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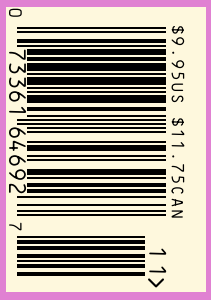

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Notes & Comments: November 2021

Columbus Day

We write on Columbus Day, a holiday that was first celebrated in the United States as far back as 1792 but which became a national holiday only in the late nineteenth century. It's a proud day for Italian Americans, of course. But it also offers an opportunity for all Americans to celebrate both the derring-do of an intrepid explorer and an event that started the ball rolling towards the creation of the world's most prosperous bastion of ordered liberty. That, anyway, is the story we were brought up on.

Today, Columbus, like all things celebrating America, has been enrolled in what the late Roger Scruton identified as the Left's "culture of repudiation." The curious, even hypocritical, nature of this repudiation is especially patent in the most privileged and affluent precincts of our culture, in the Ivy League writ large—all those institutions that, once upon a time, were devoted to perpetuating our civilization but which now, marinated in too much money, spend their time and seemingly bottomless animus deploring everything about America and the civilization that fed it.

Consider, to take just one example, the long, graphics-filled story printed on October 11 in *The Washington Post*. "Columbus monuments are coming down," the *Post* cheered, "but he's still honored in 6,000 places across the U.S. Here's where." It begins with this tableau: "With one quick tug, a 14-foot-tall Carrara marble statue of Christopher Columbus fell, shattering into pieces. The crowd of more than a hundred, gathered in Baltimore's Little Italy neighborhood, erupted in celebration." Isn't it wonderful? Destruction of public property and the kicking of America, all in one fun-filled afternoon. There follow paeans to St. George Floyd and Black Lives Matter and sympathetic quotations from Indian "activists." Quoth one: "We tell our kids the truth. We tell them that Columbus was a bad guy." There are also maps full of little dots and directions for the instruction of aspiring vandals. The message is clear: "Here is where the statues honoring Columbus are, kids. Come and get 'em." Isn't there something about "incitement" in the statute books?

Anti-Columbus activism is not new. More than twenty-five years ago, the historian Keith Windschuttle provided a précis of the genre in *The Killing of History: How Literary Critics and Social Theorists Are Murdering Our Past* (Encounter). Quoting various anti-Columbus (and anti-American) academics—Kirkpatrick Sale, Tzvetan Todorov, et al.—Windschuttle shows how one-sided is the campaign against early European colonizers of the Americas. The Left excoriates Columbus, Hernán Cortéz, and other Europeans for their savagery while completely ignoring the unspeakable barbarism of the natives they encountered. Taking that on board, Windschuttle notes, would have made their "moral outrage appear ludicrous."

At the end of the day, however, the natives function as little more than props for these writers and activists. The real focus of their energy is against America and the European civilization it embodies. "[T]he interest of these writers in the events of 1492," Windschuttle writes, "derives only in small part from any real sympathy they might have for the natives and far more from their fervour to adopt a politically correct stance against their own society." Ironically, "they themselves . . . bear all the characteristics of the Eurocentrism they condemn in Columbus, Cortés," and other targets. Which is to say, repudiating Columbus is merely a pretext for a larger repudiation of the culture that supports and flatters them. It is as disingenuous as it is repulsive. But it seems quite clear that the attacks will not end until their plump sources of support begin to be loaded onto the hecatombs of their juvenile and malicious fury.

Education apocalypse now

Speaking of "juvenile and malicious fury," we were browsing the invaluable online aggregator Instapundit recently and came across a public-service bulletin filed under the rubric "Higher Education Apocalypse," a frequent feature at that site. It turns out that the Art Institute of Chicago has decided to fire all 122 of its unpaid docents. Why? Because, being mostly middle-class white women, they are not sufficiently "diverse."

Now, the Art Institute houses one of the finest collections in the country, indeed, in the world. In the breadth and depth of its holdings, it occupies a place in that top circle of institutions populated by the Metropolitan in New York, the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, the National Gallery in Washington, D.C., and only a tiny handful of other museums. Beyond that, it maintains (that is, it maintained) one of the most rigorous docent programs anywhere. The volunteers act as greeters and guides to the collection. Unlike docents at many museums, those at the Art Institute actually know (again, insert preterite here) what they are talking about. As the article linked by Instapundit notes, docents there underwent "two training sessions per week for *eighteen months*, and then [according to the docents] 'five years of continual research and writing to meet the criteria of 13 museum content areas.' . . . On top of that, there's monthly and biweekly training on new exhibits." Docents gave up to two one-hour tours a day for eighteen weeks of the year. Their average length of service was fifteen years. They did it because they love the art. Did we mention that they did it for free?

That's all over now. In late September, the museum cashiered them all. "More than 1,200 years of work put in by the current docents," we read, "and all that expertise: gone in an instant." In recompense, the AIC offered their former benefactors free two-year passes to the museum. Really, you can't make it up. Going forward, the museum plans to hire a smaller group of docents that will skip the rigorous training and be paid $25 per hour. As the article dryly notes, the new docents "will surely meet the envisioned diversity goals."

The question is, what goals will they fail to meet? We know the answer to that, although we are not supposed to say. They will fail spectacularly to meet the goal of effectively educating the public for which the museum ostensibly exists. The article, published at a website called "Why Evolution Is True," asks some interesting questions: Does the Art Institute need to diversify? Is it an experiment in sociological consciousness-raising or an educational institution dedicated to the preservation and elucidation of works of art?

The writer of this article acknowledges that surely "some minority docents might have different points of view about art." But he wonders "what the reaction would be if all the docents were black or Hispanic and they hired whites to get a 'white point of view'?"—yet another question to which you know the answer. Moreover, the writer goes on to point out, the Art Institute *did* try to diversify their pool of docents but failed. Sure, "it would look better to have a diverse group of docents." But they just could not find appropriate ones. We agree with the writer: replacing the long-serving, unpaid, and qualified docents with a paid group of people whose primary qualifica-

tion is their skin color is not only insulting to everyone involved but is also "a bad move for the Museum's reputation and especially for the education of those who go to the AIC. There will have to be many fewer tours, and with a much less well-trained group of guides."

Incidentally, Instapundit notes that this story came "courtesy of a reader who doesn't use Facebook much, but decided to try and share this story—only to have sharing squashed."

What is happening at the Art Institute of Chicago is only the tip of the education apocalypse iceberg, of course. In New York (to take just one other example), the outgoing mayor, Bill de Blasio, just announced that he is phasing out all school programs for gifted and talented students and replacing them with a new diversity program called "Brilliant NYC." Yes, really. The trouble is, you see, that Asian and white students are "overrepresented" in the current programs. Or, to put it more accurately, there are not enough blacks and Hispanics in them. Hence, as *The New York Times* wrote, they are "a glaring symbol of segregation in New York City public schools." The question is, as one critic of the initiative had it, "How is putting kids out of gifted and talented programs going to solve racial segregation?" It won't. De Blasio's ham-handed attack on quality reminds us that a critical part of the left-liberal agenda is punishing those who succeed.

De Blasio will be gone before his parting gift to the city can be implemented. It will be left to his successor—probably Eric Adams—to carry out the plan. Will he? He has said he is in favor of expanding such programs, not replacing them, but we will see. We'd say that you cannot make it up, but then you don't have to. This surreal attack on merit is actually happening.

Fear

George W. Bush once observed that "the desire for freedom resides in every human heart." That sure sounds nice. Is it true? We think the jury is still out on that. At the very least, we'd suggest that there are other less-noble-sounding desires competing for a place. One of these is the desire for servitude and conformity. In *The Spirit of the Laws*, Montesquieu said that "government should be set up so that no man need be afraid of another." Montesquieu, together with John Locke, was one of the most important influences on the political philosophy of the Founding Fathers. But we've come a long way since Madison and Hamilton limned the ideals of a limited government of enumerated powers that put a premium on individual liberty. The American-born English novelist Lionel Shriver helped measure the distance traveled in an essay for *City Journal* on the progress of COVID hysteria in squelching freedom, not just in the actions of an overbearing state but also, and perhaps more crucially, in the growing habit of subservience in the population at large.

Shriver focuses on the situation in Britain, but what she says has equal pertinence to what is unfolding in the Untied States and elsewhere. A good 27 percent of Britons, she reports, "want to impose a government-mandated nationwide curfew of 10 p.m. . . . 'until the pandemic was under control worldwide,' which might be years from now." More sobering, nearly 20 percent would impose such a curfew permanently, regardless of the risk of COVID. Even more extraordinary, 64 percent want Britain to mandate masks in shops and on public transport for the duration of the pandemic, while "an astounding 51 percent want to be masked by law, forever."

What these depressing numbers tell us, Shriver rightly observes, is that "far from yearning for their historic liberties as 'free-born Englishmen,'" some eight out of ten Britons are "'anxious' about lifting any of their government's copious pandemic restrictions." Many even appear "in love . . . with the state of captivity itself." The same, alas, goes for a sizable part of the American population. Madison and Hamilton and the other Founding Fathers labored mightily to produce a form of government that supported liberty. But what if "we the people" decide that liberty is too scary, too difficult, too troublesome to maintain? What then?

Western civilization at the crossroads: III

The specter of Chinese civilization

by Angelo M. Codevilla

Editors' note: Angelo M. Codevilla, who died on September 21, 2021, was reviewing final edits on this essay at the time of his death.

Since few doubt that the increasingly numerous Chinese people are rising in power and self-confidence while we Americans continue to become less and less attached to the values of our own civilization, it makes some sense to ask whether we are doomed to succumb to Chinese civilization. This is especially pertinent given that the way Chinese people live has always been much the opposite of the way Americans want to live.

Does China represent the fatal crossroads of Western civilization? The question, as phrased, calls for an unequivocal *no*. Americans may well end up living under tyranny resembling that of today's China. But that tyranny's core is not the classic civilization of Confucius, Laozi, and the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. This civilization is what the Chinese themselves abandoned around the turn of the twentieth century. Today's tyranny in China itself is by, of, and for the Communist Party. It is Western civilization's perverted legacy, built upon ancestral Chinese habits.

China has not historically been a nursery, never mind an exporter, of totalitarianism or revolution. Moreover, China's rulers have traditionally had neither interest nor capacity to export any way of life. Their goal vis-à-vis America is now to maximize revenue while minimizing America's will and capacity to interfere with China's growing overlordship of Asia. This requires merely coopting the U.S. ruling class, which the Chinese find easy through garden-variety corruption.

Our own civilization is in the process of being undercut by its own ruling class, which abandoned Western culture as it was taking power over the past century. By then negating explicitly the civilization's defining premise—that all humans are created equally in God's image, and hence that legitimate rule must be based on persuasion rather than force—our ruling class has placed itself on essentially the same ground as that of yesteryear's and today's Chinese despots.

The "Chinese Model" that our side's would-be tyrants are eager to copy merely adds technical refinements to standard despotism. Our leaders want to impose it, confident that Westerners will accept it as the Chinese people do. But they mistake Chinese civilization as well as their own. What they wish to impose is, in fact, different from what exists in China in purpose and nature. Applied in today's Western world for the purposes of our own woke tyranny, Chinese-level social control would be harsher than the Chinese original. Chinese despots offer a calm, orderly tyranny in exchange for equal obedience by all alike. By contrast, our own ruling class demands that one class of people obey another's ever-evolving and unpredictable orders, while submitting to insult and injury. China is not what Americans should fear. Today, as in Lincoln's time, "if destruction be our lot, we must ourselves be its author and finisher."

Totalitarianism is not Chinese

China was never the land of the free. The net of waterworks that irrigated some of the world's most fertile land and facilitated travel within it was the doing of millions of human beings forced to dig. Even the Han Dynasty's hundreds of miles of rammed-earth walls, never mind the later thousands of miles of sculpted stone, bespeak millions worked to death. Emperors and would-be emperors advertised their brutality. Some had themselves depicted wearing robes onto which are embroidered images of bloody heads severed by bloody blades. The Forbidden City's sculptures feature angry, jealous lions and dragons. The emperors'—and their favorites'—choice of everything, including concubines, was arbitrary and absolute.

