notices—more recognition from our paper of record than most artists get in a lifetime. And since we’re keeping tabs: Casteel is thirty-one years old.

Good for Casteel: we should all be showed with attention and plaudits. Whether they are earned is another matter. Voluminous press, enviable sales, and the profile that inevitably accompanies them aren’t necessarily indicators of aesthetic quality or staying power. Art ultimately thrives on its independence and integrity, on how adroitly its requisite properties are shaped and how they embody and shade qualities we intuit as human commonalities. How good are Casteel’s paintings? (An impolitic question given the hierarchy-free nostrums of contemporary culture.) Fans of the terminally avant-garde will be taken aback by Casteel’s conservatism. Unlike the usual fare at The New Museum, Casteel doesn’t partake in installations of bric-à-brac or heady nostrums given bare-bones packaging. No bells and whistles, thank you very much: oil on canvas will do. Portraiture is Casteel’s *métier*: the sitter is the locus of, and inspiration for, the artist’s vision. Upon entering “Within Reach,” one can’t help but take note of the intimacy informing Casteel’s art—something of a paradox given its larger-than-life scale. Empathy and warmth are rare commodities in art as in life. Casteel’s best portraits are suffused with both.

In the catalogue interview, Casteel tells Thelma Golden, the director and chief curator at the Studio Museum, that “being a black artist painting people of color is a nonnegotiable, unchangeable fact.” She goes on to wonder if “it is possible to be a person from a marginalized community and still make ‘art for art’s sake.’” Casteel goes some way in answering the question with *The Baayfalls* (2017), a portrait of a Harlem street vendor and her brother, a recent visitor—or émigré—from Senegal. (The painting was recreated as a large mural adjacent

to New York’s High Line on Twenty-second Street.) It’s an unlikely and ambitious inventory of pictorial tacks: representation vies with abstraction; vibrant colors are lodged within encompassing fields of gray, black, and white; volume and mass—that is to say, dimension—coexist with attenuated-bordering-on-blasé linework. The woman pictured, Fallou, makes a devotional gesture derived from the Sufi Brotherhood, but it is the presence of her brother, Baaye Demba Sow, that cinches the painting. Casteel renders his skin with a steely range of blue-blacks and captures a temperament—a moment, really—that is simultaneously world-weary and august. Romare Bearden aimed to “paint the life of my people as I know it . . . as Bruegel painted the life of the Flemish people of his day.” Casteel has accomplished something like this with *The Baayfalls*.

Casteel isn’t up to the Bearden standard—few of us are—and it’s worth mulling if there are better role models for figurative painters than Alice Neel. Casteel is on record extolling Neel’s “freshness and sense of perfection,” and the influence is there to see. Casteel’s art is mercifully free of Neel’s cruel bonhomie, and her serpentine paint-handling is more generous in spirit and momentum. Like Neel, however, Casteel doesn’t carry her pictorial machinations throughout the entirety of the paintings. The backdrops for her subjects are, well, *backdrops*. Oddly crumpled in character, Casteel’s compositions are patchwork affairs, and the flattened light that defines them betrays too strong a dependence on the photographs that serve as source material. Casteel is liveliest when pattern and color are given a measure of independence: the red-and-green garment glimpsed in *Her Turn* (2018), for example, or the choppy run of textiles seen in *Noelle and Serwaa and Amoakobene* (2019). Casteel might take a look at Edouard Vuillard and his melding of portraiture and pattern—or Gwen John, a painter who did away with backdrops altogether. It’s enough to make you think that a bit of art-for-art’s-sake might transform “unchangeable fact” into something richer, wilder, and true. “Within Reach,” indeed: let’s see where Casteel takes us.

—Mario Naves

“George Bellows:
Sport, Leisure, and Lithography”
Virginia Museum of Fine Arts,
Richmond.
July 11–November 29, 2020

In 1904, George Bellows (1882–1925) skipped his final exams at Ohio State University and moved to New York to start a career as an illustrator. He quickly befriended the artists of the city, taking classes from Robert Henri alongside peers such as Edward Hopper, John Sloan, and Rockwell Kent. Before his life was cut short by a ruptured appendix, Bellows followed a unique path through American modernism, falling in with neither abstraction nor surrealism, adhering to Realism above all—depicting the body (individual and aggregate) in age and youth, in motion and stillness, portraying the metropolis, always trying to get “hold of life . . . of something real.”

Bellows’s career advanced quickly. By the time of the 1913 Armory Show—in which he exhibited six paintings and eight drawings—he was well known enough to assist in designing the show’s layout and installing the artworks. He expressed a grudging appreciation for Marcel Duchamp’s *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2* hanging nearby, but four years later, viewing that same artist’s *Fountain*, a urinal signed “R. Mutt,” the Midwestern pragmatist could only shake his head at the fatuousness of European ideas. The story goes that he had a heated argument with the curator Walter Arensberg, rejecting the ready-made as a joke and asking “Do you mean that if an artist put horse manure on a canvas and sent it to the exhibition, we would have to accept it?” (We can guess what he would have thought of Chris Ofili and Andres Serrano.)

Skeptic of modernism though he might have been, Bellows was also, as this small but potent exhibition at the VMFA demonstrates, a master and innovator in the challenging medium of lithography. *Self-Portrait* (1921) makes for a curious opener. Bellows stares out of a daguerreotype-style framing device, his coat unbuttoned, sketching crayon in right hand, cigarette in left, his chin buried in his bow tie. Bald-headed and slightly paunchy, the artist

looks like an exhausted bank clerk rather than a veteran chronicler of rowdy boxing matches and sweaty crowds on Coney Island. He is stolid and still, but there’s a sense of motion as the eye circles around the curving frame, roving over the active hands drawn just a little too large and puzzling over the intricately detailed background.

In 1915, Bellows was sent by *Metropolitan Magazine* to document the revivals of Billy Sunday, the “baseball evangelist.” Sunday had been traveling the salvation circuit since 1907; by the time Bellows received the long-coveted assignment to cover him, his revivals were so spectacular they competed for media attention with news of World War I. *The Sawdust Trail* (1917) uses a double-register composition that quotes liberally from Raphael’s *Transfiguration*: in the bottom half, a mass of spectators—swooning, crying, confessing, doubting—anchors the top half where we see the many cogs in the well-oiled Sunday machine. There is formidable Ma Sunday, wife and bodyguard; Mr. Cardiff the masseur; Mr. Rodeheaver the choirmaster; a gaggle of scribbling reporters; and the carpenter who built the wooden tabernacles in each city. (We know this because *Metropolitan* also printed a helpful diagram of “dramatis personae” alongside Bellows’s picture.) These temporary halls, floors covered in sawdust, held tens of thousands, as Bellows shows in *Billy Sunday* (1923), a brilliant work of satire and dynamism. Sunday, in shirtsleeves, has leapt atop the press desk, his legs wide apart, left arm pointing energetically, right arm pulled back, fist balled—just like an umpire calling “Stee-riiike!” from his baseball days. Emotions in the crowd run the gamut from adoration and despair to fear and repulsion; one gent in a uniform—a policeman planted in the front row for crowd control?—turns delicately aside as if to avoid flying spittle.

In *Reducing Exercises* (1916), a woman does leg lifts on the floor while the man in bed squeezes in a few more minutes of sleep. There’s a sense of slovenliness and indecency in the room: a checkerboard quilt spills off the open-mouthed snorer, and the curvaceous figure of the woman with her nightgown pulled

up to her waist exhibits a pair of apparently bare legs. Bellows's debt to Renoir (and Toulouse-Lautrec) is clear here. In fact, the Italian sculptor Victor Salvatore related that when Bellows saw Renoir's work in the Armory Show, he was so entranced that he talked up the French impressionist to everyone he met; Salvatore contends that Bellows's praise played a large part in the success of Renoir's work in America.

Although Bellows created numerous images of tennis matches at the Newport Casino, it is the boxing pictures for which he is best known. Each sport had its appeal: the athleticism and grace of the players, the mix of classes among the spectators, including ladies high and low, and the variety of body types and clothing in a mass gathering. But it is clear when seeing these images together that the rawness and brutality of pugilism drew out Bellows in a way that the more genteel realm of tennis did not; in the former, he tends toward the expressionistic while the latter has the feel of a sort of Beaux Arts classicism.

A Stag at Sharkey's (painted in 1909, the lithograph on display here was made in 1917) remains his best known boxing image. In his essay for the landmark traveling 1992 Bellows exhibition, the curator Michael Quick revealed the compositional underpinning of this work and several others, providing empirical evidence for what the eye has already discovered. *A Stag at Sharkey's*, with its strong triangular composition, demonstrates Bellows's deep understanding of structure. Quick estimates that the artist may here have used one or all three of the standard geometries: rebatment (the implied square inside a rectangle), proportionate division, and the golden section (an aesthetically pleasing ratio used since ancient times in art and architecture). At the center of *Sharkey's* is a tangle of forceful bodies: the two boxers and a shadowy referee. The boxers are so intertwined that it's difficult to detect where one head ends and the other begins. The

tonalities of the print are marvelous with light and shadow outlining the muscled bodies and picking out spectators' faces and shirtsleeves. The effect is, well, like a flawlessly placed right hook.

The White Hope (1921) uses a more obvious right-triangle composition, showing Jack Johnson, the first black heavyweight champ, drawing back after sending his opponent, Jim Jeffries, to the mat. Jeffries, in a pose reminiscent of the Capitoline's *Dying Gaul* statue, is an example of Bellows's interest in classical subject matter "democratized" (in the words of the curators) in American art. What's remarkable about *this* pose in *this* context is not that Bellows possesses an encyclopedic knowledge of art but that he can draw an effortless emotional connection between a centuries-old Hellenistic statue and a modern American gladiator.

So much of Bellows's imagery centered on New York City, from the massive excavation for Penn Station (1904–09) to scenes of tenements, parks, and streets. When he lived and worked there, New York was a metropolis unique among big cities, its hallmarks progress and vitality. In our present period of pandemic and protests, New York is experiencing an exodus as more people find the city isn't what they dreamed it would be. In Richmond, too, at the time of this writing, there is evidence of a "lost world." The massive equestrian statue of General Stonewall Jackson that once stood on the boulevard that leads to the VMFA has been removed, its pedestal now ignominious with graffiti. A nearby commercial district is filled with boarded-up shops, their contents looted during a series of summer turmoils. The energy and vigor that is on display in Bellows's prints would seem sentimental and outmoded were it not for an American self-assurance bolstered by keen technical skills and deep humanism. How far will the spirit that Bellows so ably captured recede before it is lost forever?

—Leann Davis Alspaugh

Peripatetic president

by *Eric Gibson*

If there's one American monument that's difficult to love, it's Horatio Greenough's *George Washington* (1841). Now located at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History, the twelve-foot tall marble statue is a commemorative portrait of the Father of Our Country in the neoclassical style—Washington as some combination of Greek god and Roman senator, one hand pointing to the heavens and the other proffering a sword in its scabbard as the man himself stares straight ahead. And that's the problem. The toga, the sandals, the exposed torso with its ripped abs, the rhetorical gesture (which means what, exactly?) all give this work a faintly comical air, the opposite, needless to say, of what the artist intended.

That's predictable enough as a twenty-first-century view. But what's remarkable, as we learn from Harry Rand's absorbing and groundbreaking *Horatio Greenough and the Form Majestic*, is that it's the way the statue was perceived from the very beginning, not just after its unveiling but even while the artist was working on it, a fact which makes this book not only timely, but also revelatory.¹

Rand, a senior curator at the NMAH and the author, previously, of an important study of the Abstract Expressionist painter Arshile Gorky, has subtitled his book "The Biography of the Nation's First Washington Monument."

1 *Horatio Greenough and the Form Majestic: The Biography of the Nation's First Washington Monument*, by Harry Rand; Smithsonian Institution Scholarly Press, 252 pages, \$35.

But it is far more than that: a tale of origin about both American sculpture and the country's monumental tradition; a distant mirror in which we see reflected many of the issues vexing public commemoration today; and a sad account of the fraught afterlife of the artist's creation, which became doomed, in Rand's words, to a "fitfully ignominious journey as the statue wandered homeless, misunderstood and often resented where it landed."

Greenough (1805–52) was the first American to choose sculpture as a profession and to train for it—in Italy, since the United States at that time could offer no such opportunity. From the first he aspired to securing a large governmental commission and marshalled influential friends, such as the painter Washington Allston, the philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson, and the novelist James Fenimore Cooper, to lobby on his behalf.

In 1832 Congress, which since Washington's death in 1799 had planned a national monument honoring him, awarded Greenough the commission for a statue to be installed in the Capitol Rotunda. The idea—don't laugh—was that it would serve as a continuing reminder of Washington's disinterested statesmanship and inspire similar conduct in the legislators of both chambers.

Today it seems logical that an American should get such a commission. But given the young country's virtually nonexistent artistic tradition, the practice up to that point had been to look to Europe for the necessary talent. Thus Jean-Antoine Houdon had

crossed the Atlantic in 1785 to sculpt the portrait of Washington for the Virginia State House in Richmond, and four decades later Antonio Canova portrayed Washington for North Carolina's.

Greenough's commission even came with the proviso that he copy Washington's head from Houdon's statue. This suggests Congress was expecting a work that presented Washington in a way that corresponded to the public's image of the man, as Houdon had done in depicting him in contemporary garb. If so, they were to be disappointed, for Greenough was thinking for the ages. He saw the commission as an opportunity to establish himself as *the* public sculptor of his day and to elevate the art form itself to an instrument of civic education. In his view, with changing fashions Washington's attire would soon become outmoded and anachronistic, thus diminishing the man. So Greenough turned to neoclassicism as the only way to attain an appropriately lofty tone and elevate his subject from the everyday to the timeless.

Alas, this proved a fatal error. From Florence, where he was working (since the United States lacked trained artisans capable of translating the finished plaster into stone), Greenough sent a working drawing to Congress. The members disliked the figure's nakedness, failed to understand the meaning of the upraised arm, and felt the statue was more emblem than likeness. In response Greenough swung between doubts and the impulse to double down, his vacillation not helped by the conflicting counsel from Allston and other friends who variously advised him to make the figure more realistic or more classical. At one point Greenough considered shipping the plaster model to Washington for a ye or nay vote from Congress; ultimately, he never did.

In July 1841 the finished statue arrived in Washington and was installed in the Capitol Rotunda in December. Opinion formed quickly, and it was mostly negative. The architect Charles Bulfinch spoke for many when he wrote to a friend, "I fear it will cause much disappointment—it may be an exquisite piece of work, but our people will hardly be satis-

fied with looking on well-developed muscle when they wish to see the great man as their imagination has painted him. . . . And now I fear that this with you will only give the idea of entering or leaving a bath."