And yet, law ruled in China. It was not statutory law, never mind natural law. It was customary law, enforced by officials whose expertise in it was certified by rigorous, competitive, high-stakes examinations. Ordinary Chinese depended on that law and its impartial enforcement for the most important things: the duties of children to parents, marriages, titles to land, rents, loans, inheritances, lawsuits, etc. The near-static nature of the supply of land and food, coupled with the constant increase in the population, meant that legal processes secured the livelihood of the most able and doomed the less able to marginalization at best. For millennia, China was the land of law.

The law's content simply reflected how things were done. Things should be done the way they were done, period. Readers of Confucius's *Analects* (*ca*. 475 B.C.–220 A.D.) have always noted their substantive commonality with Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics (ca*. 335–322 B.C.). Yet Aristotle describes what he understands to be the order of nature, of the household, among other things—namely what is right for man because man is man. But when Confucius said that "fathers should be fathers and sons should be sons," he was authoritatively describing the way that proper fathers and sons had always behaved. Enforcing such behavior and other aspects of how things were done was the whole purpose of law. The idea was that if law does not enforce doing things as they are, then things will cease to be as they are, and therefore as they should be. Reality's authority is also the reason why telling the truth about the world is essential. Until 1905, the deeply Confucian Chinese imperial civil service enforced that law.

In short, stability was the objective of traditional Chinese political theory. Just as fathers had to do certain things to maintain the family, so emperors had to fulfill their duty to maintain order. And if they didn't do the things that pertain to them, or did them badly, then things ceased to be as they were and should be, and the social fabric unraveled from the top. While "losing the mandate of heaven" remains a nebulous concept, clearly the thrust of the idea is that when rulers don't deliver stability, they bring obligations to an end.

Traditional Chinese despotism, then, was anything but revolutionary. Nor did it pit one part of society against another. It was not about class warfare or racial warfare, much less about revolution. Nor was it even oligarchical—an alliance of the powerful, entitled ones against the masses. It was about securing imperial power while interfering with the masses' orderly, predictable lives only to extract labor and obedience from them. China knew only the choice between stable despotism and chaos.

China, Communism & totalitarianism

Upper-middle-class students who had sojourned in London, Paris, and Berlin brought Communism to China in the early 1920s. Zhou Enlai was one of 1,200 of these. Academically trained, Zhou absorbed Marxism–Leninism and helped transition the then-nationalist Mao Tse-tung to it. There is no evidence that Mao (or anyone else in the Chinese Communist Party) understood or cared about Karl Marx's thought *qua* thought. Mao's *Little Red Book* (1964) is Marxist gobbledygook, but it does reflect Marxism's un-Chinese essence: tear down the pillars of the house and build anew.

Chinese Communists also adopted Lenin's construct of the Party as the ultimate weapon of conquest and power. From the 1920s to

'40s, in China as everywhere else, would-be Communists were preoccupied with building cadres for the Party. Yet China, from the 1920s on, was in the throes of civil war. Mao and friends were building and wielding their own army for it, too. Thinking of those leaders as Party cadres in the Leninist sense seemed logical. Chinese history would also have led them to think of Party cells as eventual substitutes for the defunct imperial bureaucracy that had run the country for thousands of years.

But whereas stability had been the imperial bureaucracy's purpose, war was the Party's purpose—total war to abolish all that was old and replace it with something that no one could define but that required complete denial of the present. That, or perhaps Mao's insatiable hunger for power, negated all manner of law, thereby denouncing stability and Confucius himself. Thus did Mao dictate and superintend all manner of un-Chinese, untenable ventures, chiefly the superseding of the family with communes and the organization of economic activity into collectives. That chaos is what made Communist China a place of famine and fear. Unpredictability, not harshness, is what made Mao's rule unacceptable. We think of Mao's reign as totalitarian. For the Chinese, the term "revolution" is more meaningful and more frightening.

That very superintendence over a vast land and a billion people, however, made it inevitable that the Party cadre would take the place, and eventually adapt into the role, of the old imperial bureaucracy. Once Deng Xiaoping had defeated the last of the Maoists in 1978, these officials transmuted into their imperial predecessors—minus the competence. But that did not matter in the most important respect. Stability, allowing the rebirth of family and private economy, was enough to satisfy the modest demands of ordinary Chinese. The "mandate of heaven" does not seem to require more.

By the early 2000s, it really did not seem that anything happening in Chinese society might hurt America. The number of card-carrying Communists on American university faculties may still be higher than the number of serious Communists within China itself.

Far from making, never mind exporting, revolution, the Chinese Communist Party seemed satisfied that the people were eating better than ever and enjoying luxuries such as air conditioning. And although the Party cadres themselves rose and fell by the laws of favor, they administered a scrupulously fair and demanding system of academic exams by which ordinary people could make or break their futures. It seemed as if China had reverted to something like its millennial normality. In some ways, it had. Indeed, the quiet growth in China of a seemingly export-friendly version of something that we think of as totalitarianism was more important for us than for the Chinese.

Totalitarianism & social control

Let us see how a phenomenon that has developed in China over the past generation more fully than elsewhere, one that we Westerners call totalitarian, now threatens us.

"Totalitarian," to Westerners, describes a ruler's attempt to exert control over someone's rightful autonomy, regardless of the power grab's success, because we assume that we have rights that natural law forbids be taken from us. Property may be the most obvious of these. Your life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness are also naturally, inalienably your own. Mussolini first used the term *totalitarismo* in reference to his boast of "everything within the state, nothing outside the state, nothing against the state," even though his regime's aims were hardly as ambitious as the goals of those who have sought to remake humanity—such as the perpetrators of the French Revolution and those inspired by Marxism–Leninism. We Westerners believe that any uninvited attempt to control what is ours is inherently unlawful and illegitimate.

In China, however, law has coexisted very well with all manner and degree of despotism and social control. So long as there remains stability and regularity in people's lives, the waxing and waning of China's bedrock despotism has not affected its legitimacy. But unquestioning acceptance of despotism has made China a fertile petri dish for the growth of

the latest virus: a computer-enforced "social-credit" system of societal control.

Always and everywhere, rulers seem to be in search of rationalizations and means of increasing their power over the ruled. They call upon religion or patriotism, invent or adopt pseudoscientific creeds, foster hopes, fears, and panics, and of course use any and all technological advances in service of their quest.

The unprecedented opportunity for social control offered by advances in computer technology, and the Chinese government's successful use of it for that purpose, combined with the Chinese people's matter-of-fact acquiescence, has led—misled, I believe—Western leaders to imagine that something like a "social-credit" system is transferable to the West.

Few thoughtful people ever imagined that computer technology would be anything but a mortal peril for human liberty and a boon for the power-hungry. That is why, pretty much everywhere, enthusiasm for modern data-processing's promises of efficiency, personal connectivity, and the widespread flow of information were accompanied by at least some worry about how easily this tool could become the key to a totalitarianism more rigorous than had ever been imagined.

Everywhere, that is, except in China, because the Chinese people's historical and habitual acceptance of despotic authority obviates questions concerning the legitimacy of using "big data," or anything else, to serve government power. Such use involves the coordination of state and corporate activities to rate the actions and thoughts of individuals relative to authoritative priorities, then to reward and punish these individuals based on their behavior—by making certain ratings a condition for travel, for instance. Not incidentally, in China the use of computer-aided surveillance for enforcing laws and social norms has coincided with a decrease in its historically high level of social cohesion.

Social credit

Nothing could be more Chinese than lists containing criteria of personal behavior, and even of opinion—by which rulers may manage individuals by directing, judging, rewarding, and punishing them. But even in China there is no single integrated system for rating financial, political, or moral behavior, in part because the standards being enforced vary from place to place, and with the changing concerns of officials.

Regardless of the above, the very existence of the databases, their acceptance, and the fact that they may be used for all manner of enforcement have enabled Chinese officials to bring the full weight of government and society to bear on any matters important to them. Using data management to cut and shape the flow of information, mobilizing support with rewards while punishing dissent, has made today's Chinese leadership more unchallengeable than the emperors of old ever were.

Keep foremost in mind that these new tools only confirm Chinese rule's main, distinctive, despotic characteristic: in China, ruling does not involve the least bit of persuasion. The ruler does not convince the ruled of anything, and he does not try. The ruler rules exclusively by command and coercion. No wonder Westerners, who must convince the ruled to agree, or suffer dissent, envy the Chinese and yearn to imitate them.

But Westerners fascinated with social credit in China neglect the radical difference between what it means there and what it would mean here. The lingering presence of the Confucian tradition suggests that the criteria for rating people must have much to do with how things have been done and continue to be done, and that any system must be administered in a stable, sustainable manner. The stricter the demands, the less tolerant of change. Our looming Western tyranny is quite the opposite. Not only for logistical reasons is it impossible to imagine a Chinese social-credit system forcing people to deny the difference between men and women, or even to utter the words "father, mother, son, daughter." Besides, China's regime has no interest in such things, unlike the gender-obsessed commissars found throughout Western governments and academia.

Information management & the model

Indeed, it seems that contemporary Western regimes, ours in America especially, are interested in little else besides frivolous questions of identity and how such questions may be used to control the population. Western businessmen, political leaders, and government bureaucrats have always looked enviously at the Chinese population's docility. Willful and ignorant, the Western elites see China with their own agendas foremost in mind and see no reason why something that works in China should not work in America—especially if they, the allegedly enlightened elite, want it to.

In fairness, we must note that China's complex foreignness lends itself to misinterpretation. The original Western Sinologist, Matteo Ricci (1552–1610), came to understand China's Confucian subtleties only after a lifetime of study. Today's Chinese government has overlain those principles with pure will, right down to the words themselves. The radical simplification of contemporary Chinese orthography has made it almost impossible even for Chinese to read Confucius in the original.

Still, the main reason why Western leaders misunderstand China is that they have never learned or appreciated their own civilization. Our overlords ask: Why is it that Westerners, Americans above all, won't simply do what they are told? Why do we insist on coming to our own conclusions about right and wrong, better and worse? Why do we noisily demand informed consent?

What contemporary Western leaders miss is what the Book of Genesis revealed, and Greek philosophy clarified: that the world is made according to, in the words of the Declaration of Independence, the "laws of Nature and of Nature's God," and that all humans are equally creatures of the same God, equally subject to those laws; that understanding and living by these laws is every human being's equal right and duty; and hence that, rightly to rule one another, we humans must convince one another. In other words: acting properly depends neither on tradition nor on power, but on right and wrong, better and worse, objectively true.

Although even the wokest of the corporate leaders and government officials who run America do not openly deny this foundational civilizational pillar, and thereby affirm the duty of ordinary people to obey rulers blindly, the emergence of the technical means by which to restrict and manage the information available to the general population has spurred many among them to try working around that pillar. They seek to obviate informed consent, by more or less forcefully managing the flow of information.

For many of our rulers, this does not pose problems of principle because, having thoughtlessly internalized the notion that truth and error, right and wrong, are relative (or as Marxists put it, "superstructural") to the realities of interest, they effectively believe that power makes its own right. In practice, they agree with Plato's Thrasymachus, who maintained that right is everywhere the interest of the stronger, and with China's rulers as well.

Networked computers make it possible to spread favored versions of events—"our truth," rather than *the* truth—and to discourage, if not punish, the circulation of disfavored versions of events, which nothing prevents us from calling "inaccurate," "problematic," or "disinformational." Those who control our information are careful not to label material that they thus stigmatize as "false," lest someone defend it as factually true. Reference to objective reality is dangerous, and it is far better to stick to trials of power.

Consider just one example of the elite ability to control the flow of information under the guise of protecting the population. Speaking about efforts to discredit, restrict, and shut out of circulation non-favored ideas about the COVID-19 epidemic, the Surgeon General of the United States said, "we expect more from our technology companies. . . . We're asking them to monitor misinformation . . . to consistently take action against misinformation super-spreaders on their platforms." The current White House press secretary, Jen Psaki, seconded that: the Biden administration had, she said, "increased disinformation research and tracking." It was "flagging problematic posts for Facebook that spread disinformation." She did not quite say that it was "ordering" Face-

book to act upon its judgment about what is information and what is disinformation and what the difference might be. But she added, "We're working with doctors and medical professionals . . . to connect medical experts . . . who are popular with their audiences with . . . accurate information and boost trusted content. So we're helping get trusted content out there."

In short, the current presidential administration wants companies such as Facebook to do more censoring of thoughts that do not fit its agenda than those companies are already doing. The force of that censorship comes mostly from the consensus that exists within the ruling class that thoughts that do not flow from itself, that do not reflect its agendas, should be effectively banished so that the public will know only "trusted content." But trusted by whom? Computers do not create the ruling class's unanimity of interest and hence of opinion. They are neither more nor less than a means of imposing that unanimity on a general population whose recalcitrance the rulers must fear.

They must fear it because, although the substance of what they demand is often not as harsh as what Chinese rulers demand of their subjects, Americans are not civilizationally conditioned to accept demands as part of the world's natural order, as Chinese subjects are. Take the imposition of internal passports as a condition of employment, travel, and so on. The Chinese do not need to cite public health or any other excuse to enforce such a stricture. But no excuse may convince many Americans to accept them, especially since those who tout them do so on a transparently partisan basis. But our oligarchs bolster and impose their demands with such force and reach as to create what might appear to be a new model of civilization, one dangerously ignorant of the traditions that have allowed Western civilization, and America especially, to flourish throughout history.

Revolutionary civilization is impossible

In the twenty-first century, an oligarchy has replaced the American republic. The people's elected representatives had previously ruled by persuading each other and their voters. But the distinction between public office and private power has given way to the criterion of proximity to a community of powerful individuals and institutions. In a republic, power derives its legitimacy from the voters. In oligarchies like our current model, power is exercised by persons who control the country's institutions. They don't think of themselves as citizens, but as "stakeholders." Their legitimacy derives from each other's support. How did stakeholders replace citizens? Who are these stakeholders, and by what right do they rule?

As government grew in size and power, it drew unto itself the practical allegiance of the country's most powerful private persons. Even without formal legal provisions such as that of Italy's 1926 National Council of Corporations (Italian fascism's defining feature) or the U.S. National Industrial Recovery Act of 1933 (partially invalidated by the courts), prolonged association between regulators and regulated, between administrators and administered, soon erased distinctions between them. Seamlessly, the same people changed from one role to the other. Not being wholly responsible to government or to private business, they ended up as the effective owners of the "stakes" they have in the system.

Agreements within "public–private partnerships" also differ in nature from ones made among elected representatives. The latter, as James Madison argued, draw out the "deliberate sense" of the people by adjusting their interests politically. But regulatory decisions, indeed administrative decisions by their very nature, are made on the real or pretend basis of expertise. But who judges expertise, if not the ones who pretend to have it? And if these experts also dispense the money that gives access to credentials, then there occurs the situation about which President Dwight Eisenhower warned us: "public policy could itself become the captive of a scientific-technological elite" because a "government contract becomes virtually a substitute for intellectual curiosity."

And as Ike warned, the process did proceed through the "power of money" via federal "project allocations." Beginning in the 1960s,

Congress lavishly funded multiple mandates to rid America of poverty, ignorance, racial discrimination, and much more. Each of these in turn mandated a bureaucracy to dispense the money. These in turn created classes of people who lived by these moneys and, along with the bureaucrats, took ownership, thereby becoming stakeholders of the programs.

Oligarchy is the replacement of representative government by the melding of public and private power with the administrative state. Throughout history, most oligarchies have united around the stakeholders' primary common interest in orderly rent-seeking. Typically, oligarchies have nothing to do with ideas of right and wrong, never mind with ideology. And if they form out of a political party, that party is all about oligarchy itself.

But ours is not a typical oligarchy. The sense of superiority to the rest of America had been the animating force behind the Progressive movement around the turn of the twentieth century. From their embryo, the disparate parts of the American administrative state/oligarchy shared this sense. Beginning in the 1960s, however, the will to hurt and to demean the rest of the population grew among these stakeholders, to the point that today, this vengeful approach overshadows and endangers their very power.

This happened because the tasks that these public/private institutions were empowered to fulfill always had something hostile, vindictive about them. Rid America of poverty? Can we do that without blaming our least favorite people for its existence? What about ridding America of racial discrimination? Clearly, our least favorite people are responsible for it and must be made more than a little uncomfortable. And if that takes raising the level of racial animus, it's for a good cause. As the power of stakeholders grew, other kinds of modern progressives lent support and demanded coequal attention to their grievances against the rest of the American people. That is why America's ruling oligarchy is a coalition based on little but grievances, which the several sets of stakeholders usually do not even share. These are bitter, often screaming, grievances, many of which have long since morphed into sheer hate. The oligarchy's opponents are, in the telling of American elites, responsible for everything from the black murder rate to the frying of the planet.

America's oligarchy is made up of diverse elements that have little in common other than an indifference to or loathing of Western civilization in general and of the American republic in particular. Since members of the oligarchy support each other's claims—over which they have no control—by the iron law of political necessity, there is no logical end to those claims. That is yet another reason why our oligarchy's modus operandi relies so heavily on cutting off at the source any and all circulation of facts and arguments that would cause any set of stakeholders publicly to argue its case—an argument they might lose and that would surely upset other members of the coalition. This is why Google's and Facebook's censorship is essential to the oligarchy's continued power.

Our oligarchy no longer even pretends that the commands it issues about what may or may not be discussed, what is "trustworthy" versus "misleading," derive from anything other than what its members—very much including the government—demand here and now.

Forcefully restricting and managing the information available to the general population empowers and institutionalizes the division between rulers and ruled, and does so in a partisan, even tribal way. In America this practice is revolutionary because it so explicitly destroys the theory and practice of equality that had been the American republic's defining characteristic, and because it does so on behalf of a part of the population. Google, Facebook, and Twitter, among many others, not only restrict what disfavored people may tell each other. They also limit certain segments of the population's ability to learn from history and the great store of Western knowledge. They have arrogated to themselves the power to decide who is allowed to appear on the national stage by retaining the ability to wipe out whole accounts, as if their holders never existed. Moreover, they prevent the disfavored ones from using their platforms to complain. They do all this on behalf of the bureaucratic

elite that runs most government in America, and whose officials adjudicate disputes.

Clearly the American oligarchy manages information differently, and for a radically different purpose, from China's tyrannical state. Whereas Chinese rulers demand and get obedience on behalf of a millennialist mono-ethnic (or at least they so pretend), nonpartisan country (the title Communist having lost practical significance), America's rulers demand it on behalf of allegedly aggrieved persons who never cease to stress their own difference from the ruled. The truly powerless Americans are, rather than objects of compassion, merely contemptuous in the eyes of the elite. That same contempt applies to the country as a whole and the Western civilization that has nourished it. Because the substance of the oligarchy's demands changes at will and convenience, compromising with them is impossible. So is obtaining peace by surrender. One may search history without finding examples of tribal rule-by-aggravation lasting very long.

After the crisis, what?

Ever-intensifying tribal identity, tribal hostility, and tribal warfare usually result in war. But whether by civil war, or by some sort of reformist Thermidorean, Napoleonic, or Khruschevian regime—or goodness knows what—our collective madness will someday end. This by no means counsels complacency towards how this madness may affect the kinds of lives of which Americans may be capable in the future.

What is now America's ruling culture has been gestating and marking Americans for more than a half century. The effects are all too obvious, and in some senses are worse than what the Soviets inflicted on the Russian people. Our society's tone-setters have devalued marriage, and families now raise children in a way that is arguably more violent than the Soviets did in their most virulent phase. The Soviets never descended to devaluing academic excellence, especially in math and science.

Sure as we may be that the woke regime will eventually collapse, we can be just as sure that it will leave behind millions of people who share its culture, unable and unwilling to live in one they regard as alien. We cannot know how many Americans have joined that culture. Even their very presence among us will tend to suck, pull, push, and prod the rest of us into a lifestyle far nastier than anything in ancient or even modern China.

Who will oppose them, and with what culture? Many on the right, justifiably fearful of their vanishing way of life, have chosen to defend it by defending freedom itself, abstractly. But freedom is valuable only in relation to the good. Noble as it may be to defend the right to lie, that right is worth defending only if it is part of a civilization that values truth. Nobody lives or dies for freedom abstractly.

The American republic's Founders did not do that, and neither should today's Republicans try to do it. The Founders articulated specific grievances of which they wished to rid themselves. And they chose to live by "the laws of Nature and of Nature's God." These laws were no more abstractions than were the grievances. Nor was their love for those laws abstract. These people did not carry their Bibles as any sort of cultural badge. They read them to keep in mind what was expected of them and of one another.

Our ruling oligarchy has made it socially difficult even to think about the difference between what is right and wrong. This itself presents us with an important crossroads. Eliminating the intellectual and moral conversation that made the American republic unique has been the oligarchs' effect if not also their objective. Their success in this enterprise haunts America's future. China does not.

Is America in irreversible decline?

by Conrad Black

Editors' note: The following is an edited version of remarks delivered for The New Criterion*'s third annual Circle Lecture.*

The answer to the question that Roger Kimball gave me for reply is that *no*, the United States is not in irreversible decline at all. It is at a plateau that should be sustainable for a long time. It has had an untimely and even freakish confluence of unfortunate circumstances, but the United States is today no less important a country in the world than it was a year ago or ten or twenty or thirty years ago. It was only thirty years ago that it led the West to the greatest and most bloodless strategic victory in history, in the disintegration of its only rival as a superpower in the world. This disintegration occurred as a result of the inspired policy of containment followed by ten presidents. No shot in anger was ever exchanged between the United States and the Soviet Union.

Irreversible decline is what gradually drove down Spain, Turkey, and the Habsburg Empire from the late sixteenth century into the twentieth century. One hears a good deal of glib talk comparing the United States to the late Roman Empire. This is not informed opinion. There were, depending upon how you count them, fifty Roman emperors from Augustus to Romulus Augustulus, 27 B.C.–453 A.D., and thirty-eight of them died violently. After Constantine died in 337, Rome was ever more frequently and heavily dependent upon mercenaries, frontier barbarians of questionable loyalty, and the interventions of religious leaders. Later Roman government was thoroughly debased, conducted mainly by warlords who had no real fealty to Rome at all. And even after seven hundred years of preeminent influence in western Europe, when the Empire was more or less competently directed from Rome, and after a century of increasing chaos, when it was overwhelmed by barbarian masses, the eastern Roman Empire soldiered on for nearly another thousand years. The extremities of institutional decrepitude, venality, and fragmentation had to be reached before Rome could be described as being in irreversible decline.

I speak as one who is so steeped in Oswald Spengler's claim of the coming "decline of the West" that after the last U.S. presidential election I actually had a dream in which there appeared a modified version of the song from *Kiss Me, Kate* (1953) in which we are admonished to "brush up your Shakespeare, start quoting him now. . . . Brush up your Shakespeare and they'll all kowtow." In my subconscious version, Spengler replaced Shakespeare, and if we brushed him up we would all better kowtow to the Chinese. The thought that the inexorable decline has already begun certainly seemed plausible, but on considering it carefully and despite the inauspicious beginning of the present administration, I do not think that any such conclusion is justified.

The United States is fundamentally a much more powerful country than China, which lacks the internal resources to support an aging, over-large, and culturally inhomogeneous population; is 40 percent a command economy, riven by corruption; and possesses no civilian institutions that are respected in or outside the country. Several hundred million Chinese still

live as their ancestors did two thousand years ago. China is the greatest economic development story in history, and this is the first time a formerly Great Power ceased to be one and has, after a lapse of five hundred years, regained that status. The Chinese challenge has only assumed the proportions it has because of the sudden fragmentation of the normal political consensus on national security matters in the United States at the moment that long-pent-up racial dissension has erupted in what must be its final demonstrative stage. Militant African Americans are making demands and inflicting destruction on a scale that would have been more appropriate sixty years ago. These are now sociopathic attitudes, but they are unrepresentative, though not completely inexplicable. Annoying and worrisome though they are, the events are not entirely negative. I shall return to that point.