Greenough might have stood a chance had his work been well displayed. But in these days before electricity, the Rotunda was a gloomy space whose only illumination came directly from above, causing the bottom of Washington's face to be obscured in shadow. Within months Greenough was asking that the statue be moved outdoors. It fared no better in front of the west entrance—the sun's glare caused harsh contrasts of light and shadow, eliminating whatever nuances of form the sculpture possessed. Over the next three decades it was repositioned twice on the Capitol grounds. By the early twentieth century the decision was made to move it indoors to the Smithsonian. By then the statue had weathered so badly that the first rigging crew declined, saying the sculpture's condition was "only a little better than chalk." It eventually made the journey—minus original base and pedestal, to lighten the load—to the Smithsonian's Castle, where part of a wall had to be removed to get it in. There it remained until 1962, when it moved for the last time to its present location in front of an escalator bank, a nineteenth-century American sculpture in an eighteenth-century European style housed in a mid-twentieth-century modernist building. In the following decade Joshua C. Taylor, the director of what is now the Smithsonian American Art Museum, proposed moving it back to the Capitol Rotunda, but that was out of the question. The statue had been installed during construction, with the building completed around it, effectively immuring it in perpetuity.

The consequence of all this was to turn the statue from an aspirational memorial into something perilously close to a kitsch icon. Rand is particularly effective at charting this tragic transformation. Outdoors, with Washington, D.C., not yet the built-up city we know today, and little in the immediate vicinity to give it scale, the sculpture appeared marooned, and the "vastness pounded [it] to insignificance." Fifty years later, some people climbed on it during a

boisterous parade, damaging it, an event that signaled the work's "lowest point," he says. "The monument intended . . . to symbolically anchor the political life of the country was reduced to a forgotten prop, jostled in a crowd." Given a new base on its move to the Castle, officials felt the need to carve its subject's name into the front, indicating that the memorial, as Rand writes, "had transformed into an artifact that no longer spoke to viewers."

Worse was to come with the move to the NMAH, whose low ceilings required jettisoning the new base. "The low ceiling made Washington's upward gesture ridiculous, and without its base, the piece appeared a squat curiosity," Rand writes. Then there was its location, directly in front of a pair of escalators, where "the truncated monument was reduced to an 'Up' sign." (It has since been screened off from the escalators, but not entirely; they remain visible from certain angles.)

Since "Washington himself spoke directly in plain prose," Rand writes at one point, "he was unlikely to be well interpreted by classical imagery and complicated symbolic gestures." That sums up the statue's problem precisely. The combination in a single work of art of Houdon's physical and psychological realism with the lofty and ennobling but archaizing language of the antique wasn't just a clash of stylistic opposites. It was what that clash signified: that evocations of ancient Greece or Imperial Rome were hardly appropriate when it came to celebrating the achievements of a democratic republic centered around the idea of the common man. America needed to find a commemorative language that fit its character as a nation.

This it would not do until the arrival on the scene of two sculptors born soon after Greenough's statue was installed in the Capitol: Augustus Saint-Gaudens (1845–1907) and Daniel Chester French (1850–1931). Both would imbue their work with the necessary historical gravitas not by adopting an older style or evoking an earlier civilization or historical epoch, but by looking to the masterpieces of the past as formal templates. Thus the model for Saint-Gaudens's statue of Admiral Farragut (1876–81) was Donatello's *St. George* (1416) in

Florence, while that for French's *Minute Man* (1871–75) was the Apollo Belvedere (ca. 120–40 A.D.) in Rome. Moreover, Saint-Gaudens's version of Beaux-Arts realism—appropriately descriptive but above all plastically alive—enabled him to depict his subjects in the clothes they wore without risk of the deadening pedantry or anachronism that Greenough had so feared. Nonetheless, the challenge of devising appropriate monuments and memorials did not go away entirely. French would confront it head on in his Lincoln Memorial commission.

Greenough makes no appearance in Harold Holzer's recent biography of French. But after reading Rand's book, I'm convinced that *George Washington* was much on French's mind as he developed his ideas for the Lincoln Memorial's eponymous statue. Thanks to Rand's book we now know that French was familiar with Greenough's sculpture, since he tells us that French was one of four prominent sculptors who in 1905 recommended to the government that the statue be relocated to the Capitol Rotunda. The concept of French's commission, an enthroned figure, was identical to Greenough's, and so was the challenge: the forced marriage of a revered national icon—moreover one who, as "the rail splitter," embodied the idea of the common man even more than Washington—and the language of classicism, in this case the architect Henry Bacon's Greek temple housing it and the Roman fasces in relief on the front of Lincoln's chair.

But the way French approached his subject—and this is why he must have been familiar with the troubled history of the Greenough memorial—reads almost as a point-by-point refutation of Greenough. Unlike the earlier artist, French did a site inspection with the work, bringing a full-size photograph of the twelve-foot high statue to Bacon's structure to test whether it would be dwarfed in the imposing space or hold its own. Concluding that it needed to be much bigger, he settled on a height of nineteen feet.

French's most visible and deliberate renunciation of Greenough, of course, is in his treatment of the figure. In place of the other artist's hieratic classicism, French adopts an easeful naturalism. This was in its own way

something of a gamble: the sixteenth president could have looked as out of place amid the fluted columns and fasces as did Washington in a toga. Yet French's rendering is pitch-perfect. While endowing Lincoln with an appropriate air of gravitas, French gives us the flesh-and-blood figure we know from Mathew Brady's photographs. As I wrote of the sculpture in my review of Holzer's book in this magazine last year ("Voice of the nation," March 2019),

The figure of Lincoln projects relaxation, alertness, and contemplation, and French's grace notes—the drooping forelock, the casually draped jacket, and the asymmetrical legs, not tensed yet not fully relaxed—substitute the deadening stasis that informs so many statues of this kind with a compelling vividness and spontaneity. He has endowed a seated figure with the feeling of active presence, as if Lincoln has just taken his seat and is now turning his attention toward us.

In one area, however, French couldn't escape the Greenough precedent: illumination. It would take a further seven years of work after the memorial's 1922 dedication before he was satisfied with the way the play of light and shadow articulated the sculpture's form.

Greenough died in 1852 in a mental institution outside Boston, but his dreams of becoming the American Houdon and of making sculpture a socially useful, didactic art had expired earlier, with his first major commission. The newly unveiled Dwight D. Eisenhower Memorial in the nation's capital and the controversy surrounding its evolution is but the latest indication that the issues raised by his *George Washington* are still very much with us: What is an appropriate commemorative language? How do you convey gravitas, not bathos—a heroic mode, not a bombastic one? In this regard, it's noteworthy that the most successful public monument in our time, Maya Lin's Vietnam Veterans Memorial (1982), addresses us not in a shared vernacular but in the private language of abstraction. George Washington may have been the Father of Our Country, but Horatio Greenough was the father of all our monumental dilemmas.

Statement of ownership, management & circulation

TITLE OF PUBLICATION: The New Criterion

PUBLICATION NO: 705-590

DATE OF FILING: October 1, 2020

FREQUENCY OF ISSUE: Monthly except July and August.

NO. OF ISSUES PUBLISHED ANNUALLY: 10.

ANNUAL SUBSCRIPTION PRICE: \$48

COMPLETE MAILING ADDRESS OF KNOWN OFFICE OF PUBLICATION: 900 Broadway, Suite 602, New York, NY 10003 Manhattan County

COMPLETE MAILING ADDRESS OF THE HEADQUARTERS OF GENERAL BUSINESS OFFICES OF THE PUBLISHER: Same.

FULL NAMES & COMPLETE MAILING ADDRESS OF THE PUBLISHER, EDITOR & EXECUTIVE EDITOR: Editor & Publisher: Roger Kimball, 900 Broadway, Suite 602, New York, NY 10003; Executive Editor: James Panero, 900 Broadway, Suite 602, New York, NY 10003.

OWNER: Foundation for Cultural Review, Inc., 900 Broadway, Suite 602, New York, NY 10003 (a nonprofit public foundation as described in Section 501 (c) (3) of the Internal Revenue code, which solicits and accepts contributions from a wide range of sources, including public and private foundations, corporations, and the general public).

KNOWN BONDHOLDERS, MORTGAGES & OTHER SECURITY HOLDERS OWNING OR HOLDING 1 PERCENT OR MORE OF TOTAL AMOUNT OF BONDS, MORTGAGES OR OTHER SECURITIES: None.

FOR COMPLETION BY NONPROFIT ORGANIZATIONS AUTHORIZED TO MAIL AT SPECIAL RATES: The purpose, function, and nonprofit status of this organization and the exempt status for Federal income tax purposes has not changed during the preceding 12 months.

EXTENT & NATURE OF CIRCULATION:

Total no. copies printed: Avg. no. copies each issue during preceding 12 months: 11,396; Actual no. copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: 11,356.

Paid and/or requested circulation: (1) Paid/Requested Outside-County Mail Subscriptions Stated on Form 3541: Avg. no. copies each issue during preceding 12 months: 6,052; Actual no. copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: 7,192. (2) Paid In-County Subscriptions: Avg. no. copies each issue during preceding 12 months: 0; Actual no. copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: 0. (3) Sales through dealers and carries, street vendors, counter Sales, and Other Non-USPS Paid Distribution: Avg. no. copies each issue during preceding 12 months: 1,370; Actual no. copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: 2,160. (4) Other classes mailed through the USPS: Avg. no. copies each issue during preceding 12 months: 0; Actual no. copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: 0.

Total paid and/or requested circulation: Avg. no. copies each issue during preceding 12 months: 8,210; Actual no. copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: 9,352.

Free distribution by mail: (1) Outside-County as Stated on form 3541: Avg. no. copies each issue during preceding 12 months: 461; Actual no. copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: 494. (2) In-County as Stated on Form 3541: Avg. no. copies each issue during preceding 12 months: 0; Actual no. copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: 0. (3) Other classes mailed through the USPS: Avg. no. copies each issue during preceding 12 months: 64; Actual no. copies of single issue published nearest filing date: 80.

Free Distribution Outside the Mail: Avg. no. copies each issue during preceding 12 months: 1,686; Actual no. copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: 618.

Total free distribution: Avg. no. copies each issue during preceding 12 months: 2,211; Actual no. copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: 1,192.

Total distribution: Avg. no. copies each issue during preceding 12 months: 10,421; Actual no. copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: 10,544.

Copies not distributed: Avg. no. copies each issue during preceding 12 months: 975; Actual no. copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: 812.

TOTAL: Avg. no. copies each issue during preceding 12 months: 11,396; percent paid and/or requested circulation: 79%. Actual no. copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: 11,356; percent paid and/or requested circulation: 89%.

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Music

Livestream chronicle

by Jay Nordlinger

Back in March, many people thought the shutdown would last two or three weeks, which seemed an eternity. At the Metropolitan Opera, a run of *Werther* (Massenet) was set to begin on March 16. The company canceled the first five performances—of six. But the sixth was left uncanceled. See what hope dwelt in breasts back then?

In response to the initial cancellations, Joyce DiDonato, the American mezzo-soprano, did something neat. She was to sing Charlotte in *Werther*, with Piotr Beczala, the Polish tenor, in the title role. Shut out of the opera house, DiDonato invited Beczala into her apartment, for a livestream. They sang excerpts from the opera, accompanied by a piano and a harp. I believe this was the first livestream of what would become a world of livestreams.

“Since we can’t sing on Monday night,” DiDonato told the online audience, “we thought, ‘Let’s get together in this salon,’ like they used to do in the old days—which we might have to do in the new days, too.”

Not long after, the Met canceled the rest of the 2019–20 season. Around June 1, they canceled the first half of the 2020–21 season. In September, they announced the cancellation of the entire season.

But the Met has not been idle. On April 25, they produced an “at-home gala” featuring more than forty performers, wherever they lived, or happened to be. Nightly, they have been streaming performances of the past: performances of complete operas. They also produce a series called “Met Stars Live in Concert.” These con-

certs air on Saturday afternoons, and cost \$20 to watch. They remain watchable for a period—two weeks or so—thereafter. This is a way for the Met to stay connected to its public, as Peter Gelb, the company’s general manager, has said. Is this important?

I remember when New York City Opera decided to “go dark” for a season, about ten years ago. Some people warned that this could have very bad consequences for the company: out of sight, out of mind, you know. I was skeptical. The company had been around since 1943! It was a fixture! Surely it could sit out a season, to get its act together. But, you know? That dark season did have a baleful effect on the company.

Last June, I was podcasting with George F. Will, and one of the questions that arose was: *Should there be a rump baseball season, something cobbled together to resemble a season?* Will said he was of two minds. A short season capped by “a make-believe World Series” would be “deeply unsatisfying.” But then, “for baseball to go seventeen, eighteen months without being in the national mind is a grave risk to a sport that has seen seven consecutive years of declining attendance.”

The Metropolitan Opera has been around, not since 1943, but since 1883. It can afford to sit out a season (one would think). Yet the need for the company to “stay connected”—not to mention solvent—is understandable.

The “Met Stars Live in Concert” series has a host, Christine Goerke, the American soprano, who appears in a control room in New York City.

She does her job with crispness, poise, and affability. Another American soprano, Beverly Sills, would have done this job, once upon a time. (She actually substituted for Johnny Carson on *The Tonight Show*.) Peter Gelb makes cameo appearances. During these concerts, the singers need breaks, and the Met fills them with videos of past performances by the singers. Or pre-taped interviews with them.

Sometimes there are glitches—technical glitches, as when you Zoom with your great-aunt. These can be almost charming. In any event, the Met concerts are enjoyable affairs, something one could get used to, in pandemic times and non-

The first concert brought us Jonas Kaufmann, from the Polling Abbey, in Bavaria—specifically, from its library. By the look of it, it is a former library. There was not a book in sight. And when Kaufmann coughed or cleared his throat, between arias, the sound reverberated, there being nothing to block it: no books, no people, no anything. In any case, Polling Abbey makes a beautiful venue indeed.

Kaufmann is a German tenor, born in 1969, and he was accompanied by Helmut Deutsch, an Austrian pianist, born in 1945. Their program consisted of twelve opera arias, in Italian and French (not one in the singer's native language). (Consider, too, that the pianist's name is "German"!) I don't believe I had ever heard an arias-only concert, or recital, accompanied by piano. But these are strange times, in many respects. Orchestras are unavailable for arias and operas—and symphonies and tone poems.

The recital began with the two tenor arias from Puccini's *Tosca*: "Recondita armonia" and "E lucevan le stelle." After the first aria—which ends with a huge, warm, open "Tosca, sei tu!"—it was very strange not to hear any applause. In the NBA "bubble," they piped in crowd noise. There is no such piping in at these Met concerts.

Kaufmann sang some common, famous arias—such as the two from *Tosca*—and some less common, less famous ones, from operas that are seldom staged: from *L'Africaine* (Meyerbeer), for example, and *Le Cid* (Massenet). He also sang one aria—perhaps I should write "aria"—that is not from an opera but stands alone: "Ombra di

nube," by Licinio Refice, an Italian priest who was born in 1883, the Met's founding year, and died in 1954. This beautiful, moving, and "old-timey" piece has been beloved of many opera stars over the years, beginning with Claudia Muzio and extending to Renée Fleming and Angela Gheorghiu. And Jonas Kaufmann.

His concert ended with the world's favorite aria, arguably—certainly its favorite tenor aria. (Did it used to be "Vesti la giubba," from Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci*?) I am speaking of the hit from Puccini's *Turandot*: "Nessun dorma."

Helmut Deutsch is a real pro, able to make these aria accompaniments sound almost pianistic. On this occasion, he played two pieces by himself, giving Kaufmann a break. These were piano arrangements of one intermezzo, from *Manon Lescaut* (Puccini), and another, from *Pagliacci*. Amazingly, they sounded like piano pieces, in Deutsch's hands.