The United States had not really thought in terms of being a Great Power in the world at all until the early years of the twentieth century, when President Theodore Roosevelt expanded the Navy and sent it around the world, built the Panama Canal, and mediated the end of the Russo-Japanese War. Isolationism returned and was entrenched in neutrality by President Wilson, until the German emperor forced the United States into the war by attacking and sinking its merchant vessels on the high seas. This produced the second foray of the United States into international affairs, as President Wilson electrified the world in his war message to Congress on April 2, 1917, when he said,

> The world must be made safe for democracy. . . . It is a fearful thing to lead this great peaceful people into war, into the most terrible and disastrous of all wars . . . . But the right is more precious than peace . . . . To such a task we can dedicate our lives and our fortunes, everything that we are and everything that we have, with the pride of those who know the date has come when America is privileged to spend her blood and her might for the principles that gave her birth and happiness, and the peace which she has treasured. God helping her, she can do no other.

The German provocation of the United States to enter World War I was equaled only by the Japanese and German initiation of war against the United States in World War II, and Stalin's provocation of the Cold War, as the greatest strategic mistakes of any country of the twentieth century. The common failing of all of them was the underestimation of the power of the United States, and all these adversaries were laid low as a result of it.

From Wilson's time comes the American political requirement for a moral justification for the use of force, which has sometimes created national divisions, as during the Vietnam War, that can be mistaken for decline. All have known that between these events and despite the interruption of the Great Depression, the central fact of world affairs was the absolute and comparative and unprecedentedly swift rise of the power and influence of the United States. But even then, there were occasional claims that America was entering into a period of decline. Josef Goebbels in the 1930s regularly proclaimed the superiority of Nazi society and the German economy over America's, and in 1956 the Soviet leader Khrushchev famously said to the entire capitalist West: "We will bury you." There was also no shortage of local pessimists who agreed with them.

It is a good thing not to underestimate one's rival, and the American leadership has not underestimated the menace presented to it by the Third Reich, the Soviet Union, and now China, though these three threats are easily distinguishable and have been gradually less deadly and uncivilized. The United States had the good fortune to have a leader during the time of the Nazi threat who knew Germany intimately. FDR was very familiar with Germany and other western European countries and spoke German and French fluently. (As president he always used German with even bilingual German visitors, such as Albert Einstein, Thomas Mann, and Hitler's finance minister, Hjalmar Horace Greeley Schacht.) President Roosevelt saw as soon as Mr. Churchill did that it would be impossible to cooperate or probably even coexist with Hitler.

After the fall of France in 1940, as he broke a tradition as old as the American republic in seeking a third term, President Roosevelt saw that if Germany were able to absorb the Pol-

ish, Czech, Scandinavian, Dutch, Belgian, and French populations whose territory it had occupied, and to assimilate those populations over a couple of generations, greater Germany would have a larger population than the United States and its industrial capacities would be approximately as great. In those circumstances, this greater Germany's preeminence in Europe and, if its existing alliances with Japan and the Soviet Union continued, Germany's leadership of the entire Eurasian landmass would pose a deadly threat to America's emerging role in the world. Eurasia is a substantially greater strategic base than the Americas, if it could be pulled together under a unified government or coalition of two or three like-minded and antagonistic powers.

The United States and the world were fortunate that the statesmanship and war leadership of Franklin D. Roosevelt and Winston Churchill transformed the desperate summer of 1940, when Germany, Italy, Japan, and France were all in the hands of dictatorial regimes hostile to the Anglosphere, to the triumphant summer of 1945, when all of those countries, except a small piece of Germany, were in the hands of the Anglos, discovering or reverting to democratic rule, and well along toward being flourishing allies. These were four of the present G7 countries (the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada are the others). And in this great transition, in subduing Nazi Germany, the principal enemy, the Soviet Union had endured over 90 percent of the casualties and 95 percent of the physical damage sustained collectively by the United States, the British Empire, and themselves. This was the supreme triumph of Roosevelt and Churchill.

Franklin Roosevelt, as a member of the Wilson administration, had believed in the concept of the League of Nations, not as a panacea to the world's ills but as a gentle introduction of the United States to fuller participation in the international community. He saw that if the United States were not involved in any way with the security of western Europe and the Far East, those regions would be in constant danger of being taken over by regimes hostile to democracy and to America, meaning that the whole fate of Western civilization could hang in the balance each generation. His purpose in being a champion of the United Nations was to provide cover for what would inevitably be overwhelming U.S. influence in the world: great power would be delegated to the permanent members of the Security Council, and these would be the United States and four other countries heavily indebted to the United States: Great Britain, France, China, and the Soviet Union. American influence would be disguised somewhat through the Security Council and further through the collegiality of the General Assembly. And as he lured the United States out of the cocoon of isolationism, Roosevelt also expected that the existence of the United Nations would at least for a time persuade the American public that the world was a less dangerous place than the tens of millions of people who had fled to America—because of the war, bigotry, oppression, and class rigidities of the Old World—and the descendants of those émigrés thought it to be.

The Soviets were not as belligerent as the Nazis, but the USSR was potentially a more powerful country than Germany, and communism, since it professed universality, not racial superiority, and instead of inegalitarianism a spurious form of economic brotherhood, had much greater international appeal than Nazism. Especially as the colonial era was ending, the danger of the previously colonized populations being seduced by the communist masquerade was considerable. Roosevelt's strategic team, however, was inherited by President Truman: Generals George Marshall, Dwight Eisenhower, and Douglas MacArthur, the foreign-policy specialists Dean Acheson, George Kennan, and Charles Bohlen, and other experienced officials devised and executed the strategy of "containment."

With the Soviet Union spending eight to ten times more on its military as a percentage of GDP than the United States did, the timely and theatrical production by President Reagan of his Strategic Defense Initiative, the non-nuclear space-based antimissile defense program, alerted many to the possibility that the Soviets' entire military effort might be insufficient to maintain deterrence. Astonishingly, almost miraculously, the whole regime, international communism, and the Soviet Union itself, crumbled; the mortal threat to the West fell like a soufflé.

You will recall that, for a time in the late 1980s and early '90s, Japan appeared to be an economic rival to the United States, and in a new world where peace would be undisturbed (at least between the major powers), it was instantly thought to be an advantage that Japan, in consequence of its surrender and the subsequent government of the country by General MacArthur, had forsworn a serious military capacity—that the avoidance of this burden would facilitate its supposedly irresistible encroachments upon American superiority in manufacturing and finance. You will also recall how quickly that bubble burst, for reasons internal to Japan.

The main Russian threat and Japan's style of techno-rivalry were seen off nearly thirty years ago, leaving the United States absolutely alone at the summit of the world. It is a little early to think of such a country so quickly plunging into a nose-dive. There is no reason whatever to imagine that, if the United States were severely provoked and threatened again, its response would be any less vigorous than on previous such occasions. In 1942, President Roosevelt spoke for the nation when he said: "When the very life of our country is in mortal danger, to serve in the armed forces of the United States is not a sacrifice, it is a privilege." Should such circumstances recur, I put it to you that the response would be similar.

China is the principal cause of the present consternation. It is not only the first country to recycle itself as a Great Power, but it has also repeated this cycle several times. But its limitations have already been summarized: over-populated, aging, resource-deficient, chronically lacking in transparency, beset by rampant corruption, and containing institutions that command no respect and are not believable. Not one word or figure published by the regime in Beijing can be credited. Americans are right to lament the deterioration of ethics in their public life and to some degree the role of money in American political life, but the People's Republic of China is an atrophied totalitarian system riven by Eastern-style factionalism and conspiracism. The great and the good are apt to disappear without notice, expunged, as in Stalinist times.

China has had little relevant recent experience of how to behave like a Great Power. Its generally overbearing and simplistic notions of how to augment its influence in the world and its strategies for pouring money into developing countries will ultimately lead to those investments being nationalized by their hosts. The idea that China will gain any great long-range influence by investing profusely in Africa, much less Afghanistan, is nonsense. They were so heavy-handed in their patronization of the colonels in Myanmar, they were effectively expelled. This gives an indication of the finesse of Chinese diplomacy. Vietnam, despite what it owes China in the success of Ho Chi Minh, has been thoroughly alienated. The wider region has seen the Chinese try to impose an economic boycott on Australia because that country sought a serious inquiry into the role of the Wuhan Institute of Virology in the escape of the recent coronavirus. None of the many countries who use the South China Sea is prepared to have it designated as Chinese territorial waters.

China is evidently departing from its previous practice throughout its history of having minimal interest in foreign countries other than its immediate neighbors. It has, historically, exacted the tribute which it has felt to be due to the dominant power at the center of a group of lesser nations. But the countries on China's borders now are not weak countries, and even the current U.S. administration is rallying to the desirability of a modified containment strategy to prevent China's neighbors from being subsumed into a Chinese-dominated orbit. I am almost as far from an apologist for the Biden administration as it is possible to be. But if it were possible to be confident that, shambles though it was, the departure from Afghanistan would be followed by the severance of military aid to Pakistan, whose duplicity with America's enemies has been outstanding in its insolence, and a retrenchment to a more defensible perimeter for the containment of China, that would be a cause for reassurance rather than anxiety. If China wants to put its famous "Belt and Road" through Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Iran, then the United States and its allies (when they have finished reinvigorating their faith in the alliance with Washington) will be able to draw a firm line,

as advantageous to the West as was the Cold War division of Europe. This NATO of the East, but with a substantial economic component as well, perhaps based on the reconfigured Trans-Pacific Partnership, would be based on the solidarity of the United States, Japan, Australia, South Korea, Vietnam, Thailand, Malaysia, the Philippines, Indonesia, Singapore, New Zealand, Israel, India, and Taiwan (the last only an economic alliance, unless China really forces the issue). If the posture of such an association were clearly defensive and chiefly motivated by a desire for increased prosperity in the region while resisting Chinese aggrandizements such as in the South China Sea, and if it received consistent and substantial support from the United States, it would succeed. China would have no possible way of surpassing or dangerously threatening the economic or military strength or comparative democratic and civil rights credentials of such a formidable group of countries.

The principal danger that could be posed by China, and practically the only danger that could be posed by Russia, would occur if Russia were so sharply faced down by the West that it rented important parts of Siberia to China for exploitation of its resources by surplus Chinese. If China were to move 50 million people into the almost untouched Siberian treasure house of vast resources, in exchange for a royalty paid to the Kremlin, that collaboration would be dangerous to the United States. This is why President Trump and others who did not wish to drive Russia into the arms of China were correct.

It should be possible to outbid China for Russia's goodwill without recreating the USSR, and in a broader sense we certainly want Russia in the Western world. While the Cold War was in progress, the eastern edge of the Western world was only a hundred miles beyond the Rhine at the East German border; it has now advanced into eastern Ukraine, and we ought to embrace Russia as the western European powers did from the time of Peter the Great to the Bolshevik Revolution. Russia is truculent and particularly testy after its decisive defeat in the Cold War. It should be possible to trace a path between wholesale appeasement of Russian revanchism and such a cold repulse that the Kremlin consents to live as a rentier of China. It is not clear that the Biden State Department or National Security Council thinks in such realistic terms of the American national interest. But all the elements are at hand to assure a successful response to the Chinese challenge, especially as the Chinese are not nearly as ambitious or reckless as the Nazis and are much more economically successful and amenable to coexistence than were most of the pre-Gorbachev leaders of the Soviet Union.

The various strategic pieces are ready to be assembled by the United States and its collaborators in a manner that retains the paramount influence of this country in the affairs of the world. Concerns about irreversible decline naturally arise after frightful episodes of blunderbuss foreign policy, such as in the abandonment of Afghanistan and on the southern U.S. border. But whatever the policy shortcomings of the present administration, it will become more effective or eventually be replaced. The only thing that would really incite such fears of imminent American decline would be if the American people itself should lose its ambition to be—and its pride in remaining—the greatest national force and influence in the world. There is no evidence that anything like this has happened.

Not to oversimplify well-known events, I suggest that the most disconcerting upheavals in American social and political life of the last several years are already settling down, and, as I said at the beginning of these remarks, they do contain a couple of positive elements. No country has ever made such prodigious and largely successful efforts to raise a subjugated racial minority to genuine equality and to atone for what Mr. Lincoln called "the bondsman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil," followed by a century of the pall of segregation. Magnificent though the progress and reconciliation of Caucasian and African Americans has been, it is not in the abstract surprising that there is some whiplash of continued and even exaggerated resentment. Slavery was abominable, but it was at one time the almost universal practice of nations. America's performance as a slave-holding country was not markedly worse than that of other countries, and its record as in emancipation, desegregation, and the promotion of racial equality has been exceptionally determined.

At no point have the recent ambitions of certain African Americans for re-segregation come close to prevailing in the general opinion of that community over the heritage of Martin Luther King and others seeking integration and equality. It is inconceivable that a majority would join the extremist African-American cause, and it is unlikely that self-hating liberal white indulgence will continue to be as kindly disposed to the provocations of African-American extremists as they were last summer. As all will recall, billions of dollars of damage from vandalism, theft, and arson that had nothing to do with the horrifying death of George Floyd were patiently described as "peaceful protests." And the assault upon the effigies of great leaders and supporters of the African-American interest of the past, including Lincoln, Grant, and even Frederick Douglass, was inexplicably tolerated by many who knew better.

The United States was at a unique political crossroads when a man who had never served in any public office nor held a high military command, elected or unelected, astounded the country by winning the presidency—the only such candidate to do so, ever—on a campaign to reverse bipartisan agreed policy and to reorient or dismiss almost the entire community of senior government personnel. Despite President Trump's undoubted success in many policy areas, his stylistic infelicities and the threat that he posed to the bipartisan establishment that operated the government for decades briefly and unprecedentedly created against him a coalition of disgruntled status-quo-seeking Republicans and outraged displaced Democrats, an alliance against the incumbent president such as the country has never seen. The Democratic Party became an incongruous coalition of New Deal–Great Society–New Democrat traditionalists, anti-Trump Republicans, almost all the academy and the national political media, Silicon Valley, Wall Street, and the African-American extremists. It was all covered in nostalgia, with an atmosphere of Norman Thomas socialism personified by Senator Bernie Sanders and young legislators like Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. And it all somewhat recalled Herbert Marcuse, that venerable twentieth-century Marxist, and the energetic youngsters of the Holy Barbarians at Berkeley and similar groups across the country in the 1960s and '70s. Unfortunately, there was also a violent accompanying riff-raff of hooligans, Antifa, and the militant wing of Black Lives Matter in particular. Nothing as absurd and churlish as contemporary "wokeness" can long escape the Thermidorean instincts of American society and even of its academics. It is unrigorous and malignant faddishness, without legs, as they say in Hollywood (which is inevitably one of the most bilious sources of the "woke" nonsense).

The shortcomings of the present administration will hasten the disintegration of this discordant coalition which only arose to be the evocator and the voice of Trump-hate. What is unprecedented is this tremendous wave of American self-loathing. It is aberrant, unjustified, and must be understood as the brief palliative to what has come to be seen by many Americans as a prolonged American taste for self-flattering historical mythmaking. There is a quantity of truth in that reproach. It is one of the great ironies of modern times that, although the world chiefly owes the relative success of democratic government and free market economics to the influence, energy, and leadership of the United States, it is not now one of the world's best-functioning democracies.

The federal criminal-justice system is just a conveyor belt to the bloated prison system. Every informed person knows that current plea-bargaining procedure enables prosecutors to extort and suborn perjury from cooperating witnesses who themselves receive an assurance of immunity to prosecution for perjury. This chiefly explains why 98 percent of American federal criminal trials produce convictions, and 95 percent of those without trials. The United States has six to twelve times as many incarcerated people per capita as comparable countries, like the large, prosperous democracies of Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Japan, and the United Kingdom. This has played some role in the recent unreasonable hostility to police and to some prosecutors.

American exceptionalism today is chiefly a matter of scale. Many other countries have better judicial systems and less compromising use of money in politics, and many are equally

meritocratic. This is not any denigration of the genius of the Founders, of the success of the U.S. Constitution, and of the completely unique rise of the Americans, in two long lifetimes, from a few million settlers and slaves to citizens of the most powerful country in the world. Mr. Churchill said in his parliamentary eulogy of President Roosevelt that "he had raised the strength, might, and glory of the Great Republic to a height never attained by any nation in history," which included, at the end of World War II, an atomic monopoly and half the gross economic product of the war-ravaged world.

As for the country's beginnings, of course the British botched the Stamp Tax, because it couldn't be collected. But in fairness, Britain had tripled its national debt in the Seven Years' War, largely to expel the French from Canada at the insistent request of the Americans, especially Benjamin Franklin. And as the Americans were, on average, the wealthiest British citizens, there was an argument to be made that they should pay the tax the British were already paying to rid the Americans of the French threat in Quebec, which didn't bother the British but greatly perplexed the Americans. They should have imposed the tax before they defeated the French, when there would have been no resistance to it, rather than imposing it retroactively to pay for what had already been achieved. In its early days, as the United States did not have a language and civilization of its own, unlike England, France, Holland, Spain, and other countries, and as its lore was in its prospects and not its past, America's propagandists, chiefly Jefferson and Paine, fabricated the theory that the young country was ushering in a "new order of the ages" and the dawn of human liberty. This was the first American recourse to what Donald Trump calls "truthful hyperbole."

In fact, the country had no more liberty than it had had before the Revolutionary War, only its own government, and at no point did the Americans have greater liberties than the British, Swiss, Dutch, or most Scandinavians. But they had the genius of the spectacle: the world was riveted by the American experiment and has not ceased to be so. I do not for a moment diminish American traditions. It is a magnificent country with a tremendous level of achievement in almost every field, even today; countries of such fermentation and vital energy are not in decline. It is rather at a point of renewal, made even more intense than it would normally be by both the tumult of the Trump and Biden elections and, in very different ways, the uniqueness of their administrations.

Donald Trump did the nation a service in recognizing the level of public discontent and the drift away from an incentive economy and into indecisive foreign policy. He achieved a great deal, especially in eliminating unemployment and generating a greater percentage of economic growth among the lowest 20 percent of income earners than the highest 10 percent. But his war on the political establishment made him vulnerable, and his vulnerabilities were compounded by his bombast and tactical errors at times. His enemies, however, strained the system by defaming him as an agent of a foreign power, by abusing the impeachment process, by rendering the 2020 election result questionable by their handling of over 40 million mailed, dropped, or harvested ballots, most of which could not be verified, and finally by launching a war of extermination against anyone who questioned the result of the election. Those results were questionable, but the election is over, and the administration that has been installed has not so far been competent. If it doesn't raise its game, either Trump or a candidate supported by him will be elected in 2024.

But the crisis of society is passing, even if public-policy problems are not. Trump is mellowing; the effort to use the rickety platform of the Democratic Left to transform the United States into a torpid socialist country will fail. Adam Smith famously said that "there is a great deal of ruin in a nation." And there is a great deal of general failure before a great nation goes into inexorable decline. This is no time for complacency, but no such decline is in process. Americans are still highly motivated and very patriotic. American political institutions, though strained and tainted at times, still function; the national political media are starting to retrieve a modicum of professionalism, and China has no answer to the full force of American creativity, spontaneity, and focused national determination.

Chasing the Man-Moth
by William Logan

Poems haunt long after they are haunted. The most disturbing poem in Elizabeth Bishop's first book, *North & South* (1946), is "The Man-Moth"—this meek creature, so withdrawn he lives in storm drain and subway tunnel, embodied a peculiar modern loneliness years before David Reisman published *The Lonely Crowd*. Was the Man-Moth hybrid or monster? No one appears to notice him except the poet; indeed, the city where he lurks seems unpopulated. His existence, as in a fairy tale, is never questioned; but his wretchedness and thwarted longing answer something in the poet without declaring it—the poem was anti-confessional long before confessional poetry was born. It opens,

> Here, above,
> cracks in the buildings are filled with battered
> moonlight.
> The whole shadow of Man is only as big as
> his hat.
> It lies at his feet like a circle for a doll to stand on,
> and he makes an inverted pin, the point
> magnetized to the moon.
> He does not see the moon; he observes only
> her vast properties,
> feeling the queer light on his hands, neither
> warm nor cold,
> of a temperature impossible to record in
> thermometers.
>
> But when the Man-Moth
> pays his rare, although occasional, visits to the
> surface,
> the moon looks rather different to him.

Readers curious about this nocturnal specter were directed to a footnote: "Newspaper misprint for 'mammoth'"—even his birth was an accident. Hunting the Man-Moth requires misdirection (shy beast, hard to trap), so the reader has been warned.

North & South was prefaced by a different note, "Most of these poems were written, or partly written, before 1942"—unlike poems in most books published not long after V-E and V-J days, they hadn't been written in time of war. Bishop's delicacy marked her honesty, or her wish not to be misinterpreted. Some of the poems dated back to her years at Vassar, from which she graduated in 1934. Decades later, explaining the origin of "The Man-Moth," she recalled, "An oracle spoke from the page of the *New York Times*." Her biographer Thomas Travisano noted that "despite diligent research, the actual misprint has yet to be found."

Bishop had moved to New York after graduation, staying until a trip to Europe the following year. A search of the *Times* for those pre-war years reveals a possibility. On April 30, 1939, a large illustration of the amusement area at the New York World's Fair, which opened that day, showed Admiral Byrd's Penguin Island, the Arctic Girls' Temple of Ice, a "Greenwich Villagy" artists' colony, Auto Dodgem, and much else, including the Amphitheatre where Billy Rose's Aquacade performed. A popular attraction at the Great Lakes Exposition two years before, the Aquacade proved a wild success. The accompanying description promised

> Showgirls that can swim, swimmers that are easy on the eyes. Mermaid ballet, beauty parade, fancy diving, songsters, orchestras. Eleanor Holm, Gertrude Ederle and others. Color, light, fountains—a man.moth show. 40 cents to $1.

The "man.moth," then. The Man-Moth.

Holm, the winner of a gold medal in the backstroke at the 1932 Summer Olympics in Los Angeles, had notoriously been booted off the 1936 team for becoming drunk at a shipboard cocktail-party on the way to the Berlin games. The ship was named, all too appropriately for drinkers, SS *Manhattan*. Ederle was the first woman to swim the English Channel. Johnny Weissmuller (Olympic gold medalist, Tarzan) also appeared, though he went unmentioned. Rose, the most famous entertainment impresario of the day, seduced Holm, whom he married after her divorce, and his.

The "man.moth" was created by a broken piece of type—the right shoulder of the "m" may have sheared off or been worn away. Could Bishop have seen this page? She was at Key West then, not arriving in New York until two months later. Someone might have sent her the article, knowing her taste for the bizarre or offbeat, like her friend Marianne Moore, who took her own mother to the fair that October "in a mist that became a Victoria Falls of solid rain this afternoon":

> [Mother] made me think of Scotch coaching-horses that automatically trot forward like water-rats neither fast nor slow—avoiding no puddles and half-closing their eyes as they travel. . . . Finally it seemed so chilly and unreasonable I said, "We'll go to the subway. The masks (from the Congo) and the diamond-cutting aren't anything you can't imagine or see in some Geographic magazine." . . . The food, and the pyramids of stuffed pheasants, peacocks and woodcocks, interested us—and the Camembert cheeses looking like aged English muffins or Assyrian clay tablets.

The influence on Bishop of Moore's poems on creatures like the octopus and the jerboa is plain; but "The Man-Moth" in its peculiar way is Bishop's declaration of difference. Extravaganzas like the World's Fair were not entirely foreign to the younger poet, who in 1935, when she sailed to Europe, had visited *L'exposition universelle et internationale* in Brussels. She remarked at the time that, "aside from the wonderful collection of early Northern painting, it seemed to be mostly the dregs of the World's Fair, including Dillinger in effigy." That must have been the Chicago World's Fair of 1933–34, where John Dillinger had taken his girlfriend.

When the 1939 fair opened, Bishop was renting a "$40/month 'garret' in Greenwich Village," though most of that year she lived back in Key West. She arrived in the city about July 4, staying for three months. In the middle of July, she'd written her friend Charlotte Russell in Florida, "Please come and see us and we'll have some mild form of fun—the World's Fair, maybe? I haven't seen it yet." The fair was on the docket. Bishop returned to Key West on October 26, she thought, putting a question mark in her travel diary. That November, she recorded,

> Last night—I had a long, dreamy[?] conversation with the little gnome, our ex-gardener. It was just getting dark. Up among the stars the little palm trees described [?gleaming/glowing] curves, like skates—a man went by, whistling, on a bicycle with a hunk of ice tied to the handlebars, glittering like a big blue diamond. We spoke of Life, Love, and the World's Fair.