Jonas Kaufmann is an uneven singer, singing like an immortal on one night, and like an average Joe on the next. He is sometimes immortal and average on the same night. In Polling Abbey, he did some rough, shaky singing. He also did some beautiful, commanding singing. Always, he was brave. What I mean is this: He never tried to cover up any flaws or problems. If the music called for a high *piano*, that's what he tried. He did not bull through with a belt. If the music called for a *diminuendo*—hard to pull off—that's what he tried. Often, he succeeded in these things. He was willing to be "out there," exposed. And always, he sang with operatic intelligence and emotion. I admired this imperfect, spotty outing a great deal.

Next in the series was Renée Fleming, coming to us from Dumbarton Oaks, in Washington, D.C. We are talking about the mansion in Georgetown. "Dumbarton Oaks" is a name in music, as well as in international affairs. In 1937, Mildred Bliss, who owned the house with her husband Robert, commissioned Stravinsky to write a piece for their thirtieth wedding anniversary. This became the *Dumbarton Oaks Concerto*. In 1944, the house was the site of a conference at which the United Nations was planned. The Blisses bequeathed the house to Harvard. And

Renée Fleming sang from—where else?—its music room.

She sang a mixed program of songs and arias. Her pianist was Robert Ainsley, an Englishman, who graduated from Cambridge with a degree in mathematics. Not a few British musicians have math or science degrees, from the top universities. This always astounds me.

The song that opened the program, however, needed no accompaniment. It is a new song, for voice alone, by John Corigliano, the veteran American composer. Called “And the People Stayed Home,” it sets a poem by Kitty O’Meara, a retired schoolteacher in Wisconsin. She wrote it early in the pandemic, and it “went viral.” The poem speaks of all the things that people might do at home: read, rest, exercise, make art. Learn “new ways of being.” It hopes that people will give up their “ignorant ways,” and make “new choices,” thus healing themselves and the world at large.

Why is the song unaccompanied? Corigliano has explained in a composer’s note: “I envisioned the performer as a single person at home.”

This song will not be to everyone’s taste, as it was not to mine, at least on first hearing (and I write this as a lifelong Corigliano fan). I found it vaguely hortatory, somehow. I doubt it will be performed in the future, though these guesses can be foolhardy. But Renée Fleming? She was in good voice—really good voice—causing me to sit up and pay attention.

She proceeded with three arias by Handel. Years ago, in a public interview, I said to her, “Tell me about you and Handel.” Modestly, she said she did not regard herself as a Handel singer, and she is not one, in a traditional sense. But she has sung a *lot* of Handel, and many of us will take her over “Handel singers.” She approaches him musically, and I think he would beam with pleasure.

Speaking of pleasure, the third of those arias was “Endless pleasure, endless love,” from *Semele*. Fleming ripped through its coloratura with ease. She injected her customary hint of jazz or blues. (She is American, after all.) She Flemingized her Handel, while keeping it Handel. She was, in short, herself: the extraordinary soprano we have known for decades.

Frankly, I did not know she sang this kind of music anymore. I thought she had transitioned into Broadway, cabaret, and the like. But obviously not. Listening to her, I thought of an old phrase from politics: “tan, rested, and ready.”

Fleming and Ainsley continued with a song by Hahn: “Si mes vers avaient des ailes.” Ainsley did some lovely, limpid playing here. They also presented two of the *Auvergne* songs, of Canteloube: “Malurous qu’o uno fenno” and “Baïlèro.” The second, in particular, was enrapturing. Fleming has plenty of voice left. She was “hooked up,” with that famous voice in just the right place.

I grant you that this was not the Metropolitan Opera—a big, cavernous house—and that there was no orchestra to sing over, or through. This was a music room, and a piano. But still . . .

Manon is one of Fleming’s most famous roles—in Massenet’s opera, not Puccini’s—and she duly sang “Adieu, notre petite table.” Vocally, musically, and dramatically, it was compelling. Eventually, she got to Richard Strauss, who “has always been my desert-island composer,” she told the audience. She added that the Marschallin, from *Der Rosenkavalier*, was her favorite role. Then she sang the Marschallin’s monologue.

What else? More arias, including one from *La bohème*, but not Puccini’s: Leoncavallo’s, which came out in 1897, a year after Puccini’s. Leoncavallo’s sank. But at least Puccini wrote no *Pagliacci*.

Over and over, I wrote in my notes, “Flemingesque.” “So Flemingesque.” You did not have to make any allowances, for age or circumstance or anything else. Is it possible to hear a Fleming recital—an honest-to-goodness Fleming recital—in 2020? Absolutely, yes.

Before she concluded her recital, she said that she wanted to sing “probably the most popular song of the twentieth century”: “Over the Rainbow” (Arlen and Harburg). She sang it in a jazz arrangement by Rob Mathes. Fleming was a jazz singer in her youth, and she still is. She finished her recital with the *Wiegenlied*, the lullaby, of Brahms.

Actually, she finished with a statement. Singing is “the most antique human expression,” she said. “And it’s safe to do at home, and it’s good for your health.” Hear, hear.

The third concert in the series brought two voices, not just one: those of Roberto Alagna and Aleksandra Kurzak. Did the two singers observe proper social distancing? No, they were fairly intimate. They are husband and wife. Previously, Alagna was married to another singer, Angela Gheorghiu. They were known as the “Love Couple” and had their wedding ceremony on the stage of the Met. Presiding was the mayor of New York at the time, Rudy Giuliani. Interesting things have happened in the lives of all three since then.

Aleksandra Kurzak is a soprano from Poland. Alagna is a tenor from France, the son of Italian immigrants. He has two native languages, lucky guy. This is an especially lucky combo for an opera singer.

Ten years ago, I was at the Met for a *Don Carlo* (the Verdi opera). When Alagna sang the opening cry of “Fontainebleau!” I looked at my program. I had not realized that the opera would be performed in its original French, not in Italian. But Alagna proceeded in Italian—it’s just that he had pronounced “Fontainebleau” *à la française*, which made me smile.

Alagna and Kurzak sang outdoors on the French Riviera. They were in Èze, about eight miles east of Nice, at the Château de la Chèvre d’Or. The concert took place on what looked like a terrace, with the Mediterranean, plus the mountains, in the background. The setting almost stole the show. The singers were accompanied by members of the Morphing Chamber Orchestra, who had morphed into a string quintet. One of the bass players sported a man-bun.

In a sense, this was a typical gala program, offering beloved duets and arias. It began with the love duet from *Madama Butterfly* (Puccini). After, the soprano said, “Ah, what emotions!” The tenor said, “It is very warm here. Please, have a beautiful drink and enjoy the show.”

Later, Alagna walked onto the stage, or the terrace, with a bottle of wine. You figured we would have a stretch of *The Elixir of Love* (Donizetti), which we did. (Kurzak and Alagna sang this music for the Met’s at-home gala, back in April, too.) The singers did some nice comic acting. At one point, Alagna departed from Donizetti, bursting into “It’s Now or Never,” the Elvis Presley song, derived from “O sole mio.”

It was not all fun ‘n’ games. The singers gave us a stretch from *Cavalleria rusticana* (Mascagni), which had high drama. Honestly, I felt shivers. We also had music from *Otello* (Verdi). First, Kurzak sang the Ave Maria, from Act IV. In the opera, things get very, very bad from there. But on the terrace, the action reverted to Act I, for the love duet—which was a happy development. Cooperatively, romantically, and stunningly, the sun set over the Mediterranean.

About the singing, I will make some general remarks. Aleksandra Kurzak was immaculate all evening long. She was in beautiful voice, she was utterly secure in technique, and she was near faultless in musical expression. Can we be candid here? The series is called “Met Stars Live in Concert.” Alagna is the star. The missus was along for the ride. His name came first on the billing—the tenor’s, not the soprano’s, which is rare, and almost wrong. But Kurzak sang like a star.

Earlier, I said that Jonas Kaufmann is an uneven tenor, and so is Alagna. He was uneven in this concert. Sometimes he was effortful—tense and shouty. When he gets this way, I want to tell him, “Relax. Trust your talent. There is no need to overexert yourself. You have plenty of voice and any number of gifts. Just let it happen”—which, of course, he did, when he was at his best here. And always, he is a winning personality.

Toward the end of the night, the couple sang “Lippen schweigen,” that gala duet from *The Merry Widow* (Lehár). Further letting their hair down, they sang Mexico’s most famous song (if it is not “Bésame mucho”): “Cielito lindo,” with its refrain of “Ay, ay, ay, ay, canta y no llores.” Alagna yipped it up like a mariachi singer. Then came a hit from Naples: not “O sole mio” but “Funiculi, funiculà.” When it was all over, Alagna let out once last yip, which sailed into the night, over the Med.

The Met’s series continued with Lise Davidzen, the young soprano from Norway, and Joyce DiDonato, our mezzo from Kansas. I reviewed these concerts on the magazine’s website. In the future, there will be Anna Netrebko, Bryn Terfel, et al. And, at last, opera—opera itself, live and in person. Won’t that be a starry night? Or a bright matinée?

The media

Of men & manners

by James Bowman

How many, I wonder, of those who had been abusing President Trump on Tuesday for his violation of civilized norms during his debate with Joe Biden were the same people who, on the following Friday, were leaping for joy (like the actor Dominic West) at his diagnosis with COVID-19—or, like Hillary Clinton’s former spokesperson Zara Rahim, wishing for him to die of it. Maybe publicly hoping for the death of your political opponent (or “enemy” as Mrs. Clinton herself prefers to put it) doesn’t count as boorishness on the same scale as interrupting him in debate, but I don’t think I’m the only one who was inclined to take the Trump haters’ over-the-top outrage at his debate performance with more than a grain of salt, even before his diagnosis with the disease.

Here, for instance, was John Harris in the next day’s *Politico*: “An Epic Moment of National Shame: The Debate Was an Embarrassment for the Ages.” You may have noticed, as I did, that the media seems to have discovered rather a lot of “Embarrassments for the Ages” during the last four years. In fact, they’re as common as blackberries these days, which might tend to lessen their shock value a little. Yet the Embarrassing One himself never seems to be the least bit embarrassed. A bit like the media, come to think of it. They have, as some of us think, at least as much to be embarrassed about as the President, but they are no more inclined to show the least embarrassment, or admit to any but the most trivial mistakes or false steps, than he is. We’ll just have to be

embarrassed on their behalf, as they are, or profess to be, on behalf of the President.

For another thing that the media have in common with their *bête noire* is that they are, and ever more obviously, performance artists. Here’s how James Poniewozik of *The New York Times* characterized Mr. Trump’s first two days at the Walter Reed National Military Medical Center at the beginning of October:

Donald J. Trump has told aides to think of every day of his administration as an episode in a television show. That production, it turns out, does not take sick days. The president’s diagnosis and treatment for COVID-19 has unfolded as TV drama, some of it stunning, some baffling—and some of it crafted by Mr. Trump’s own producers, in a surreal but characteristic attempt to try to wrangle control of reality through pictures.

This treatment of the President’s illness through the medium of a television review, suggested by the rubric of the *Times*’s “Critic’s Notebook,” is now as familiar a device as the representation of his administration as “a reality TV show,” and the shock of both, if there ever was any, has long worn off. But the *Times*, especially, never seems to get tired of it. For they are unlike Mr. Trump in one respect, at least, which is that they are apparently still unaware that they, too, are putting on a show every day.

Some may say that the media are only pretending not to know of their own fakery and pretension, but I think this does them an in-

justice. Their lack of self-awareness is too well precedented and documented to be a pretense. Rather, I believe, the reason for their blindness to irony is that they are bewitched by that word “reality” in Mr. Poniewozik’s critical essay. “Pictures,” particularly those of the President’s fabrication, are always at odds with “reality” in the pages of the *Times*—since reality (or “Truth,” its alter ego) is seen as belonging to that venerable institution *by definition*. Reality is always what they say it is, and *because* they say it is. As for so many others of less intellectual eminence, both in the media and out of it, reality is proprietorial nowadays, and so always comes with the *Times*’s own brand on it.

Thus it should come as no surprise that that newspaper’s approach to the President’s illness was couched in terms of reality versus illusion from the get-go. Its headline on the day after his diagnosis was: “A White House Long in Denial Confronts Reality.” The alleged “denial” here was gleaned from the work of Bob Woodward, of a rival paper, who the previous month had offered as the “bombshell” revelation of his latest tedious White House chronicle, titled *Rage*, that the President had sought to “play down” the seriousness of the pandemic in the first instance in order to avoid a panic. Of course there had never been any denial of the virus’s *reality*—though at one point early on in COVID-19’s infamous career the media had misconstrued a presidential attack on a previous media misconstruction so as to affect to believe that he had called it a “hoax.” In fact, he had only denied, hesitantly and briefly, that the mortal danger threatening anyone who caught the virus was such as to justify extreme and economically ruinous measures against spreading it. Some of us still wish that he had stuck more firmly to this denial.

But never mind that. With typical media illogic and with no demur from Mr. Woodward himself, at least that I saw, Mr. Trump’s “denial” was now being treated as if it had been a denial of the fact that he, like everybody else, was potentially susceptible to infection—a “reality” which then caught up with him when he came down with it the day before. Of course, Maureen Dowd could not but get in on the act

in her column that ran in the same day’s *Times*: “Reality Bursts the Trumpworld Bubble.” For her the President’s diagnosis was an epochal event, emblematic of his whole life and career. “For his entire life,” she wrote, “Donald Trump has stayed one step ahead of disaster, plying his gift for holding reality at bay. He conjured his own threadbare reality, about success, about virility, about imbroglios with women, even about the height of Trump Tower.”

You can guess the rest. At last, after so many false starts and so many disappointed hopes of the media, this “threadbare reality” had now been exposed as the sham it always was. “Now,” she continued, “in a moment that feels biblical, the implacable virus has come to his door.” I especially like that “biblical” feeling. Only Ms. Dowd could have thought of that, I fancy. And yet she apparently has no clue that this moment of melodrama could be anything other than *echt* “reality” with the *Times*’s own ironclad guarantee and blue ribbon seal of approval on it. She can only ever be blissfully unaware that more factitious realities than Mr. Trump’s “own” are beginning to look just a bit threadbare these days.

The paper also sought to get some mileage out of the story by treating it and its alleged “reality” as an opportunity to sidetrack a worrying tendency of the election campaign (remember that?) to get onto subjects that might be more favorable to President Trump—the economy, the leftism of the Democrats, the corruption of Joe Biden and his family, the violence in the streets—and bring it back to what they see as the most favorable ground for their side. A “Political Memo” by Alexander Burns, written within hours of the diagnosis’s being made public, purported to observe that “Trump’s Illness Makes It Clear: This Election Was Always About the Virus.” The article’s sub-head explained that, “For all of the tumult of the race between President Trump and Joseph R. Biden Jr.—and for all of the other currents battering the country and its leaders in an election year—the issue of the virus has never retreated as the overwhelming factor.”

Well, “overwhelming” is laying it on a bit thick, but that’s the *Times* for you. Never use

a hammer when a sledgehammer will do. But with a fine disregard for all such patented realities, this election, like others, will be “about” what it is about and not, or at least not necessarily, what *The New York Times* keeps insisting it is about. Only forty-eight hours earlier it had been, according to the media, all about the President’s bad manners and “unpresidential” behavior in picking on poor, addleheaded Joe Biden during the debate—or that and a Cook’s tour of all the golden oldies of the media’s accusations against the President over the past four years that resurfaced, from his alleged “lies” (“Everybody knows you’re a liar,” Mr. Biden had averred during the course of the debate) to his alleged white supremacism, which was brought up both by Mr. Biden and the alleged “moderator,” Chris Wallace.