Years afterward she wrote Robert Lowell from Yaddo, "Did you ever get over to Glens Falls when you were here to see the Hyde Collection of paintings? . . . You may even remember the famous Rembrandt Christ that was in the World's Fair." She's referring to *Christ with Arms Folded*, now in the Hyde Collection but lent by Mrs. Hyde to the fair in 1939, when Bishop would have seen it in the exhibition "Masterpieces of Art," an astonishing show covering twenty-five galleries with over four hundred drawings, prints, and paintings, including nineteen Rembrandts.

The possibility that "The Man-Moth" was inspired by this particular misprint is all too attractive. The strange wraith might have been exhibited alongside the Seminole Village

("Alligator wrestling, primitive dances"), the Miracle Town of midgets, Nature's Mistakes ("from the two-headed cow to the pig without a ham"), Savoy ("Dark-skinned jiggerbugs stepping to Harlem swing"), Strange As It Seems ("Natural wonders from all parts of the world; pigmies, giants, duck-billed Ubangis"), and Dalí's Bottom of the Sea ("Real diving girls splash into a surrealist pool and come up with the strangest things"). He would have been perfect for the middlebrow freak show, as the organizers no doubt thought it, that apparently so delighted the crowds. The *Times* trumpeted such features of the fair: "Right this way to the most astounding, . . . most stupendously colossal collection of natural wonders, mystifying marvels, . . . fantastic phenomena and free-hearted fun ever assembled." Many of the "amusements" would now be an offense against public taste.

Unfortunately, it's impossible for the poem to have been prompted by the *Times* typo of 1939, because three years before the fair opened "The Man-Moth" was published in the March 1936 issue of *Life and Letters To-Day*. The footnote about the misprint for "mammoth" was there from the start. A quarter-century later, in 1962, Bishop recalled,

> This poem was written in 1935 when I first lived in New York City.
>
> I've forgotten what it was that was supposed to be "mammoth." But the misprint seemed meant for me. An oracle spoke from the page of the *New York Times*, kindly explaining New York City to me, at least for a moment.
>
> One is offered such oracular statements all the time, but often misses them, gets lazy about writing them out in detail, or the meaning refuses to stay put.

Rather like any oracle, then—duplicitous. Why my earlier sleight of hand in quoting only a fragment? To show that without crucial information—the prior appearance of the poem, Bishop's memory of the year she saw the misprint—it would be all too easy to argue that the inspiration had come from the *Times* listing for the fair. The magazine and book versions of the poem are identical, except that the latter has inserted a comma, restored a cedilla to "facade," and added three articles and a pronoun ("a," "the" [twice], and "his"). The addition of the articles and pronoun came in *North & South*, where Bishop no longer capitalized the first word of every line, a choice afterwards consistent.

Could the poem have been finished in New York in 1935, or did Bishop rough it out there and take it abroad during that first trip to Europe? In one of the spiral notebooks dated 1934–36 in her archive at Vassar, there's a draft of "The Man-Moth," though without place or date. The previous page contains an unfinished poem with the lines "Only the word 'save'/ Lights quickly in our brain/ Without preliminaries" and "In every cabin there must be/ A life-preserver/ For every passenger." Bishop would certainly have seen life preservers on childhood boat-trips to Nova Scotia to visit her relatives in Great Village. Indeed, in 1919 her ship, the *North Star*, had run aground on an island off the coast, so the passengers, who all safely disembarked, might have been ordered to wear life preservers. It's nonetheless tempting to imagine, as the poem's attentions seem immediate, Bishop writing the lines on SS *Königstein*, the German freighter on which she sailed to Antwerp in July 1935, paying, as she wrote Marianne Moore, $155 for roundtrip passage.

This fragment and the incomplete draft of "The Man-Moth" that follows might have been her farewell to New York City. The Man-Moth scales the buildings in the belief that the "moon is a small hole at the top of the sky" and that "this time he will manage/ to push his small head through that round clean opening." Alas, "he fails, of course, and falls back scared but quite unhurt." Taking ship for Europe, Bishop was probably seeking not escape but experience—she loved to explore new countries. Perhaps "what the Man-Moth fears most he must do" does not apply to her; but her often expressed lack of self-confidence mirrors the inner life of the woebegone figure of tunnel and drain. Such a lonely, morose outsider, like Bishop herself, couldn't find his place—to use Dickens's phrase, he seemed to

"retire into himself." Perhaps this presses the meaning too hard; but the symbols are there to press, like the wordplay embedded in "life-preserver." Ambiguity is not innocence.

Bishop's later books included *Questions of Travel* (1965) and *Geography III* (1976). She had so many addresses over the years, she seemed to inhabit a highly detailed anywhere that was nowhere, "always a sort of a guest," as she once said in an interview. After she bought a house in Key West in 1938, her life largely shifted between there and New York, ending only when she moved to Brazil in 1951. Though other poems in her notebook before and after the draft of "The Man-Moth" are certainly New York poems (the first of "Three Poems," of which there were but two, and "Coney Island"), poets when abroad are often moved to write of home. Such speculation falls well short of proof.

The New York of her poem is imaginary, the best address of all. The final stanzas describe the Man-Moth's home in "pale subways of cement," where

> He flits,
> he flutters, and cannot get aboard the silent
> trains
> fast enough to suit him. The doors close swiftly.
> The Man-Moth always seats himself facing the
> wrong way
> and the train starts at once at its full, terrible
> speed,
> without a shift in gears or a gradation of
> any sort.

This must be a fantasy New York, because no subway train ever started at full speed. The idea of the train remaining silent would not have occurred to any New Yorker used to the screech of steel wheels on steel tracks. The "artificial tunnels" through which he's carried each night seem real enough: "He does not dare look out the window,/ for the third rail, the unbroken draught of poison,/ runs there beside him." (Bishop—or the Man-Moth—may not have known that you can't see the third rail from inside the car.) Could she have merged memories of New York with those of her stay in Paris, the location of some poems in *North & South*? Probably not. The *Métro* lines have a third rail, but the famously quiet rubber-tired cars were not introduced until the 1950s.

The third rail might be the true genesis of "The Man-Moth," however. Sometime after July 25, 1934, Bishop wrote in her travel journal, "*The third rail* is almost worth some sort of prose poem. Running along silently, as insincere as poison." She was then not long out of Vassar and a new resident of New York City. Whether she saw the "man-moth" typo earlier or later, at some point she combined the ideas.

Bishop's version of the origin of the poem seems vivid, all those years afterward, especially that the Man-Moth was born of a misprint for "mammoth." Still, perhaps instead she'd seen one of many magazine ads for Larvex, a mothproofing spray:

> Don't fool around with Old Man Moth. You can't lick him by superficial methods. It's your *wool* he is after, and if you treat the wool itself with Larvex, he is harmless and powerless. . . . Ask your druggist to show you Larvex. He will tell you it is a scientific triumph and there is nothing else like it.
>
> (*Woman's Home Companion*, May 1934.)

Nothing else like it! That might describe the Man-Moth. Decades later, a poet may not remember precisely where, when, or why a poem was written. Bishop almost certainly would have been amused by the Macy's ad printed in the *Times* (June 17, 1936) months after the poem was published and a week after she returned to New York from that long initial trip to Europe: "Then it will take a G-man moth or a Houdini piece of dust to work its way into the garment bag in this ensemble."

The hyphen in Man-Moth may be an artifact of the word's position, divided at the edge of a newspaper column ("man-/moth mass meeting," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, April 6, 1932,"54 Captains Sign Up for Patriot Drive"), though "manmoth" or "man moth" ought to have served well enough ("a man moth rally in Madison Square Garden," Canandaigua [NY] *Daily Messenger*, October 1, 1936, "Ballot Battle Spurred Today By Activities"). There

may have been no typo at all, as the two ads for mothproofing show; but, if typo it was, "mammoth" could have been transformed in a number of ways. The error might have been (a) a simple slip in typing, though on a Linotype keyboard "m" and "n" are a good distance apart, not adjacent as on the keyboard of a typewriter. Perhaps it was (b) a misreading by the Linotype operator—or, worse, (c) a mistake in the copy he was given. Last, the lowercase "m" might have been caused by (d) a broken piece of type. The deformity could also have been due to a flaw in the brass matrix from which the piece of lead type was cast.

The typos "manmoth," "man-moth," or "man moth" are not hard to discover in the digital archives of *The New York Times* or on sites like ProQuest and Newspapers.com. Though the *Times* Article Archive does not search display or classified ads, TimesMachine and ProQuest Historical Newspapers do. The latter is more sensitive, producing two sightings of the word in the *Times* for 1935 and 1936. Both, unfortunately, come too late. The first appeared after Bishop had departed for Europe: "two ma:nmoth new red signs" ("Giving Shape to 'Jumbo,'" November 3, 1935). Part of the left upstroke of the "m" is missing, enough that a reader might have seen a Man-Moth there. The second lies in the classified ads of June 10, 1936, probably the day she returned from her long stay abroad:

> SOLICITORS, 3, experienced journal and special edition men for Manmoth World Labor Athletic Carnival; commission. Apply 152 West 42d, Room 1222.

There was indeed an anti-Nazi World Labor Athletic Carnival that August on Randall's Island in the East River, this in protest against the Olympics held that year under the watchful eye of Adolf Hitler.

If neither can be the typo for "mammoth" that revealed New York to the young Bishop, perhaps one or the other comes close to what she saw. There's another possibility. A month before she graduated, "old man moth" appears in an ad for "safety clothes closets" in Vassar's local paper, the *Poughkeepsie Eagle-News* (May 4, 1934): "no entrance can be made by old man moth." It's not the *Times*, of course, and not a typo for "mammoth." That's as near as I can come to what could have sparked the poem.

If the typo does exist in the *Times*, someone will have to search a hard copy of each issue from Bishop's arrival in New York in 1934 until her departure for Europe a year later. That might not be enough. The *Times*, like many papers, printed a number of editions each day; and stories might be added, subtracted, or altered from one edition to another. The digital archives, as with microfilm before them, have saved only the Late City Edition. Therefore articles referred to in secondary sources sometimes simply cannot be found.

Bishop might have thought, had she seen the cluster of appearances of "man-moth" in the years immediately after the poem was written, that the "Man-Moth" was everywhere. The quest for the true "man-moth" continues, but inspiration may arrive on many wings. Had Bishop never spied the typo in the *Times*, she might have written the poem after reading *Love's Labour's Lost*:

> Armado: I confess both: they are both the varnish of a complete man.
> Moth: Then I am sure you know how much the gross sum of deuce-ace amounts to.

A "complete man./ Moth." Just so.

Goodbye to all that
by David Hein

Toward the end of 1922, at the home of the poet Harold Monro, Ford Madox Ford began the work that became a modern classic, *Parade's End*. In this house at Saint-Jean-Cap-Ferrat, a Mediterranean peninsula between Nice and Monaco, Ford started to mull over a major project about the First World War. Writing began in earnest early the following year, and the first volume, *Some Do Not . . .* , was published in 1924. In 1928 appeared the fourth and final book in the series, *The Last Post*. A bolder undertaking than Ford's other famous novel, *The Good Soldier* (1915), this tetralogy was heralded as one of the best fictional treatments to come out of the cataclysm of 1914–18. The critic and novelist Malcolm Bradbury calls it "the greatest modern war novel from a British writer."

Like other modernist works of the era, *Parade's End* takes up as themes disillusionment with the past and the turn away from old authorities and enfeebled traditions toward a new, though not necessarily better, future. But unlike other novels in the Great War canon, such as Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1928) and Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), *Parade's End* goes beyond dismay at the origins, pursuit, and effects of the war to incorporate a leitmotif of ethical inquiry, even—in the face of this pervasive sense of the spent value of all established norms and institutions—of moral affirmation. The unfolding of this persistent theme makes *Parade's End* oddly pertinent to our own time of ethical erosion.

The main character, Christopher Tietjens, is a source of bafflement to most readers. Critics have tended to see him as either an unbelievably patient Anglican saint modeled on Christ himself or a good Tory whose principles, based on a code of chivalry, are all jettisoned by narrative's end, when Tietjens has to renounce his feudal outlook and accommodate himself to post-war England, a different world that will host "no more parades." Neither reading is as helpful as it might seem, however, for neither goes to the heart of the matter.

This tetralogy is closer to a *Bildungsroman*. Tietjens has principles all along, and he makes his decisions—some good, some not-so-good—in light of them. In the second book, *No More Parades* (1925), he declares that he has always taken his "public school's ethical system seriously. I am really . . . the English public schoolboy. That's an eighteenth-century product." But he comes to a greater maturity by the end of the third novel, *A Man Could Stand Up—* (1926), particularly in consequence of his service in the British Army; he attains his majority, as it were.

What distinguishes the later Tietjens from the earlier is a sense of authenticity, all the way down to his boots. For many of us, the French existentialists, especially Jean-Paul Sartre, have given "authenticity" a bad name. For them no moral standards exist; if there are any norms at all, they are only freedom and authenticity. Existence precedes essence: you are free to define yourself as you will. *To thine own self*—fashioned according to your completely

free choice in the moment—*be true*: a lodestar for many in the 1960s and ever since.

Thoroughly different, however, is authenticity in relation to an ethical code. Like the *paidagogos*, the trusted house slave or child-guardian in ancient Greece and Rome, the schoolboy code Christopher lived by—starting with prohibitions against lying, cheating, and stealing—had its time and place. A sound moral compass, it served him well, providing guidance as he grew up and moved into widening circles of association and responsibility. Not to be gainsaid are the sense of confidence that comes from self-discipline and the reputation for reliable judgment that accrues to a person in whose character such virtues have found a secure place.

Eventually, however, in the life of a young man or young woman, the law—Tietjens's public-school moral code—must be reevaluated, modified, and made one's own, not imposed heteronomously from without and rigidly conformed to. Tietjens says in *No More Parades* that "other men get over their schooling. I never have. I remain adolescent." But in the next book he does mature; he stands up and becomes fully his own person—more, not less, a man of principle.

The younger son of a rich Yorkshire landowner, Christopher Tietjens views himself as a Tory of "an extinct type." In the war sections of the books, his soldiers are said to be commanded by "the last surviving Tory." Thus he is conservative, treasuring place and honoring the past, not only responsive to his duties but also faithful to the norms that attend his position. He is accurately described by his wife Sylvia as "an eighteenth-century figure of the Dr. Johnson type." He knows horses and old furniture; he can assess the value of an antique "purely by instinct: by taking a glance at a thing and chancing its price." He cherishes his native land "for the run of its hills, the shape of its elm trees and the way the heather, running uphill to the skyline, meets the blue of the heavens."

Moreover, Tietjens is a Christian gentleman who aspires to Anglican sainthood. Recalling the spire of George Herbert's church in Bemerton, near Salisbury, he wishes for a life like that devoted priest's, affirming that "one ought to be a seventeenth-century parson at the time of the renaissance of Anglican saintliness."

His ethics are deontological, rooted in a traditional code of honor, not modern and utilitarian. His elder brother, Mark, calls him "one of the best. A fellow who never told a lie or did a dishonourable thing in his life." Principles, Christopher Tietjens observes, are necessary if one is to find one's moral way in life. They "are like a skeleton map of a country—you know whether you're going east or north." He consistently strives to act in accordance with these principles, no matter what the cost to his own person, refusing—to cite a major example—to divorce his faithless wife, because he will not subject her to the disgrace such proceedings would entail.

Later on, however, in *A Man Could Stand Up*—, he thinks of Valentine Wannop, the suffragette, girls' school gym instructor, and his equal in character and intelligence—the woman he loves—and declares against a George Herbert kind of life: "Not Bemerton. A country parsonage was not for him. So he wouldn't take orders!" A bit further on, he renounces his ancestral home, Groby: "Tietjens was never going to live at Groby. No more feudal atmosphere!" And finally, toward the end of this third book in the series (the volume which is the climax of the Tietjens story), we read: "The war had made a man of him! It had coarsened him and hardened him."

What reshapes him? Certainly he is powerfully stirred by Miss Wannop, but he would not be able to respond to this multilayered attraction were it not for other developments in his personal history. Tietjens's transformation is indicated in a number of episodes, by way of an accumulation of details, through what Ford called a *progression d'effet*.

In one of these scenes we perceive what Captain Tietjens has to put up with in his army posting. Confronting him and demanding answers is General Lord Edward Campion VC, his commanding general and also his godfather, an old friend of the family whose close ties do not prevent his coveting Tietjens's lovely wife. Tietjens has just been blown up in the air by

the concussion of a nearby high-explosive artillery shell and then hauled out of the mud that covered him after he returned to ground. "Who are you?" Campion asks his godson. "Where the devil is the officer commanding this Battalion?" Irritated—"in a hell of a temper"—the general exclaims: "You're disgustingly dirty. Like a blackamoor. I suppose you've an explanation."

It's a terrific vignette, comprising comedy, horror, and the sort of moral obliquity Tietjens has had to deal with for all of his married life. He replies: "I am in command of this Battalion, sir. I am Tietjens, second-in-command. Now in command temporarily. I could not be found because I was buried. Temporarily." Unmollified, Campion says this battalion was alleged to be the smartest in his unit, but no one has been able to locate Tietjens, and now you come "strolling along with your hands in your pockets!" His attitudinizing scarcely registers with Captain Tietjens, who is more honorable—ethically more in-command—than his commander. Tietjens knows his job, endures calamity, and carries on regardless of opposition from enemy, home front, and higher-ups.

Far more important to him are the opinions of his men. A sergeant, now acting temporary sergeant-major, says to him in *A Man Could Stand Up—*: "Then a man could stand hup [*sic*] on an 'ill. . . . You really mean to say, sir, that you think a man will be able to stand up on a bleedin' 'ill . . ." But Tietjens does not understand what prompts this apparently isolated statement; he's been preoccupied with his own worries and only gradually realizes he must have been offering assurances to the sergeant-major in order to boost the NCO's morale.

Tietjens asks him: "You're a Lincolnshire man, aren't you? You come from a Fen country. What do you want to stand up on a hill for?" The man replies: "Ah, but you *do*, sir! . . . You want to stand up! Take a look around . . ." He searches for the right analogy. "Like as if you wanted to breathe deep after bein' in a stoopin' posture for a long time!" Tietjens tells him, why, he can stand up here, if he's discreet; he had just done it. But the sergeant-major won't be satisfied with a narrowly literal reading of the line: "You, sir . . . You're a law hunto yourself!"

Tietjens receives this judgment as both "considerable shock" and "considerable reward"—the uttermost of each quality that he's experienced since he first put on an army uniform. He interprets these words as a token of the way in which the men, the "Other Ranks," regard him. His soldiers are hard to read, a mysterious mass. A commanding officer never can be certain what they are thinking, what they make of him, and of course he cannot ask them.

Tietjens takes the sergeant-major's statement as a high compliment. The narration, in free indirect discourse, reflects the protagonist's thoughts: "An acting temporary regimental sergeant-major, without any real knowledge of his job, extemporising, not so long ago a carrier in an eastern county of remarkable flatness does not tell his Acting Commanding Officer that he is a law unto himself without meaning it to be a flattering testimony: a certificate . . . of trustworthiness."

His men rely on him. Tested at every level, Tietjens meets each problem and carries out his duties. Over time, these challenges and his mastery of them have their effect, and largely for the better. Glimpses of the new man surprise even him. Part of the seigneurial code of honor was to eschew ambition, never to seek higher preferment. But Tietjens becomes aware within himself of "a passionate desire to command that battalion. It was the last thing he would have expected . . ."

He notices other signs of alteration. With the regimental commander he discusses the possibility that tactics in the entire conflict will soon become dramatically more mobile. The colonel replies that it won't become a war of motion for some time. Tietjens then asks: "Isn't it rather like a war of motion now, sir?" The significance of this question lies not in its main theme, the subject of whether renewed mobility for one coalition or the other would lead to final victory in 1918, but in the fact that Tietjens has asked it at all: "It was perhaps the first time in his life he had ever asked for information from a superior in rank—with an implicit belief that he would get an exact answer." Throughout his employment as a

brilliant mathematician for the government in Westminster, before he went into the army in 1916, Tietjens was the one answering his masters, who would then go on to misuse his data for their own deceitful ends.

This competence in the profession of arms gives Tietjens a newfound assurance composed of both pride and humility, which is gratifying to him. He's starting to imagine that he will be able to stand up one day, confined no longer to a stoopin' posture.

What has Tietjens experienced in the war that brings him to this realization? In his active service, he is in charge of a large base camp near Rouen, from which drafts of men are organized and dispatched to the front. Later, during the spring 1918 German offensive, he is temporarily in command of an infantry battalion of the 9th Glamorganshires. Finally, Campion orders him to guard German prisoners of war behind the lines, although Tietjens hates the role of "gaoler." He faces hardship, wounding, and the prospect of imminent death, while his worries from home—marriage and family, finances, reputation—never leave him.

His service with the troops, particularly his time in command, results in the growth of his democratic spirit. Ford Madox Ford, who—although a bit old for it—obtained a commission in the Welch Regiment, also left the army with a stronger sense of connection to the ordinary men at the front. Moreover, Tietjens suffers with his men and cannot escape feelings of anguish and of something close to guilt when he believes he has failed them. He turns down the Welsh private O Nine Morgan, a company runner, for compassionate leave to go home because he is certain that if Morgan returns to Wales he will be injured and possibly killed by a prizefighter who is living with the private's wife. Soon after Tietjens refuses this request, Morgan is killed by an enemy shell.

In another scene at the front, Tietjens rescues a junior officer, Lieutenant Aranjuez, who has been partly buried by an exploded shell. The captain is carrying him back to their own lines when, suddenly, "the boy kicked, screamed, tore himself loose. . . . Well, if he wanted to go!" The subaltern rushes off screaming, holding his hands to his face. Later Tietjens learns that, while he was being carried, Aranjuez was hit by a sniper and lost an eye.

Tietjens's mind keeps recurring to these men and to his decisions. His compassion is profound. He evinces no sign that, while the war has made a man of him, it has "coarsened" and "hardened" him too. Ford's narrator is not always reliable.

We learn more about Tietjens's military reputation by way of Sylvia, whom Christopher married believing—mistakenly, it appears—that she was pregnant with their child; now she strives to undermine him at every turn. Bernard Bergonzi, a critic and student of the war literature, calls her a "beautiful sexual terrorist." To stir up trouble, she even visits her husband's camp in France. While there, she detects unmistakable evidence of his devotion to his men and of their appreciation of him, which she construes as a moral and social failing on his part. Possessed of an "indolent and gracious beauty"—and knowing it—she contemplates the situation and concludes that Christopher should be focusing all his attention on her. The narration conveys her inner thoughts: "But to betray her with a battalion. . . . That is against decency, against Nature . . ." And a social crime as well: "And for him, Christopher Tietjens, to come down to the level of the men [she] met here!"

A second lieutenant tells her what she does not want to hear: the captain is a knowledgeable and proficient officer. "There you are, madam. . . . Trust the captain to know everything! . . . I don't believe there's a question under the sun you could ask him that he couldn't answer . . ." Then he adds, to her increasing annoyance, "They say up at the camp . . ." and he starts to recount all the questions from his men Tietjens has capably answered. In torture, Sylvia wonders to herself, "Is this to go on forever?"

While other officers around him are coming unstitched, Tietjens, although beset by betrayals and false dealing on the part of acquaintances and family members who should have had his back, gets on with his job. Lieutenant Cowley tells Sylvia: "You must excuse the captain, ma'am. . . . He had no sleep last night. . . . Largely owing to my fault. . . . I

tell you, ma'am, there are few things I would not do for the captain."