Somehow, in the media’s view, such insults didn’t count as discourtesies themselves, or even as provocations to the President’s discourtesy, which is always represented as being gratuitous—naturally flowing from his badness of character, which is always contrasted with the goodness and purity of his opponents. So fixed is this now familiar black-and-white portrait in the imaginations of those who still read, watch, or listen to the media uncritically, that a neighbor of mine has hung a Biden banner over the door of his house with the motto (I kid you not): “Truth over lies.” Of course I live in the Swamp that Mr. Trump, beset on all sides by the media, Democrats, and permanent government or “deep state,” has so far struggled to drain. But “Truth over lies,” like his egotism and uncouth manners and his supposed responsibility for mishandling the response to the virus, are central to the media narrative, which is always going to be, in the media’s view, what the election is “about.”

This isn’t to say that they are necessarily wrong. Obviously the media are not, even after three years of fake news about Russian “collusion,” without considerable power to keep the public’s attention fixed on what they want it to be fixed on. As I write, my impression is that their own uncivil gloating about Mr. Trump’s having fallen victim to the virus is so widely shared as to have obscured if not obliterated

the American people’s natural tendency to feel sympathy with the misfortunes of their leaders and public men and women—so much in evidence in the media’s outpouring of sorrow and regret after the death of Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg only two weeks earlier. One “snapshot” telephone poll taken on the day after the diagnosis found that 40 percent of self-identified Democrats were “happy” to hear of the President’s illness. Another 41 percent were “indifferent.” Such an apparent disparity might give rise to the uncharitable suspicion that at least part of the regret for Justice Ginsburg’s passing was owing to her death’s having given the hated Orange Man the opportunity to appoint a third nominee to the Supreme Court no more to the Democrats’ liking than the previous two.

The media are determined to prove the truth of the old proverb: give a dog a bad name and hang him. They know that, having been given as bad a name as any public figure since Richard Nixon, Mr. Trump can never do anything right—therefore, why should he expect to be the beneficiary of even the chilliest of polite good wishes when he catches a potentially fatal disease? Besides, his illness affords the media an opportunity, which they can hardly be expected to pass up, to claim that it was his own fault, and a condign punishment for his pushback against the media’s own Project Fear about the virus. A Reuters/Ipsos poll taken within forty-eight hours of the diagnosis purported to find that “a majority of Americans think Trump could have avoided infection if he had taken the virus more seriously.”

Whether or not they can be equally successful in selling Joe Biden as a plausible alternative to Mr. Trump remains to be seen at this writing. The “presidential” demeanor that was the implied promise of the former in his rebuke to the latter for being “unpresidential” may run the risk of looking just a bit too much like the dignified appearance of the waxworks dummy that, some would say, Mr. Biden already too much resembles. I’m reminded of the description of Governor Thomas E. Dewey, sometimes attributed to Alice Roosevelt Longworth, as looking like “the little man on the wedding cake.” And ev-

erybody knows what happened to *him* when, thirty years younger than Joe Biden and in all the vigor of youth, he took on a pugnacious and ill-mannered Harry Truman.

Admittedly, this is not the country that it was in 1948, when our fathers and grandfathers had just done more than a bit to win a titanic, two-front world war. In the intervening period, corresponding to the lifetimes of the two candidates as well as your correspondent, America has undergone a process of what Rush Limbaugh calls (in connection with American football) “chickification”—which is essentially what makes the usually shrewd Daniel Henninger of *The Wall Street Journal*’s editorial page think that Mr. Biden’s rebuke to his opponent during the debate—“Will you shut up, man?”—has all but clinched the election for good old Joe.

Other than driving turnout from a polarized electorate, these presidential debates are about winning at the margin by pulling over undecided or leaning voters. This especially includes women, with whom Mr. Trump lately has been underwater and sinking in battleground-state polls. Here’s guessing few women migrated to the Trump column Tuesday evening.

He may, of course, be right. Certainly that is the conventional wisdom on both right and left these days. Yet I still have some doubts that this female perspective on things is the work of the chicks themselves, some of whom

surely must still appreciate a manly man more than the pack of girlie men who nowadays seek to flatter them. Of course there are many women who are repelled by displays of masculine *thumos*—the Greek name for that untameable and aggressive spiritedness typical of men in a state of nature discussed by Harvey Mansfield in his book on *Manliness*—of the sort engaged in by Mr. Trump, to the universal horror of the media, in Cleveland. But such women were never going to be persuaded by Mr. Trump anyway—that nasty, horrid brute of a “bullying nut.” The epithet was Peggy Noonan’s until, after the diagnosis, she changed it to “belligerent nut.” Belligerent means “war-making”—and who wants that in a Commander-in-Chief?

But there is another kind of woman—like Alice Roosevelt Longworth, perhaps, whose presidential papa was also faulted for excessive masculinity—who is probably not much interested in politics because politicians are generally assumed by her, not inaccurately, to be weaselly characters and canting, lying hypocrites. It is not beyond imagination that such women might actually be impressed by the straightforward, attacking and counter-attacking style of a man like Donald Trump who, to an unprejudiced observer, has been much less bullying than bullied by the cowardly, sneaking, underhanded media for the last four years and who tells people, in defiance of media “reality,” not to be afraid of the too-much dreaded virus. You may say I’m a dreamer, but I’m not the only one.

The slow & the dead & other authors

by *Andrew Stuttaford*

There's something suitable, in this year gone awry, that the best novel I have read in 2020 purports to be an autobiography written from beyond the grave ("I am not exactly an author recently deceased, but a deceased man recently an author") and that it was first published in 1881 (after appearing in installments in the *Revista Brasileira*). With 2020 being 2020, *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas* (*Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas*) has been rendered from Portuguese into English not once, but twice, even if it has been read by me not twice, but once.¹ *The New Criterion* arranged for me to be sent a copy of the Penguin Classics version, which has been translated by Flora Thomson-DeVeaux and boasts a perceptive foreword by Dave Eggers. That this is a paperback, and a rival (translated by Margaret Jull Costa and Robin Patterson) was only available in hardback was, I am sure, merely a coincidence.

In addition to her translation, Thomson-DeVeaux provides detailed and highly informative endnotes, an attempt, she writes, to restore "the book's malevolent grace and depth . . . in its fullness," not least the "jokes half-buried in the sands of time." And she takes pains to stress that she has used endnotes, not footnotes:

Because the *Posthumous Memoirs*—as befits the creation of an ex-typographer—is exquisitely aware of its existence as a book, commenting on

1 *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas*, by Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis, translated by Flora Thomson-DeVeaux; Penguin Classics, 368 pages, \$17.

bindings, capitalization and so on, and nowhere does Brás indicate that his grave-composed masterpiece has anything marring its lower margins.

By contrast, Jull Costa and Patterson descend to footnotes. Barbarians.

In Thomson-DeVeaux's hands, the text—written, says Brás, "with the pen of mirth and the ink of melancholy"—rolls (often) merrily along, playful, acid, and with a liveliness impressive in an "author" so dead:

I was accompanied to the cemetery by eleven friends. Eleven! True, there had been neither letters nor announcements. What's more, it was raining . . .

There are asides, wild digressions (two pages on a random butterfly), absurd speculation ("Have you ever meditated on the purpose of the nose, beloved reader?"), and erudite allusions. The fourth wall is repeatedly reduced to rubble, thus:

I am beginning to regret that I ever took to writing this book. Not that it tires me; I have nothing else to do. . . . But the book is tedious . . . it bears a cadaveric grimace; this is a grave defect, and yet a minor one on the whole, for the book's greatest flaw is you, reader. You are in a hurry to grow old, and the book moves slowly; you love direct, robust narration and a smooth and regular style, and this book and my style are like drunkards, they veer right and left, stop and go, grumble, bellow, cackle, threaten the skies, slip, and fall . . .

Deepening the suspicion that Tristram Shandy is chatting to Brás in the afterlife, there are games with punctuation and layout, although Eggers warns against overplaying how innovative *The Posthumous Memoirs* were:

Readers are an amnesiac species, and so, every few decades, we wake up to believe that an author addressing the reader directly, or playing with form, or including references to the author or the book *within* that book is new and should be labeled post or meta- or whatever unfortunate and confining term will come next. But the fact is that an outsize number of the classics of the world employ one or many of these so-called post/meta devices.

That the writers Eggers cites in this context who precede Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis (1839–1908), the real author of *The Posthumous Memoirs*, are Cervantes, Sterne (an influence acknowledged by Machado), Voltaire, and Austen is an indication of the heights that this book, written in Brazil by the son of a man whose parents were freed slaves and an Azorean washerwoman, manages to reach.

Machado's ascent began with a job as a typographer's assistant, followed by journalism and then increasingly important positions within the civil service, something he combined with a growing literary career. He was a cofounder of the Brazilian Academy of Letters in 1897, becoming its first president, a post he held until he died. For him to have risen so far in a racially stratified society where slavery was finally abolished only in 1888—seven years after the publication of *The Posthumous Memoirs*—as, for those keeping count, a “quadroon,” made his achievement all the more remarkable.

Tellingly, the best-known photograph of a man who was by then a significant Brazilian cultural presence appears to have been lightened, and he was labeled as white on his death certificate, two signs of the implicit challenge that Machado posed to the racial hierarchy, a challenge, now explicit, that is the subject of lively debate in Brazil today.

Perhaps it's simplest to note the observation by the University of California's Pro-

fessor G. Reginald Daniel that “essentially, Machado was an insider who remained to some extent a detached observer—an outsider.” By the time Machado wrote *The Posthumous Memoirs*, he had penetrated the elite, and he uses his knowledge of its workings to depict the milieu in which Brás (who never had “to earn [his] bread with the sweat of [his] brow”) had lived a generation before (Brás is described as having died in 1869 at the age of sixty-four). But that detachment is not hard to see: When Brás has (at last) been elected to the Chamber of Deputies, the only contribution he mentions having made is a speech (praised for “its bursts of eloquence [and] literary and philosophical elements”) to reduce the size of the National Guard's shakos. It changes nothing, despite his accommodating suggestion that such an alteration could be delayed “for some years” and confined to “three-quarters of an inch, or even less.”

Slavery is part of the backdrop to *The Posthumous Memoirs*—given the time and place, it could not be otherwise—but in a matter-of-fact manner, going almost entirely without editorial comment, reflecting Machado's public reticence on the topic. That reticence, however, has been overstated, and here too there are hints of a more critical attitude. But as Machado was writing in the character of a cynical, caustic, and (in a loose interpretation of that term) nihilist member of a ruling class that had prospered under slavery, little more, perhaps, could be expected, other, maybe, than the absence of illusion. Even in that, Brás, too willing to find a rationale for brutality, disappoints on more than one occasion, a flaw that in Machado's hands is unlikely to be an accident.

To take one example, strolling through Valongo, the site of an old slave market in Rio de Janeiro, a location that Machado will not have chosen at random, Brás encounters Prudêncio, his former “slave boy,” who, as a child, he had ridden like a horse, “put[ting] a bit in his mouth and thrash[ing] him mercilessly.” Now a free man, Prudêncio is beating a slave whom he has in turn bought. Brás orders Prudêncio to stop. Contemplating the incident

later, Brás concludes that it was “dreadful, but only on the outside,” a qualification that says a lot both about Brás and of Machado’s view of his own, well, I hesitate to use the word, “hero.” But then, Brás continues, “as soon as I slid the knife of reasoning farther in, I found a marrow that was mischievous, refined, even profound,” adjectives that are subverted by his analysis: “This was Prudêncio’s way of freeing himself from the blows he had received—by passing them on to another.” The chapter in which this occurs is called “The Whip.”

About the only thing that Brás takes seriously is his relationship with Virgília, the woman he has failed to marry (as he fails to marry anyone)—despite their first exchange of glances being “purely and simply conjugal”—but with whom he carries on a lengthy affair after she marries Lobo Neves, the man who stole her away from him in the first place.

The first and second times he meets her after her marriage, they exchange a few words, but on the third:

We waltzed, and I won’t deny that as I held that supple, magnificent body next to mine, I had a singular sensation, that of a man who has been robbed.

Neves never stood a chance:

I was known as a master waltzer.

Some weeks later:

BRÁS CUBAS
.....!
VIRGÍLIA
.....!

Although centered on Brás’s involvement with Virgília, the book’s narrative is chaotic, its herky-jerky pace underlined by its division into 160 chapters, each named—“Sad, but Short” is followed by “Short, but Happy”—over the course of fewer than three hundred pages. Chapter CXXXVI is entitled “Uselessness.” In its entirety, it reads: “But, either I am very much mistaken, or I have just written a useless chapter.”

If *The Posthumous Memoirs* contains any message, it is, to optimists, dark. Thus, a sick, delirious Brás believes that a talkative hippopotamus takes him to the top of a mountain from which he watches all of history unfold in a bleak procession:

And then man . . . would run . . . after a nebulous, elusive figure cobbled together out of scraps, a scrap of the intangible, another of the improbable, another of the invisible, all sewn with flimsy stitches by the needle of the imagination; and this figure—nothing less than the chimera of happiness—either fled constantly or allowed itself to be caught by its train, upon which man would clasp it to his breast, and then the figure would give a scornful laugh and vanish like an illusion.

Much the same could be said of an early love, the mercenary Marcela, who loved Brás for “fifteen months and eleven thousand mil-réis” (several hundred thousand dollars today; Brás’s father was right to be annoyed). Here is another failure in what Jull Costa and Patterson in *their* introduction to *The Posthumous Memoirs* describe as “a catalogue of failures,” not just by Brás, liberated by death to admit to his own mediocrity (“What an unburdening!”), but by a number of the book’s main characters. It’s an accurate description, even if Eulália, a potential bride, can hardly be blamed for failing “even to live past seventeen,” a failure brought on by yellow fever and not made any easier by the fact that it is exaggerated by a typo that would have amused Machado the writer and infuriated Machado the typographer: in the book Eulália makes it to nineteen.

In 1857, Thoreau counseled a friend that there was no need for a story to be long, “but it will take a long while to make it short,” advice that in various forms has been circulating for centuries. Kathryn Scanlan would understand. She spent over a decade working on the forty short, short stories that flicker across the 140 pages or so of *The Dominant Animal*.² Her sentences are whittled down and polished to

² *The Dominant Animal: Stories*, by Kathryn Scanlan; MCD x FSG Originals, 160 pages, \$15.

some kind of perfection without the work that went into them ever being the point. They are not, mercifully, a display of self-consciously fine writing, but are matter of fact, underwritten rather than over, and often, carefully, and most precisely, unsettling:

The baby is difficult to figure. It sounds like a nest of squirrels I found after a storm. One of them had died in the fall from the tree, and the other two chattered next to it, to me, as though to tell me of their trouble. I understand the inappropriateness of comparing a human baby to a squirrel baby. I don't know why I continue to do so. I cannot help it that a human baby also reminds me of an overfull helium balloon hovering too close to a hot bulb.

If anything unites these tales, it is the sense that they are sightings of a world slightly askew, a world that is not quite ours, but which shares its unhappiness and cruelty too regularly for comfort. Here and there the stories shade—no more than that—into something close to horror, but more frequently they just leave a feeling of unease. Most need reading more than once, and some remain ambiguous, even on occasion seemingly incomplete, from time to time frustratingly so, a device, conceivably, to reinforce and prolong the reader's disquiet, to ensure it lingers in the mind.

The way that speech slides unpunctuated into the narrative adds to the impression of being in a space where boundaries have broken down:

Bob Snatchko held a painting of yellow flowers in dirty snow. Looks like we had a genius on our hands, he said. What a tragedy! Are these things worth more now that he's a confirmed nut job?

Some pie on your chin, Bob, I said.

And yet it is a distinctly American space. Bob Snatchko. Pie. Scanlan, I note, grew up in Iowa.

As to what these stories are about, it is tricky to generalize, other than, perhaps, that they often depict relationships that have gone sour, or perhaps always were—sometimes it is hard to say. Among the topics we find a picked-on

eccentric, an unnerving surgeon, an embittered daughter in her mother's last days, tenants from hell, an old man's life in three pages, a murder certainly, a murder possibly, an unfaithful dog, the ideal carpet, an annoying husband felled by a golf ball, neighbors observed:

[I]n the small hours of the morning, one son is chasing the other in the yard with a pair of scissors. It is early enough that we could be dreaming it, the half-clad boys running and tumbling like satyrs in the blue light of the lawn.

On the cover of *The Dominant Animal*, Scanlan is described as the “author of *Aug 9—Fog*.”³ Left unsatisfied by forty short, short stories, I turned to Amazon. Published in 2019, close enough for a 2020 review, I reckoned. It was worth the clicks. Spare, elegiac, and curiously haunting, and somewhere between poetry and prose, *Aug 9—Fog* is elaborately unvarnished. It was also co-written, one way or another, with Cora E. Lacy, a woman from a small town in Illinois who died in her mid-nineties over forty years ago.

In a note at the beginning Scanlan explains:

The text that follows is drawn from a stranger's diary. I acquired the diary fifteen years ago, at a public estate auction. It was among the unsold items. I removed it from a box on its way to the garbage . . . The diary was a Christmas present to the author from her daughter and son-in-law. . . . [The diarist] was eighty-six years old when she began recording in it. . . .

I didn't try to read it. I kept it in a drawer. I assumed it illegible.

But then I did read it—compulsively. . . .

As I read, I typed out the sentences that caught my attention. Then, for ten years, off and on, I played with the sentences I'd pulled. I edited, arranged, and rearranged them into the composition you find here.

Ten years. Scanlan takes her time.

The diary covers the period between 1968 and 1972, but Scanlan has removed the dates and simply divided the book into Winter,

3 *Aug 9—Fog*, by Kathryn Scanlan; MCD, 128 pages, \$18.

Spring, Summer, Autumn, and then one final Winter.

On September 1 this year, Scanlan retweeted a call by the Canadian poet Anne Carson to “edit ferociously and with joy, it is very fun to delete stuff.” It is evident both from *The Dominant Animal* and *Aug 9—Fog* that Scanlan does just that. But in the latter work, she preserves as she destroys, stripping down what she concedes can be a “terribly banal” text in a fashion that allows the essence of Cora—or the essence of Cora as envisaged by Scanlan—to emerge, with Scanlan reshaping an everyday existence into something of beauty, and, as she does so, summoning up a time that now seems impossibly remote:

So snowy & bad he came back. Beautiful big red sun dog on the North. D. played her Victrola. Vern working on Doris cupboards.

Cora wrote in the vernacular of her era, and her grammar (frequently) and spelling (sometimes) are shaky, but reproducing them comes across not as patronizing but operates instead as a way of bringing her back to life. As I read, I could hear Cora, or at least form a clear view of how she might have sounded, or, again, of how Scanlan thought she might have sounded:

D. & I walked over to Bertha’s to see her flowers. We had teas, cookies & candy, legs kind a tingly when we got home.

Scanlan writes in her introductory note of how “the diarist’s voice, her particular use of language, is firmly, intractably lodged in my head. Often I say to myself, ‘*some hot nite*’ I have possessed this work so thoroughly that the diarist has ceased to be an entirely unique, autonomous other to me. I don’t picture her. I am her.”

But in an article for *The Paris Review* in 2019, Scanlan qualified that statement by saying that its last line

portrayed the mindset in which my book was composed. My creation was possible because the essential mystery of the diary opened a space

in which I could imagine an “I” who was other, but also myself—otherwise known as the realm of fiction. My book would not exist without that space, without that leap of voice. . . .

But then, last year, before my book went into production, I tried one last search for the diarist. I needed to know whether she had any surviving relatives. If she did, I wanted to contact them. This time, one result came up in my browser: the diarist’s full name linked to a page on a website called Find a Grave.

Now she discovers (as she probably always could have done; Cora had lived less than an hour away from Scanlan’s parents, and she’d put her name and address in the diary) fact after fact about the real woman, her life, her death, her family: “Here was Lee, her brother. Here was Bayard, her sister’s husband. Here was Bucky, her niece’s son.”

And:

As the real woman expands in detail, the private one shrinks. Presented with the stark, unequivocal details of the real woman’s life and death, the private woman undergoes a death of her own.

I am glad to have found the diarist’s relatives, glad to be able to share the diary and *Fog* with them. But the price of this is a puncture, a deflation of the reality—or unreality—I’d made. It feels like an origin story in reverse: in finding the woman, I’ve lost the woman. Face to face with a photo of the diarist’s grave, I was forced to realize I was not, in fact, *her*—was not now, had never been. It had been me all along.

Yes, I would say, and no. Scanlan’s Cora is an artifact, something underlined by how painstakingly produced *Aug 9—Fog* is, from its elegantly plain cover to its pages laid out with only a few lines of text (“Ruth came thru operation. Hiller’s house burned. We went out to see what fire had done. Sure clean sweep”), but the real Cora is unmistakably there too.

Cora was eighty-six when she started the diary. She enjoys her quiet pleasures, painting, a jigsaw (“Niagara Falls. Very pretty, hard one”), Scrabble, some photography, watching the outdoors (“Robin on nest today”), but twilight is never far away:

Big snow flakes like little parasols upside down. Ella had Widow's Club to dinner, a delicious fried chicken at Holiday Inn. D. & I out to cemetery little bit.

There are aches and pains ("my right knee ailing"); people retire ("they gave her a beautiful clock"), fall sick ("Maude was operated on this A.M. They took out tumor in bladder it was cancer"), and die ("Vern took worse. Passed away before D. got there. Seemed to just sleep away"). Not long later, Nora complains that her "pep" has left her, but, a Midwestern stoic, she soldiers on.

Scanlan writes that the "diary still moves me, which seems unbelievable." Not really.

I am the son of a collector and a collector myself, in my case stamps (a standard gateway drug half a century ago), political ephemera, Russian icons, First World War art, old maps, preferably of the Baltic region, a *Pickelhaube*, and, of course, books, including, when it comes to the fiction section, several novels—some of my favorites—that revolve around collecting, accumulation, and people's relationship with things. Bruce Chatwin's Baron Utz makes his inevitable appearance, but so does Thomas Clerc obsessively chronicling his possessions in *Interior* (reviewed by me in *The New Criterion* of May 2020) and Christine Coulson's beguiling *Metropolitan Stories* (reviewed by me in *The New Criterion* of November 2019), in which the Met's artworks, employees, and visitors conduct their own enchanted dance. And then there's the fictional Henry James Jesson III, the bibliophile and collector from Allen Kurzweil's *The Grand Complication*, whose immaculately arranged hoard has room for the unpredictable as well as the respectable: a "severed finger, the gruesome harvest of a Calvinist surgeon who collected anomalous body parts."

So the premise of *The Caretaker* by Doon Arbus (a daughter of Diane) was one that I would never have found easy to resist.⁴ Its eponymous but unnamed protagonist looks after the unprepossessing Manhattan build-

ing that houses the collection of the late Dr. Charles A. Morgan (the author of *Stuff—A Meditation on the Charisma of Things*). In life, Morgan had run the house as his own museum (one reason Mrs. Morgan had moved out), and he used his will (a document that demonstrated "that he cared more for the fate of his building and its contents—to which he had devoted himself for nearly half a century—than for any living creature") to ensure that it would outlive him.

Mrs. Morgan, who had remained his wife if not his cohabitee, presides punctiliously over her late husband's legacy: "His absence," claims Arbus, not always the most trustworthy of narrators, "healed the rift." After learning that the new widow "insisted that the objects to be enshrined were not limited to the items in Morgan's collection, but included anything he might have touched, worn, used, sat upon or gazed at before leaving home for the last time," however, I wasn't so certain about that.

Other members on the Morgan Foundation's board shared this doubt. They "protested that treating Morgan's personal commonplaces with the same reverence accorded the collection's artifacts would be to make a mockery of his life's work." Judging by what is on show in a hallway near the museum's entrance, they had a point:

At first glance, the display looks not so much haphazard as deliberately organized to confound comprehension. Ordinary domestic items (a wire hanger, a chewing-gum wrapper, locks with and without their keys, a broken hinge, a watch without a watchband, a toilet plunger, a plastic coffee lid) vie for position with a smattering of gilt-framed eighteenth-century oil portraits, a large multifaceted jewel, an African mask of teak and straw, a pair of pearl-handled dueling pistols aimed at one another. Nature has its place here too: seashells, dried leaves, driftwood, lumps of coal, a human skull.

The Dürer, hung "amid a cluster of various small household objects," is elsewhere.

The caretaker, an intelligent if complicated man, is hired—it seems at the insistence of the widow, "his perplexingly loyal advocate"—de-

⁴ *The Caretaker*, by Doon Arbus; New Directions, 144 pages, \$19.95.

spite a résumé of downward mobility, false starts, abandoned promise, and a bewildering range of mainly unimpressive jobs briefly held, “a process of divestiture that bore a disconcerting resemblance to flight.” On the plus side, as a young man, he discovered Morgan’s *Stuff*: “Its method of deciphering hidden relationships between things in a world apparently bereft of meaning offered him a lifeline; he [had] declared himself a disciple.” Poor judgment, maybe, but not the worst qualification.

In reading the early portions of this book, my guess was that the caretaker, a Bartleby who had finally found something he would rather, was going to be absorbed into the museum—an institution that owes a third of its (few) visitors to the fact that they have confused it with the Morgan Library uptown—not necessarily healthily, not necessarily uncomfortably, perhaps even literally: “He is a monochromatic man. Dust is his color. It envelops every aspect of his person, hair, skin, eyes, clothing, softening all distinctions.”

When the story reaches the present, he has been at his post for over two decades. It is “now the very essence of his identity. He is the caretaker of The Foundation, Dr. Morgan’s man,” there “solely to make the dead man come alive. It has become a consuming preoccupation. His work is never done.” He labors, for the most part alone, reveling in his celebration of what he describes as Morgan’s “meticulously orchestrated . . . conversation among objects.”

At this point, I was anticipating a soothing and diverting read, enhanced by Arbus’s bone-dry sense of humor and made all the more entertaining by a writing style that, in passages of subtle ponderousness, occasionally nods to Henry James, if only as pastiche, as well as Arbus’s satisfying way with lists, reassuringly suggestive of an admirably sharp curatorial focus:

Orphaned objects assembled here like so much scrap are orphans no longer. A child’s worn left shoe bereft of laces, a coil of hemp, a jewel-

encrusted Russian Easter egg poised on end, a tarnished ladle with holes punched through its bowl in a star-shaped pattern (presumably to drain off liquid), a glass eye staring helplessly, relentlessly, at nothing, an Indian arrowhead, a small framed pen-and-ink rendering of a dense forest choked with underbrush, the skeleton of an umbrella, a telephone receiver trailing its crimped cord, the displaced Roman nose of a lost marble statue, a fossilized crustacean, a stethoscope, a paper clip, a tortured tree branch, petrified and turned to stone—all members of some complex extended family with their own indispensable roles to play—commune with another across a wasteland of irrelevance, each an answer to the others’ prayers.

Sadly, by the time this glorious catalogue brings joy to the page, the order, however offbeat, that it represents is fracturing, undermined by the combination of the machinations of a changed board with no time for it (the widow has sunk into dementia) and, partly in response, by the actions of the caretaker. His struggle to champion what has possessed him transports both the caretaker and this story to a place where I was no longer sure quite what it was that I was reading.

Almost from its very beginning *The Caretaker* had strayed far beyond the alternate reality necessary to any novel. But before it arrives at its enigmatic yet oddly poignant conclusion, Arbus takes the narrative into a realm where hallucination, perhaps, a trace of the supernatural, just maybe, and obsession, undoubtedly, are the only keys to the riddle that she, no mean trickster, has conjured up.

And it is made even more disorienting by Arbus’s distinctive voice, calm, wry, deadpan amid absurdity, and yet capable of lyricism at unexpected moments, as when she navigates the widow’s shattered mind:

Every so often, she would emerge from her blighted state to endure a brief glimpse of what she’d lost, which only made things worse, leaving her forlorn, desolate, beached on a strange shore.

Petrified Wood

by *Kyle Smith*

I had no intention of finding much fault as I dug into James Wood's career retrospective *Serious Noticing: Selected Essays, 1997–2019*, which gathers what must be Wood's favorite pieces from previous books collecting his magazine writing—the best of the best.¹ Among *The New Yorker's* back-of-the-book crew, my preferences run to Anthony Lane and Louis Menand, but over the years I've found Wood to be sound enough. Two of his pieces for that magazine are among the best I've come across in its pages. One (reprinted as the opener of this volume) relates how, as a dutiful piano student and daily choir singer in his boyhood in provincial Durham, England, young James became fascinated with the rock drummer Keith Moon (of The Who) and made mastering the drums an unexpected new goal. Notable here are Wood's exuberance (Moon's "many-armed, joyous, semaphoring lunacy suggested a man possessed by the antic spirit of drumming"), an amusing application of literary terminology to the art of smashing things ("Moon is the drummer of enjambment" deploys a poetry term for Moon's spilling-over style), and an engrossing wealth of technical detail; Wood notes that "a good dry snare [drum]" that sounds like a dog's bark differentiates hard rock from soft rock, in which the snare is tuned more loosely, creating a "drippy" effect.

Another of Wood's finest *New Yorker* moments (not, alas, republished here) was a glorious eulogy to his Scottish mother published in

2016, a tribute to a life of loving toil composed shortly after its conclusion, when "Her work was done." That piece has nothing to do with art, though, so it would have been out of place in this volume.

I looked forward to encountering many more such gems that I'd previously missed. One piece, "Hysterical Realism," published in *The New Republic* in 2002, delivers only partly, dated as it has since become: the title is a useful sobriquet for the Rabelaisian mania of such novelists as Don DeLillo, Thomas Pynchon, and David Foster Wallace, who in the 1990s were filling three-inch-thick volumes with floridly imagined catalogues of the weird. Unlike magical realism, the style didn't deal much with physical impossibilities. Its practitioners instead were a merry band of literary funsters, spraying wacky improbabilities in every direction to steadily diminishing effect. "The mere existence," writes Wood, "of a giant cheese or a cloned mouse or three different earthquakes in a novel is seen as meaningful or wonderful, evidence of great imaginative powers." Wood finds these touches "props of the imagination, meaning's toys," and asserts that "the existence of vitality is mistaken for the drama of vitality." In an especially apposite phrase, Wood asks whether the novel will "dare a picture of life, or just shout a spectacle?" The novel has calmed down considerably since this spastic episode, but Wood pinpoints what was happening to it then and what was so enervating about its madcap antics, in which the human element became an afterthought.

¹ *Serious Noticing: Selected Essays, 1997–2019*, by James Wood; Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 528 pages, \$30.

As the essay goes on, though, Wood surrenders much of the goodwill he builds in the opening pages by failing to bore deeply into the common factor he has identified in his mob of hysterical realists. He instead turns the essay into a long, sour, unconvincing attack on Zadie Smith, who in *White Teeth*, her own supposed contribution to hysterical realism, is more human-centered and less guilty of the excesses he decries than any of the others, and whom he fails to diminish in quotations meant to expose her shortcomings. Wood bristles at a scene in which two adult men in a bar, one a devout Muslim, discuss women's bodies in immature, verging on pornographic, ways. The scene isn't at all implausible, though, and less prissy readers will shrug because we understand that, especially in culturally efflorescent London, there are all kinds of Muslims, with many behaving in ways that expose tension between behavior and belief. Smith is a keen student of hypocrisy and skewers it brilliantly. Wood, calling foul where there is none, seems to miss what Smith is getting at. As an example of Smith breaking the "law of persuasion," Wood refers to how she gives a slightly absurd Islamist fundamentalist group the reductive acronym "KEVIN." Wood doesn't grasp the wit here, how the banal name deflates the pretensions of jihadists, but then again an almost insistent deafness to humor is a running subtext of this too-often-stodgy volume. He recoils at Smith's perfectly apt usage of "that juvenile verb, 'squished,'" but later in the same essay, when noting that a character in *White Teeth* sews plastic garments that are bound "for a shop called Domination in Soho," he pronounces the detail "one of the many good jokes in this comic book." "Comic book," with its overtones of Green Lantern and Astro Boy, is not what to call a comic novel, and this isn't actually much of a joke (Domination, far from being hyperbole, is exactly the kind of name a shop selling bondage gear in Soho might have). Yet it's one of the few indications that Smith's galloping comic energy even registers with Wood in this six-thousand-word piece.

By this point in *Serious Noticing* I had already begun dimly to sense something that proved to be true: Wood is a jokeless soul. The Maltese-

British psychologist Edward de Bono once noted, "Humor is by far the most significant activity of the human brain." It is only the self-important who find it unimportant. Its absence, not necessarily conspicuous in a single magazine piece, gradually becomes manifest, then irritating, in the course of five hundred pages in which Wood never once writes anything funny and encounters considerable difficulty even in identifying the many instances of humor he comes across in the course of his reading; "Saul Bellow's Comic Style," for instance, will make you laugh about as much as having your X-rays explained to you by a radiologist.

Even someone ungifted with any wit whatsoever is sometimes *accidentally* funny. Any barstool yakker who set out with no intent to amuse—merely in the course of describing his daily grooming habits, or his strategies for fixing household appliances—would, you'd think, necessarily emit an amusing quip once in a while. So how does Wood manage not to? The closest he comes to being amusing is a parody of the novels of Paul Auster, who writes hard-boiled noirs tinged with surrealist fancy and postmodern posturing (Wood's pastiche: "For no good reason, but no bad one either, Phaedo decided to please Aleesha. He sat down and started reading the opening paragraph of his novel, the paragraph you have just read"). A pretentious hall-of-mirrors habitué such as Auster isn't particularly difficult to mock, though, and anyway, the passage, well-aimed as it is, isn't exaggerated enough to rise to the level of being humorous. Wood immediately deflates the effect anyway: "Yes, that is a parody of Paul Auster's fiction, an attempt to shrink *Peau d'Auster* into a sardonic sac. It is unfair, but diligently so: it reduces most of the familiar features of his work." Wood may consider that he is reducing Auster to rubble here, but I'm not sure the latter has ever committed to the page a phrase as clunky as "an attempt to shrink *Peau d'Auster* into a sardonic sac." Why the lapse into French? What's a sardonic sac? Can a sac even be sardonic? More important: should anyone who is actually, or has recently been, sardonic feel the need to so notify us? "That was me being sardonic" is a self-defeating claim, a nightclub comic saying, "Please note that this was a funny remark I made and laugh accordingly."

The humor avoidance seems part of a consciously chosen persona, that of the stiff English schoolmaster unyielding in his belief that if a spoonful of sugar should be proven to help the medicine go down, all sugar bowls should be filled with castor oil. Wood says in “Becoming Them” that he reminds himself increasingly of his father, a boiled parsnip of a man who rose from the working class to the rank of professor and sounds like a twentieth-century version of *Middlemarch*’s Mr. Casaubon. Once Wood used Keith Moon to pry himself away from paternal habits; today, though, Wood goes out of his way to be as stolid as is humanly possible. A passing reference to Tom Wolfe’s supposed “cinematic vulgarity” confirms that Wood’s grasp of humorous fiction is thumbless, and when Wood does attempt humor, it’s a ghastly sight. Describing an early moment in *Anna Karenina*, he writes, “Stiva miserably recalls the recent evening when, returning from the theatre and ‘holding a huge pear for his wife’ (we are two pages into the novel and already Tolstoy’s succulence of detail is bearing fruit) . . .” I think I speak for all of us when I say: egad.

Like the hapless Limey in the romantic comedy who finds that an English accent makes pretty American girls swoon despite his having no actual redeeming qualities whatsoever, Wood leads with his Britishness. But how to dazzle the audience with an English accent in prose? With British spelling conventions. It’s a curious affectation for a man who has lived in America for twenty-five years, has American children, and is published by both *The New Yorker* and Farrar, Straus and Giroux to employ British spellings—“scepticism,” “realise,” “defence,” etc.—throughout. To these Wood adds fusty, milky, passive pleonasm that are such obvious instances of bad writing that no self-respecting English professor would fail to slash a red pen through them: “it might be said that,” “one is reminded of,” “it might be argued that,” “it could be said that,” and so on. “It might be argued that literature has only rarely represented character.” Might it? Then so argue. (When Wood does so, he fails: the contentions that follow are preposterous). “One is reminded of Kierkegaard’s remark that travel is the way to avoid despair.” Why not just

share the Kierkegaardian aperçu and proceed from there? There is no archness or irony in these usages; the intent is to summon the image of the authoritative English don. The adjective in Wood’s title, *Serious Noticing*, might mean “earnest” or “intent” to him, but I suspect he was drawn to the idea of seriousness partly because he disdains levity in the donnish manner.

When a don speaks, the reader is sufficiently cowed enough not to call out the banalities (“With Joseph Roth, you begin—and end—with the prose”; as opposed to the tap-dancing or the macrame?), the hyperbole (of Roth again, “each sentence is a discrete explosion”), the haughty declarations of a rule where none exists (“no single story can ever explain itself: this enigma at the heart of story is itself a story”), the murky metaphors (“Literature, like art, . . . makes us insomniacs in the halls of habit”), the assertions whose arrogance is meant to cover for their unpersuasiveness (he praises George Orwell’s journalism but derides “the talent he lacked as a novelist for non-existent worlds” and claims “he could not work at his novels like a good novelist”).

In ripping into Auster, Wood writes, “The most second-hand sentences in my opening parody, the ones most thickly lacquered with laziness (about being beaten to within an inch of his life [and other examples]) . . . are taken verbatim from Auster’s previous work.” Are there degrees of second-handedness, and is Wood aware that a thing can be third-hand, or twentieth-hand? How might the “most second-hand” item compare to the “least third-hand” one? Wood would have been better off to say “the most shopworn.” As for “thickly lacquered with laziness,” are we meant to think of a craftsman who is putting on one coat of laziness, then another, then another, working himself up a fine sweat as he ensures the coat is well and truly thick? This sounds like a remarkably industrious instance of laziness. But then the metaphor of laziness as lacquer makes no sense in the first place. Laziness isn’t a thing, and certainly not an extraneous decorative thing like lacquer. It’s a character trait associated with the absence of action, or its bare minimum. And “the most thickly lacquered with laziness” is a superfluous appositive anyway. As an astute reader, Wood should have taken note that he

was unable to come up with a dazzling metaphor and moved on: “the laziest sentences in my opening parody are taken verbatim from . . .” would have sufficed. As Wood must have learned from all of those days in the choir, if you can’t sing the high notes, it’s better not to try than to try and fail.

When reading the sports pages, or listening to the blather of a television talking head, we find that misadventures in phrasing are so common as not much to matter. (And it’d sound downright weird if a sports announcer ever pronounced “Notre Dame” correctly.) But a Professor of the Practice of Literary Criticism at Harvard University who is furthermore a lead critic at *The New Yorker* carries with him the two most prestigious brands in the intellectosphere, and so Wood must bear the burden, or the expectation, that he dazzle us at least once on every page. Failing that, we trust that he will at least manage not to step on any rakes. As Kevin Williamson (a formidable stylist who has written many pieces for this magazine) drolly put it recently for *National Review*: “Writing clearly takes a little work. You have to think about the actual words you are writing and what they mean, and then write what you mean.” They teach this even at Harvard, perhaps. Yet even in the Moon essay, Wood allies himself with the dullards of the universe by using “epicentre” as a fancy way of saying “center” (or “centre,” I suppose) when it actually means “point vertically above the center,” meaning the term is highly useful in discussing earthquakes but almost useless as a metaphor. The ill usage has become the rule over the last twenty years because we live in a society in which people think adding “epi” to the familiar word makes them sound exotic, learned, scientific. Moon inspires Wood to venture this banality: “Music makes us want to dance, to register rhythm on and with our bodies.” Ugh. Sounds like a vicar, possibly one from outer space. *Victorian* outer space, even. “So the drummer and the conductor are the luckiest of all musicians, because they are closest to dancing.” How’s that? By that measure the tambourine player is the luckiest of all musicians because she actually *is* (or can be) dancing at all times. At any event, anyone whose job requires him to be

continuously seated would appear to be pretty far removed from dancing. In another essay, Wood writes, “I find that my memory is always yeasting up, turning one-minute moments into loafing, ten-minute reveries.” “Loafing reveries”? “Loafing” as a verb form already has a meaning and it isn’t “to turn into a loaf.” Wood is trying to do too much here, complicating the metaphor and phrasing it awkwardly. “My memory works like yeast: a baton of thoughts becomes a loaf of reverie” is what he’s trying to say. At least that’s the best I can do to unmangle this sentence.

Out of nowhere, Wood writes, in an unexpectedly revealing aside, “Sometimes one despises oneself, in near middle age, for still being such a merely good student.” Oh, does one? Which one would that be? Wood is certainly deeply versed in literature, and he’s the heir to a 1940s switchboard operator on roller skates when he zips around the centuries, racing through the card catalogue of his mind calling up references: a piece on W. G. Sebald draws him back to Denis Diderot, to George Eliot, Peter Handke, Franz Kafka, and forward to such writers of today as Teju Cole and Aleksandar Hemon. Entertaining as this is to observe, when Wood returns with his references his prose too often fails him, his analysis proves unsupported, or both. Wood carries the reputation of being a brilliant, rapier-equipped critic, yet it is just possible that *New Yorker* writers and Harvard professors enjoy somewhat more deference than they are due. His self-assessment seems nearer the mark.

Poetry world

John Burnside

The Music of Time:

Poetry in the Twentieth Century.

Princeton University Press, 520 pages, \$35

reviewed by Paul Dean

Around the year 940 A.D., a Chinese poet, Zhao Chongzuo, contributed to an anthology of lyric verse called *Huajian ji*, for which he also wrote a preface. This work, translated into English by P. P. Thoms in 1824 under the title *Chinese Courtship: In Verse*, found its way into

the hands of Goethe and was the occasion for his celebrated conversation with Johann Peter Eckermann in 1827, in which the sage of Weimar claimed that the age of national literatures was drawing to a close, and that “the epoch of world literature [*Weltliteratur*] is coming.” As Martin Puchner, a professor at Harvard and the general editor of the six-volume *Norton Anthology of World Literature*, explains in an article of 2017 for the digital magazine *Aeon*, in making this prediction Goethe sought “an alternative to both metropolitan culture and German nationalism”; *Weltliteratur* was to be “the cultural expression of a political order.” Recast in economic terms by Marx and Engels, national literatures were viewed as commodities available for international import and export: their intrinsically bourgeois nature, which had served the purposes of imperialism and colonialism, could be diverted to cosmopolitan ends. In the academy, comparative literary studies enjoyed a boom in the last decades of the twentieth century, while today there is a World Literature Institute at Harvard, and courses in that subject are offered on many American campuses. The globalization of media via digital technology has allowed this process of cross-fertilization to accelerate to an unprecedented extent, while at the same time the concept of nationalism in any form has become politically problematical.

John Burnside’s *The Music of Time* goes further even than Goethe. He envisions not just world literature, but a “world culture,” an environment in which, he informs us, he is living already. “A sense that the world has its center anywhere,” he believes, “is by any standard parochial.” It’s also parochial, according to him, to believe that the Holocaust was a worse atrocity than the slave trade: this he judges a “grossly Eurocentric” view. I shouldn’t have thought that belief was confined to Europe, but I may be out of touch. Burnside is equally impatient with “nonsense” about “high” and “low” culture, a distinction he dismisses as totalitarian and class-based. (Class must come into it since, of course, “all poetry is political” and “can be seen as *dissident*.”) “High” and “low,” he suggests, should be replaced by “good” and “bad,” an equally subjective pair of terms, and equally dependent on a judgment

of quality. He does, indeed, concede that we should “seek out quality work wherever it is being made,” in “a live critical culture in which poets and readers from many backgrounds might engage with one another, on as equal a basis as political systems and commercial-cultural trends allow.” The question is inevitable: how equal is that?

Burnside has some dismissive asides about T. S. Eliot, who embodies the kind of elitism he sees as The Enemy. This is odd, given that Eliot, with his interest in Sanskrit and Buddhist philosophy as well as in the literatures of Christian Europe and his native America, might seem to be a pioneer of “world culture”—and odder still, because Eliot devoted several pages to discussing that very phrase in *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* (1948), a book not included in Burnside’s bibliography. Eliot, of course, espoused political views unacceptable to Burnside; they were “*dissident*” in the wrong way. Nevertheless, Eliot’s remarks in *Notes* raise important issues. Writing in the immediate aftermath of World War II, he suggested that “world culture” poses obstacles similar to those posed by the notion of “world government”: to bring about the aim, local idiosyncrasies and traditions must either be absorbed or abolished—and “a world culture which was simply a *uniform* culture would be no culture at all.” Meanwhile, the difficulty of drawing boundary lines around national cultures did compel him to accept the logical possibility of world culture, even if he couldn’t imagine what it would be like. The history of culture has been deeply affected by colonization and migration, frequently producing tension between an indigenous culture and a foreign one, and perhaps resulting in an unsatisfactory hybrid. Eliot observes:

In the migrations of modern times, the emigrants have come from countries already highly civilised. They came from countries where the development of social organisation was already complex. The people who migrated have never represented the whole of the culture of the country from which they came, or they have represented it in quite different proportions.

Of course, these questions about the preservation or dissolution of identity can be themselves the catalyst for poetry. The USSR unintentionally encouraged writers such as Yevgeny Yevtushenko or Anna Akhmatova to affirm their resistance to absorption into a super-state. Among other recent examples, Burnside cites Olga Orozco (1920–99), who was of mixed Basque, Irish, and Sicilian descent, and whose poetry unites memories of the pampas and her grandmother’s folktales with the work of St. Augustine and Eliot on time. She is unknown outside of Spain, and I am grateful to have been alerted to her, as also to Albrecht Haushofer (1903–45), incarcerated, and later shot, in the Moabit prison for complicity in the July 1944 bomb plot to kill Hitler. There he wrote a series of sonnets which grapple with his sense of being an outcast in his own homeland (*Heimat*—the word, as Burnside admits, has no real English equivalent). Land itself, and ultimately the cosmos, became the only homes he could recognize. The extracts from the *Moabit Sonnets* are genuinely impressive. The sequence doesn’t appear to have been previously translated, and so Burnside has done us a real service here.

Less impressively, there is Haki R. Madhubuti, born in 1942 as Donald Luther Lee in Little Rock, Arkansas, whose quest for a “final definition of self” took him to Africa and made him aware of the patronizing attitudes of “the white establishment.” The quotations from Madhubuti’s work, whose manner nods to Pound and to E. E. Cummings, amply show the extent of his indignation, which we can respect; the trouble is that, in literary terms, they are so flimsy and evanescent. Regrettably, much of the work Burnside discusses seems to exemplify the dictum of the late Clive James that we live in “a time when almost everyone writes poetry but scarcely anyone can write a poem.” Increasingly, poetry is written to be heard rather than read. The routine claim that this is simply a return to ancient oral tradition forgets the intricacy of the classic epics, which were not characterized, as much contemporary oral poetry tends to be, by formlessness and banality of statement. It’s ironic

that Burnside disapproves of “instant” poetry, “like a microwave dinner or packet mashed potato,” so marked by *parti pris* that we can see its sociological message coming a mile off, when he prints some choice examples for our admiration. Some of the writers, too, might profitably have reflected on Seamus Heaney’s distaste, quoted by Burnside, for “poems as a parade of victim entitlement,” exhibiting “the swank of deprivation.”

The root meaning of “culture” is growth rooted in a piece of land, and a national (or regional, or ethnic) literature will develop its distinctive character in response to historical circumstances. This character may change internally (English culture before and after the Civil War, for instance) and vary externally (the nineteenth-century novels of France contrasted to those of Russia). As Eliot observed, cultural migration will lead to adaptation to the “host” culture (the impact of Greek tragedy on Eliot himself is not the same as on Eugene O’Neill or Jean Giraudoux). The socially and geographically specific nature of culture leads to an objection that neither Eliot nor Burnside considers: “the world” (as distinct from the planet) doesn’t *exist*, and therefore can’t have a culture. The word “world” derives, as far as philologists can tell, from roots meaning simply “human,” and human culture is subject to local variation, which leaves us where we started. Setting that aside, Eliot raises questions Burnside leaves unaddressed. What degree of coherence might a “world culture” possess? Would the disintegration of national cultures, in the name of internationalism, be an unalloyed good? Would it promote world peace? Must it be the case that any attempt to preserve national culture is ipso facto reactionary, elitist, or even fascist? Rather than acknowledge Eliot’s work, Burnside simply scolds him for not believing in the democracy of intellect as Lawrence Ferlinghetti did (with some limp lines by Ferlinghetti to prove it). Pound, admittedly a more borderline example, but certainly not “parochial,” comes off worse still, his “political and artistic vision” being brushed aside as “a hodgepodge of half-understood Chinese philosophy, medieval morality and European courtly traditions.” (Even

his opposition to capitalism, we're told, was elitist—quite a feat!)

Poetry, notoriously, is the least translatable of literary forms. What might be meant by “world poetry”? Burnside doesn't use that phrase, but in his unparochial way he is as much at ease commenting on poets from Chad or China as on more familiar names such as Auden, Heaney, or Stevens. With impressive confidence, he tells us that Du Fu (712–70), “a minor Tang court official,” is the author of “some of the finest poems ever written”—too fine, apparently, to quote. Besides being a sinologist, Burnside lays claim to fluency in both Germanic and Romance languages, with their very different poetic traditions and stylistic habits, and offers translations alongside the originals. There is one glaring exception: the representation of French poets is meager. Were such figures as Aragon, Bonnefoy, Char, Eluard, Jouve, Ponge, and Supervielle really thought unworthy of mention? Valéry appears only because a line from *La jeune Parque* was used as an epigraph to a poem in Spanish by Jorge Guillén. This, admittedly, is the cue for Burnside to take us through a possible translation of the poem (“Muerte a lo lejos”) with some sensitivity, and the proviso that a poem is as much sound as sense; the act of translation changes our understanding of both languages in play. But, again, the consequence is to refine our appreciation of cultural *differences*, not to abolish them in favor of a chimerical globalism. I wonder how much of one of Burnside's own poems would survive translation into, say, Ibo or Formosan.

Each chapter of *The Music of Time* consists of meandering meditations, loosely tied to a theme, sparked off by autobiographical anecdotes. It comes across as a somewhat baggy personal anthology. For example, the chapter “Einen Reinen Vorgang” begins from a walk in Switzerland that Burnside, convalescing from illness, made with one of his sons. He recounts how they refreshed themselves from the ice-cold *bisses* (irrigation channels) before visiting the nearby burial place of Rilke. Burnside turns to consider one of the many poems Rilke wrote in French, before giving a brief

biographical outline of Rilke, then discussing his characteristic symbols of roses and angels (with a digression on paintings of the Last Judgment and Annunciation). He sees the angels as reasserting the claims of *poesis* against those of scientific rationalism (cue references to the Michelson–Morley experiment and Eddington's indeterminism). Following a glance at Emily Dickinson—“Nature is what we know—/ Yet have no art to say”—we finally arrive at an unexceptionable exposition of the ninth *Duino Elegy* before returning to the Burnside, on another twilight walk. If only, Burnside thinks, he could make his son see the importance, hymned by Rilke in that elegy, of pure, ephemeral *being*. But that cannot be. Individuals must find these things out for themselves. As the chapter closes, critical analysis is replaced by quasi-poetic evocation of the dance of shadows on stone walls accompanied by the sound of running water, “the very origin—the source—of warm-blooded witness.”

According to your taste, you will find this gracefully moving or pretentiously self-indulgent. It is, for better or worse, the *modus operandi* of the book. Burnside's critical discussions are often worthwhile, but not reliably so. A seven-page commentary on D. H. Lawrence's “Snake” is marred by a wholly fanciful comparison with St. Luke's story of Jesus and Zaccheus, while elsewhere, on Lawrence's brilliant dialect poem “A Collier's Wife,” Burnside sees the narrator as merely “a hard-bitten, brutalized woman,” completely missing the notes of stoical acceptance and understated tenderness that make the poem so touching. Despite the premium on “quality work,” he shies away from value judgments. Comparing a revivalist hymn of 1842 by John Putnam with Emily Dickinson's “I heard a Fly buzz—when I died—” he hastens to add that Dickinson's poem isn't *better* than Putnam's; “they are simply different in form, and thus in effect.” “And thus” doesn't follow: it's not the form in itself, but the greater originality, richness, and complexity of thought and imagery that have made Dickinson outlast Putnam.

“Our most basic error about poetry,” Burnside says, is “that it is there to be ‘understood.’”

Insofar as this is suspicious of one kind of academicism, we can sympathize; the distinguished critic Sir Frank Kermode, in his memoir *Not Entitled* (1995), observed that “the academy has long preferred ways of studying literature which actually permit or enjoin the study of something else in its place,” with the result that students who have been moved by poetry and wish to experience it more deeply find themselves being rewarded for their knowledge of political theory or linguistic philosophy. On another level, however, if poetry can’t be “understood” with the head as well as the heart, it will never be truly nourishing. Archibald MacLeish’s dictum “A poem should not *mean*/ But be,” duly quoted by Burnside, is nonsense; it should do both. What do we do with poets, such as Hart Crane or Wallace Stevens, who seemed deliberately to court incomprehensibility? Burnside cites Crane’s letter to Harriet Monroe, which admits the poet’s lack of interest in logical meaning if that limits “my subject matter and the perceptions involved in the poem.” (Perceptions of what, exactly?) On Stevens, Burnside is more helpful; his comments on “The Snow Man,” “Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour,” and “Restatement of Romance” are of great practical assistance in—yes—understanding the poems.

As I was tidying up this review, it was announced that the prestigious T. S. Eliot Prize for Poetry had gone to the fifty-two-year-old Roger Robinson for *A Portable Paradise* (Peeppal Tree Press, 2020). The news was timely in my present context. Robinson is a “cultural activist” and musician as well as a poet, born in London of Trinidadian descent, who lived in Trinidad between the ages of three and nineteen before returning to Britain. His collection includes poems about the immigration of Jamaicans to England on the *Empire Windrush* ship in 1948, the victims of the Grenfell Tower fire in 2017, and modern slavery, as well as about the difficult birth of his son. He claims Chinese and Russian poets as well as the poetry of working-class protest as influences. He also, unusually, has a strong sense of the importance of faith. “If you want people to understand the power of prayer in a time of trauma, let

this book spread,” he told an interviewer. John Burnside has renounced the religion of his childhood, but a portable Paradise sounds just the sort of thing he is after. As with Milton’s Adam and Eve, the world is all before him.

The rum diaries

Richard Atkinson

Mr Atkinson’s Rum Contract:
The Story of a Tangled Inheritance.
Fourth Estate, 512 pages, £20

reviewed by Barnaby Crowcroft

Among the many demands made in this summer’s cultural revolution, one of the more erudite was for the United Kingdom to abolish the history test currently required as part of the process for acquiring British citizenship. The test is based on an official government handbook—*Life in the UK: A Guide to New Residents*—with chapters on British values, the country’s legal and electoral system, and the story of Britain since the Bronze Age. The tone can be inferred from its subtitle: “A Long and Illustrious History.” There are special boxes on things like Henry VIII’s six wives, William Shakespeare’s most famous plays, and “Notable British Sportsmen and Women.” The spirit of the exercise may be surmised from the sample questions: What is the name of the admiral who died in a sea battle in 1805 and has a monument in Trafalgar Square? Who is the patron saint of Scotland? And so on.

Over one hundred and fifty distinguished British historians signed an open letter denouncing this handbook for its “falsehoods and misrepresentations” over the role of slavery and empire in British history. Only one “falsehood” is identified: the claim that slavery, while widespread in the eighteenth-century British Empire, was illegal in Britain itself—a point that is ambiguous rather than wrong. Yet this is repeated loudly and at length, alongside a dozen complaints over narrative and interpretation, to justify the book’s immediate withdrawal. We cannot

be sure what these distinguished historians would substitute in its place; but a hint of the kind of examination they have in mind for aspiring British citizens was given in the comments several signatories provided to the media: more on how Britain became great only through pillaging and exploiting the rest of the world; more on its history of imperial violence; more “ugliness.”

Richard Atkinson is not a professional historian, but rather a successful publisher of cookbooks. But he has adopted what was once a historian’s preferred way of addressing such matters: conducting years of painstaking archival research and writing a book reconstructing the lives and events of long-gone days. *Mr Atkinson’s Rum Contract: The Story of a Tangled Inheritance* began as a piece of amateur family history, but these Atkinson ancestors turned out to have surprising roles, close to the epicenter of events, through some of the most momentous episodes of British imperial history. And as the author discovered for the first time in the course of this work, they were not only Jamaican slave owners but slave traders as well—their social advancement, wealth, and political and cultural capital based, in part, “from the blood, sweat and lives of enslaved Africans.” Getting to know his extended family history thus forced Richard Atkinson into a rare personal reckoning with Britain’s colonial past.

The family hails from a part of Great Britain in the now neglected “flyover counties,” some way south of the Scottish border, and one of the book’s great achievements is its evocative portrait of the far north of England. The Atkinsons first appear in the sixteenth century as leather tanners in the town of Temple Sowerby. The town is a palimpsest of northern English history, its name derived half from the Knights Templar who owned the area until the dissolution of the monasteries, half from seventh-century Scandinavian settlers. Its former place on the Roman military road to the north is recorded by the mile-markers located on its outskirts. Though prosperous, the Atkinsons were emphatically not part of the English gentry, but in the seventeenth century they

bought land and taught their children Latin; in the early eighteenth century they acquired a farmhouse in the center of town; then they sent two generations of Atkinson men to work in the business of empire.

The fortune was made by the author’s namesake, Richard Atkinson. Moving to London in the 1750s, this Atkinson worked his way up from a clerk to become a partner in a large merchant house working on the Jamaica trade. The central action in Atkinson’s life, however, came from events in the thirteen colonies. When the American colonists rose in revolt in 1775, Atkinson’s firm—Mure, Son & Atkinson—won the contract to supply the British army fighting the colonists. The great contribution of *Mr Atkinson’s Rum Contract* must be its account of an early modern military contractor: Atkinson working closely with the prime minister, Lord North, to supply everything from transport ships, military uniforms, barrack furniture, and Jamaican rum. At one stage, one-third of all British war expenditure was passing through Atkinson’s hands—and substantial profits, from commissions and scandalous over-charging, passing into his pockets.

By the end of the war Richard Atkinson was a wealthy and politically connected London merchant. His next move was into politics. Dismissed by the Whigs who succeeded Lord North in 1782—by which time Atkinson was known as “the notorious rum contractor”—he was quickly adopted by the Tories, who valued him for his influence in the city and undoubted financial and logistical skills. One of the author’s most striking discoveries is the product of Atkinson’s work, behind the scenes, to make William Pitt the Younger prime minister in December 1784, and is a sad indictment of late-eighteenth-century British democracy. A table drawn-up in Atkinson’s handwriting lists the total votes needed, the landowners who controlled key swing seats, and an estimate of how much it would require to buy them off. There is even a costing for the total required expenditure to form a government: £193,500 for 134 seats.

But Richard Atkinson did not have long to reap the rewards. After being elected to

parliament and given a position in the government, he became ill and died suddenly in January 1785, aged just forty-six. None of his successors ever reached such political heights in Britain itself—but several Atkinson nephews who took over Richard’s business rose to some prominence in public affairs in British Jamaica. The family saga that follows contains all of nineteenth-century life: a disputed will, a Dickensian legal struggle encompassing several generations, a dozen illegitimate children; more war, more war profiteering, and constant dealing in slavery. Taken through the twentieth century and into the present day, the story of the Atkinsons could serve as a metonym for the fortunes of twentieth-century Britain. Family wealth built up over generations—multiple country estates, thousands of acres of land, artworks and antiquities—is liquidated and frittered away by a profligate heir in the 1920s and 1930s, largely on the racetracks. By the century’s end, not even family kinship survives.

The Atkinsons’ role as slave owners and traders is most striking for how long it endured. The family firm’s heyday in Jamaica, when nephews George and then Matt directed affairs from Kingston, was in the 1790s and 1800s. This is true of many British West Indian interests—underlining the tendentiousness of arguments that the slave trade was banned in 1807 because it was no longer profitable. But still fifteen years after the trade had been criminalized, a third generation of Atkinsons was setting off to Jamaica in the 1820s to squeeze what they could from the trading business and their two plantations. They deal their last slave months before the Emancipation Act came into force in Jamaica in 1833, in a contract Matt Atkinson had secured back in 1799 to source slave labor for a local Jamaican military force.

What is perhaps most striking for the author—who is naturally concerned with his characters’ inner lives—was his inability to find evidence of any expression of qualm or scruple among Atkinson family papers or documents over their involvement in a business so obviously questionable in moral terms, including to their contemporaries. Atkinson concedes that this indictment of his ancestors was hard

to write. But he places them in the context of a “British culpability” for propping up slavery that dissolves some of the Atkinsons’, observing that individuals from every rank of society played their part, from monarchs and ministers down to working-class people “consuming tainted sugar.”

The truth for much of this period is better for British society, and worse for the Atkinsons. The anti-slavery movement in Britain attracted greater popular support and crossed more social barriers than any other cause in the nineteenth century—it remains today the largest public petitioning campaign in British history. In 1788 a hundred towns and cities submitted petitions demanding an end to the slave trade, including two-thirds of the adult male population of Manchester. Four years later more than five hundred towns and cities did. In 1814, a campaign for empire-wide abolition gained 750,000 signatures across 800 separate petitions; another in 1833 gained over 1.5 million across 5,000—more than 10 percent of the national population in what was a predominantly rural society. The British parliament ultimately responded to public pressure with emancipation legislation that cost the British government millions of pounds. We can second-guess this achievement, but it represented an extraordinary revolution in sensibility and ideas—and it passed the Atkinsons by. One would like to better understand why.

So what are we to make of this for Britain’s national story? *Mr Atkinson’s Rum Contract* opens with the usual boilerplate remarks over how the difficult chapter of slavery in British history has been forgotten or neglected in favor of more comforting accounts of the past. Who has forgotten it? Not historians. Eric William’s classic *Capitalism and Slavery*—which argued that West Indian slavery permeated eighteenth-century British society and government, and was central to its economic rise—was published in 1944 and has been a staple of British history courses since the 1960s. Over the past twenty years there has been such a proliferation of scholarly works, university centers, dedicated faculty hires, and

research fellowships concerned solely with the study of the legacies of British slave ownership that such an assertion must be (to coin a phrase) “demonstrably false”—though this, of course, does not prevent every new author from making it.

It may be true that official discourse and the general public are more concerned with past British achievements rather than past wrongs. But the jury remains emphatically out as to whether governments really should be cultivating the collective national memory of their country’s historic atrocities. As David Rieff observed in *Against Remembrance*, the same techniques a therapist might apply to a patient dealing with personal trauma are likely to be extremely damaging when applied to a whole community or society, regarding events that took place six or seven generations ago—and especially in societies at risk of fragmentation or worse. However that may be, this is a civic and political question, not a historical one. And in such matters (as in so many others) the judgment of one hundred and fifty distinguished historians is almost certainly not to be preferred over that of the proverbial first four hundred names in the phone book.

In the steps of Solomon

Vaughan Hart

Christopher Wren:

In Search of Eastern Antiquity.

Yale University Press, 232 pages, \$60

reviewed by Harry Adams

What makes Sir Christopher Wren’s buildings so distinctive? Over his lengthy architectural career from the mid-1660s to his death in 1723, Wren produced a remarkable array of pioneering buildings in both classical and Gothic idioms, from churches and royal palaces to colleges and hospitals. Of these, the mighty St Paul’s Cathedral—that monumental statement of cool-headed Anglicanism—undoubtedly looms largest. But how do we account for the immense inventiveness of these structures in a country whose experience of

classicism had, hitherto, been confined to the sober, strictly Vitruvian works of Inigo Jones in the first half of the seventeenth century?

For the last fifty years, scholars have attributed Wren’s prodigious architectural creativity to his knowledge of ancient and modern Rome, as mediated through Renaissance treatises and the Baroque buildings of Colbert’s Paris (which Wren saw between July 1665 and March 1666 during his only trip abroad). As such, the influence of works by architects such as Donato Bramante, Gian Lorenzo Bernini, Louis Le Vau, and François Mansart on the young Wren is now well documented. But these sources do not completely explain his vast vocabulary of forms and plans. For the inspiration behind some of his most original designs—such as the innovative steeples, domes, and lanterns of the City churches he rebuilt after the Great Fire of London in 1666—we must look farther afield.

In this new, lavishly illustrated volume, *Christopher Wren: In Search of Eastern Antiquity*, Vaughan Hart does just that. This welcome addition to the field reconsiders many of Wren’s celebrated buildings in the context of his keen interest in the architecture of the Middle East, from antiquity to the Ottoman Empire. Drawing on Wren’s surviving writings (namely, his letters, reports, and so-called “Tracts”) alongside diary excerpts from Robert Hooke, John Evelyn, and other friends and collaborators, Hart skillfully reconstructs a sense of how Middle Eastern architecture was understood and discussed in the 1670s and 1680s. For it was during this period of fierce scientific endeavor, centered on the Royal Society and its search for universal values and origins, that Wren set out to prove that the roots of classical architecture lay not in pagan (and subsequently Catholic) Rome, but in the ancient civilizations of the biblical East.

As Hart argues, these ideas about the origins of architecture are significant because they explain why Wren felt so free to depart from Vitruvian principles and models. Eastern buildings provided a repertory of forms quite distinct from anything in Rome and France. In this volume we see, for example, how the triumphal columns of Constantinople influenced

the design and inscription of the Monument to the Great Fire of London, how the streets of Apamea and Palmyra inspired Wren's sweeping colonnades at Greenwich Hospital and his (unexecuted) scheme for rebuilding the City, and how the Byzantine cross-in-square plan paved the way for several of his most inventive churches.

Having never traveled any farther than Paris, Wren had an understanding of these buildings that was often vague and wholly dependent on reports and drawings by the various travelers, diplomats, clergymen, merchants, and natural philosophers who had made the dangerous journey to the East in person. But archaeological accuracy was, it seems, only part of the picture. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of this book is the way in which Hart contextualizes Wren's fascination with the East in terms of contemporary Anglican thinking. At a time of great soul-searching about the identity of the still-youthful Church of England, the early Christian structures of the Byzantine Empire and Greek Orthodoxy provided valuable examples of Christian-built churches untainted by Roman Catholicism. Much like the Anglican divines, Wren saw these surviving early Christian structures as the key to reviving the architecture of an earlier, purer form of Christianity. Not only were these churches more palatable in historical terms than their Roman and French counterparts, but their centralized plans provided a model that was more suited to the Protestant liturgy and its emphasis on preaching. Constantinople's Hagia Sophia, in particular, held special significance for Wren as the first Christian cathedral (although it had been a mosque since the Fall of Constantinople in 1453). In Chapter 3, Hart demonstrates how its structure—which, like many other smaller Byzantine and Greek Orthodox churches, is based around a dome resting on pendentives, as opposed to a round drum like the Roman Pantheon—influenced those of St Stephen Walbrook, St Mary-at-Hill, and St Paul's Cathedral.

Wren also used the precedents set by buildings in the Holy Land as a way of legitimizing what he considered to be heathen, or less obviously Christian, architectural forms and

styles. As we read in Chapter 2, he justified his use of the Gothic style at Westminster Abbey on the grounds that it originated with the Arab Saracens in the Holy Land and must, therefore, have come to England with the Christian Crusaders. Chapter 1, meanwhile, focuses on Wren's contention in Tract IV that the Roman Doric order dated back to the Phoenicians in Tyre (now part of modern-day Lebanon). Since Phoenician workmen were said to have constructed Solomon's Temple, it followed that this great biblical structure must also have been of the "Tyrian," or early Doric, style. This discovery enabled Wren not only to validate his own extensive use of this order at Greenwich, Chelsea, and Trinity College, Cambridge, but also to claim that he was continuing the work of the Bible's most revered builder, King Solomon. Such assertions may now seem somewhat creative, but they allowed the serious-minded Wren to justify his architectural experimentation on historical and theological grounds.

Hart is by no means the first scholar to emphasize the importance of these ideas about the origins of architecture in the East and the form of early Christian churches, but he is certainly the first to take a prolonged and systematic look at how these views and buildings affected Wren's design imperatives. Indeed, this book benefits from the same high standard of primary research and depth of technical analysis as Hart's previous volumes concerning Inigo Jones and Wren's protégés, Nicholas Hawksmoor and John Vanbrugh. The four chapters are clearly organized around distinct themes and nicely tied together in a separate conclusion (a feature that has, alas, become increasingly rare in books of this kind). At a time when the question of Eastern influence in Western architecture is becoming increasingly politicized, it is also pleasing to note that Hart's approach remains scrupulously scholarly and detached throughout. Highly readable and interesting from begin to end, this superlative volume has something to interest both the discerning architectural scholar and those with but a passing interest in Restoration Britain.

Same as it ever was

Jonathan Scott

How the Old World Ended:
The Anglo-Dutch-American
Revolution, 1500–1800.
Yale University Press, 392 pages, \$35

reviewed by Jeremy Black

With *The New York Times* seemingly leading a crusade to besmirch America's past (and therefore present?), discussion of that heritage is clearly a matter of the present-day culture wars. As Jonathan Scott's book, *How the Old World Ended*, demonstrates, those of an earlier era are also with us again. Much of his book would have sat comfortably with modish writings of the 1960s, for example by the Marxist Christopher Hill. Here we have a simplistic account of modernity and modernization, and, more generally, of causation. In a lumpen's dream, early modern Western republicanism is regarded as a crucial shifter bearing the weight of new concepts and methods that helped produce the Industrial Revolution. With the fundamental link being the influences of Dutch republicanism on mid-seventeenth-century England, republican ideology is seen as key on both sides of the Atlantic. The year 1649 is presented as inaugurating, in England, the "real 'first modern revolution,'" with "history-changing economic consequences" and a radical transformation of manners. Words and phrases are swirled around in a heady, self-intoxicating mix of revolutionary change. The below is typical of the main text, neither introductory flourish nor concluding peroration:

Over two centuries the contexts of all of these revolutions linked old worlds and new. They coincided with, and helped to bring about, the decline of Iberian and the rise of Anglo-Dutch-French (North-West Atlantic) imperial power. They exploited and exacerbated military-fiscal overstretch, the risks attending which became increasingly grave between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries as empires, states and armies grew larger, and the wars in question became global. The result was a political dynamic which

was both destructive and creative, rooted in the making and breaking of both states and empires.

All of these revolutions were linked by culture . . . and ideology.

Sound plausible? Actually, it is rather crude and silly. The individual phenomena Scott sweeps through and then piles up as if proofs for his thesis were far more complex, multifaceted, and often ambiguous in their meaning than he allows for, and so even more with their connections. There is, for example—and this is by no means an exhaustive list—a minimization by Scott of the role of religion; an underplaying of the extent and significance of non-republican dimensions of the Dutch, British, and French revolutions, and indeed of their complexities and contrasts; a failure to devote sufficient attention to differences and discontinuities in republican thought; a fascination with a crude and naive account of modernity, modernization, and turning points; a running-together of cause, precondition, and precipitant in a reductionist and instrumentalist jumble of explanatory phrases; an excessive simplification in addressing explanations of economic development, notably so with reference to long-term trends; and a lack of willingness to engage with alternative explanations, and, thereby, to provide the reader both with suggestions and with the "agency" to consider and choose. Maybe, for example, you are convinced, like Scott, that England "modernized along Dutch lines," but maybe you would like to wonder more about the divergence between the two economies in the eighteenth century and assess how far this reflected differences from the seventeenth and before. Maybe you wonder whether the decline of the Baltic looked so obvious from St. Petersburg, and so on, but Scott is not one to doubt, which presumably contributes to his certainty about present politics. At least he offered a reflection that finally appeared new to me: apparently "Brexit looks like an act of self-mutilation, like the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes." I leave those who know about the willingness of Louis XIV to heed referenda and also the Brexiteers' use of *dragonnades* to get their way to consider the general quality of insight this suggests.

Rather than having the easy task of itemizing problematic aspects of Scott's book, let us address the more complex one of asking "How the Old World Ended?" Clearly, there was and is no single definition of this world. Moreover, there was no one narrative, chronology, or turning-point. As far as changing "the existing world order," a phrase thrown out here by Scott, the following are all germane, but all took place at different moments: linkage by regular trade across the Atlantic; the beginning of the continual period of population increase; mass urbanization; the development of global political ideologies; the move to coal-based power systems; the mechanization of agricultural work. Those are just starters, for any book on "How the Old World Ended" would also have to address multiple viewpoints, variously national, chronological, political, social, economic, religious, and cultural.

Scott, as he makes clear, locates his in a very specific academic-intellectual context, and would I am sure accept that it is partial. This I understand, but even so there is a limited willingness by Scott to address other viewpoints. And yet, that is one of the most interesting aspects of the ending of the "Old World." It is precisely that due to Western expansion, and the often cooperative responses with which that expansion was met, that very different cultures and viewpoints were brought into regular and insistent contact. That situation created a range of intellectual, cultural, social, and political problems, not least how to reconcile the new with pre-existing beliefs and practices; this was an issue in both the West and the even more highly variant non-West. Of course, then and subsequently, there were attempts to surmount, cope with, and/or ignore the resulting disruption by propounding supposedly universal propositions, and the liberal, progressivist notions reheated by Scott can be seen in that light. So, more generally, can ideologies of optimism and global applicability, whatever their genesis.

More interest (and difficulty) resides in seeking to understand the compromises of life, the complexities of power, the multifaceted character of change, and the ambiguities of cause. In the specific case of the Atlantic, it is contrast, unsurprisingly, that is to the fore. Cuba and Virginia both had slavery, but the long-term

consequences have been very different. Britain and France both became republics, but the causes, course, and consequences were scarcely similar. And so also within states. It is too easy to write of Dutch culture without contrasting Amsterdam (on which Scott, like Simon Schama before him, writes extensively) and the bulk of the United Provinces, not just poor areas like Drenthe, but many other parts of the country. Similarly, it is misleading to write of America and its Revolution without assessing adequately the many Loyalists and also the many uncommitted.

Like Scott, I studied for a while at Cambridge. I see in his work not only the influence of the Cambridge political theorists, but also of a broader tranche of scholarship there (and elsewhere), with its fascination with text, discourse, and *Zeitgeist* over the complexities of nuts-and-bolts history, that which happened and was reflected upon in all the confusion and variety one would expect. It is possible to criticize Scott in terms of his approach to texts, not least with reference to the failure to confront differences in republicanism, but, for me, it is the disengagement with the complexity of the non-textual that is most disturbing.

Publishers and reviewers are apt to prefer simplicity and boldness. That certainly makes for clarity. This book unfortunately has all the clarity of a *New York Times* account of the past. It is tendentious and deeply flawed. Much of the writing is hackneyed in its phrasing, whether "the avalanche of publications" or "As London anchored the transnational and global process which made the British imperial and eventually industrial state, so it was made by that process into the first world city."

Also, far from presenting the conceptual originality and startling connections proclaimed by a back-cover puffer, this book possesses an element of weary predictability as you turn the pages and find the established connections of academic platitude—which can be readily reread as the established platitudes of academic connections, for the case of the latter in this book deserves anatomization. Much of this felt like going back half a century. Sometimes that is praise from me, but not in this case.