But General Campion, who wants Sylvia for himself, sends Tietjens "up the line," toward the front and, Tietjens assumes, "certain death." He survives but, like Ford himself, suffers from shell-shock and amnesia. Another officer who knows both Campion and Tietjens later explains: "The General wanted Sylvia Tietjens. So as to get her he had sent Tietjens into the hottest part of the line. But Tietjens had refused to get killed." Even General Campion eventually concedes that Tietjens deserves a military decoration, but he wouldn't receive it: decorations were limited in number and ought to be given, as Campion is sure Tietjens would agree, to those for whom it would be professionally more advantageous.

And so after the war Christopher Tietjens gives up Groby, becomes a trader in antique furniture, divorces Sylvia, marries Valentine Wannop, and lives quietly as a smallholder in the West Sussex countryside, working hard to make ends meet. Good for him. He remains a man of principle, and his ethical stance is firmly based on inner conviction. That he is no longer, in the eyes of a diminishing local aristocracy, of the landed gentry is not crucial. His ethics may have shifted from *noblesse oblige* to bourgeois virtues, but he is no less conscientious in his personal and professional dealings than he was before.

Indeed, something artificial, pretentious, and misaligned always seemed to adhere to Tietjens's previous occupation, limned in the tetralogy's well-known opening sentences which describe Tietjens and his colleague Macmaster.

> The two young men—they were of the English public official class—sat in the perfectly appointed railway carriage. The leather straps to the windows were of virgin newness; the mirrors beneath the new luggage racks immaculate as if they had reflected very little. . . . Their class administered the world, not merely the newly created Imperial Department of Statistics under Sir Reginald Ingleby.

Tietjens's transition from civil servant to independent businessman is not a terrible fall.

That Tietjens will witness no more parades is not a matter of undue concern either. In military parlance, "parade" can mean any assembly of troops. Sometimes officers and men gather for a review of marching units. Other times they assemble for religious services, a "church parade." In a literal sense, then, after the war, Tietjens, no longer in uniform, will face no more parades. But "parade" can also mean an ostentatious display, often incorporating a measure of hypocrisy. Thus, back in the first volume, *Some Do Not . . .* , the narrator refers to a pair of adulterers, now lawfully married, still carrying on their "parade of circumspection and rightness," even after their ceremony in the registry office.

"No more parades" does not necessarily signify the end of all things honorable and glorious, therefore. In fact, for Tietjens, "no more parades" could be a blessing. One suspects that there will be less "parade" in his own life; he will be less formal and wooden, humbler, far less priggish, and more accepting of all sorts and conditions of men and women.

Moreover, if "no more parades" does mean no more hope and glory, then who is to blame? This world of old-fashioned values—including, it must be said, class snobbery, assumptions of Anglo-Saxon superiority, and an extreme reticence which assumed far too much in the way of mutual understanding—was under assault well before the war. Ford was concerned with dissembling and moral rot when he was writing *The Good Soldier*. The Great War did not put paid to duty and responsibility; nor did the great estates ensure their continuance. Consider Christopher's father and his older brother, Mark: neither squire turns out to be a towering oak of rectitude.

And the British government's national tax system did as much as any other force to end centuries of tradition, at least as embodied by the gentry and their country houses. In his outstanding history *The Long Shadow: The Legacies of the Great War in the Twentieth Century* (2014), David Reynolds observes that the aristocracy's landed wealth was being steadily whittled down by onerous rates. Fiscal policy dictated that estate taxes would soar after the war to 40 percent from 1919 at the

same time that the income tax was rising and a new super-tax on the highest incomes hit the owners of old estates. Many great properties were broken up; Groby is a single instance of a larger social transformation. In 1922 the politician Charles F. Masterman (a friend of Ford's, he's "Waterhouse" in *Parade's End*) declared that taxation "is destroying the whole Feudal system as it extended practically but little changed from 1066."

Ford would have been sensitive to these changes. He fretted about increasing bureaucracy and statism in England. In his autobiographical *Between St. Dennis and St. George: A Sketch of Three Civilizations* (1915), one of his contributions to the wartime propaganda efforts at Wellington House, he writes that he is "a pronounced Tory" who has always focused mainly on his art, so he does not know much about public affairs. He knows enough, however, to express "a profound distrust of all legislation," believing that "what the country needed was a rest from all Acts of Parliament for as long a period as possible."

In any case, the distinction between the core values of the aristocratic and middle classes can be overdrawn. Large numbers of landed gentry and bourgeois Britons alike, both before and after the war, respected civilized customs and inherited forms of behavior. Appreciating social stability, they were not political or social rebels; they believed in honest conduct and in performing one's duty in the station to which one has been called. Changes in sexual mores, the artistic avant-garde, and a revolutionary Germany disturbed many—in varying degrees—across both social classes.

Christopher Tietjens is marked out as *sui generis*, but he stands in for all those who bridle at cheating, mendacity, cruelty, and self-aggrandizement. His mark of distinction is not his ancestral link to Groby but that he is a man of honor, a good person despite his failings, in a post-war world that exhibits a rising skepticism toward old pieties and declining belief in an objective moral order. Within the canonical literature of the Great War, his representation of a conservative alternative is unusual and makes him worth knowing in our own age, a time of moral cynicism and moralistic grandstanding.

Tietjens reminds us that the schoolboy code of honor must be freshly appraised in adulthood, adjusted, and embraced as one's own, but its underlying standards never grow old. The best schools today will teach and reaffirm the lineaments of integrity, not only the seven cardinal and theological virtues but also the disreputable habits of humility and patience. By such means educators will stand athwart the deadly contemporary drive to endorse teleological justifications of opprobrious acts. Closing in on one hundred years, *Parade's End* still appeals.

New poems
by David Yezzi & Alec Solomita

The wasp in the lamp

A dried wasp casts
its shadow—thorax
cinch-waist, sting
—against frosted glass.

Pinned like Icarus
to a globe of white,
its sere lobes fold
into elegant origami.

The year past has
found its cenotaph.
Ghosts waft in
the wind, swarming

into sight, revealing
themselves above
the houses, borne
on filament wings.

—David Yezzi

Old Faust

Forty years ago, I would have sold my soul (like him)
for a love so strong the self dissolves in it.
And it's possible I did. For beauty feels blameless when frozen
in a stereopticon two-in-one a sepia-toned moment of pure
radiance the star inside the sapphire's liquid blue.

And I'd do it again only more so to be sanctified like that
brushed by grace held harmless if only as an illusion
in that dazzling light. It will not come again not now
at my age. What's past is all there is and what remains
seems hardly worth the candle. No one inquires or seeks

to take some benefit from my hard-won knowledge and truly
I have little left to give. The days are an abscess whose odor
chokes the patient in his bed. I long for them to be done. All
that's left to hope . . . You know the rest: *cries of execration*.
I am a madman and his victims all in one.

—*David Yezzi*

Echolocation

To see old Mahlon rowing across Chain of Ponds,
his boat spilling over with weightless strips
of fuchsia Styrofoam for one of the new cabins,
startling the foraging bats flitting in the dusk
who had never heard such a color before,
we fretted that the new hue was some sort
of harbinger, a portent of some quiet incursion,
but maybe we were a mite previous seeing
signs of the end everywhere, the coming
of the dreaded *autres*, but didn't know (how
could we) as we rowed and waved in the
wild's low silence toward our own small
cabin with its kerosene lamps and outhouse,
that not the wilderness but you were soon
to be among the missing, you were going?
How could we know that, as you helped guide
me through the two rounded boulders marking
our landing spot and I pulled gently on one oar
and then the other to get us safely to shore?

—Alec Solomita

Reconsiderations

Immigration, crime & the leftist mind

by Gerald Frost

The ways in which the progressive mind responds to realities that challenge its most profound beliefs provide an enduring source of fascination. One response is to lay claim to the ownership of an alternative "truth" that departs in significant respects from the world perceived by others, an approach also popular with public relations executives and dissident members of the British royal family. Henning Mankell (1948–2015), the initiator of the trend for "Nordic noir" and the creator of the fictional detective Kurt Wallander, followed a rather more unusual approach. The most successful Swedish writer since Strindberg, during his lifetime Mankell sold forty million books and was translated into thirty-five languages. In addition to the thirteen Wallander thrillers, he wrote novels, children's stories, and plays, while also founding a publishing company and working in the theater. But it was the Wallander detective stories, and the Swedish and British television series based on them, that brought fame, considerable wealth, and influence. Today, his hometown of Sveg boasts a museum in his honor and a bridge bearing his name.

Mankell was born in Stockholm in 1948 and brought up in the northern Swedish town of Sveg, where his father, Ivar, was a district judge. Mankell's mother walked out on the family shortly after her son's birth, but the author described his childhood as a happy one, defending his mother's action on the grounds that she only did what many men do. He has related how he invented an imaginary mother to take her place so that he could cope with the resultant feelings of isolation; when he met his real-life mother as an adolescent he found that he preferred the imaginary one. His account of his childhood suggests an early ability to retreat into a fictional world to escape disagreeable aspects of reality, a capacity which did not desert him.

As a young man, Mankell belonged to the political far Left, taking part in the activities of the Workers' Communist Party of Norway, a Maoist outfit, without actually becoming a member. He opposed the existence of Israel, which he believed would go the way of white South Africa; demonstrated against U.S. policy in Vietnam; joined the 1968 student uprising in Paris, where he had gone to become a professional writer; and railed against racism and a variety of perceived injustices. In 2010 he was on one of the boats in the "Freedom Flotilla" that attempted to break the Israeli embargo of the Gaza Strip. Nine civilians died in the bloodbath that followed the boarding of one of the other boats in the flotilla by members of the Israeli Defense Forces. Mankell was arrested and subsequently deported to Sweden. He responded by arguing for international sanctions against Israel, comparing the Israeli West Bank barrier to the Berlin Wall: "The Wall that is currently dividing the country will prevent future attacks, in the short term. In the end it will face the same fate as the wall that once divided Berlin." Commenting on the condition of the Palestinian people, he asked: "Is it strange that some of them in pure desperation, when

they cannot see any other way out, decide to become suicide bombers? Not really. Maybe it is strange that there are not more of them."

In later years the Marxist aspects of his thought became somewhat less prominent as he morphed into a kind of militant liberal activist. Describing himself as "a humanitarian socialist," he opposed constraints on immigration, advocating the construction of a bridge between Gibraltar and Africa, where he spent part of each year and where he gave generously to refugee welfare charities, as a means of easing passage between the two continents. His appointment as an E.U. "goodwill ambassador" to Africa, working for an organization he had earlier condemned as a rich man's club, gave him an additional platform for his views on the subject.

Curiously, those views stand in startling contrast to those of Kurt Wallander, his fictional detective hero. Throughout the Wallander stories the detective reflects on why it is his once tranquil hometown of Ystad, thirty-five miles south of Malmö in the province of Scania, is so frequently riven by violent crime. Nearly all the murders he investigates have a foreign dimension, and many of the perpetrators are foreigners. All the crimes are of a particularly brutal kind, and some involve sadism or torture; there are also severed heads and acid attacks. Wallander concludes that the root of the problem is a lax immigration policy. His view is clearly stated in *Faceless Killers*, the first of the Wallander books, published in 1991, almost a quarter of a century before the European immigrant crisis year of 2015 when Sweden became one of the European countries with the highest proportion of immigrants in per capita terms.

Visiting a refugee camp outside Ystad as part of his inquiry into two particularly brutal murders, Wallander expresses the hopes that the killers will be found there: "Then maybe it will put an end to this arbitrary lax policy that allows anyone at all to cross the border into Sweden. But of course he couldn't say that." The murder victims, a farmer and his wife, have been tortured before being battered to death. A neighbor who discovers the crime reports that the wife's dying utterance was "Foreigners!"

The killers turn out to be refugees from Central Europe who are seeking asylum on the grounds that as Roma they have been subject to racial discrimination. Wallander is told by the camp director: "If you only knew how many people live here without residency permits. They live together, forge their papers, trade names with one another, work illegally. You can spend a lifetime in Sweden without anyone checking up on you. No one believes it, but that's the way it is." Wallander becomes even angrier when the camp director refuses a request for the documents relating to the suspects on the grounds that this would breach data-protection laws. The detective declares: "This is f—ing crazy."

Similar sentiments can be found in many of the other Wallander stories, while Judge Birgitta Roslin, the central character in *The Man from Beijing* (2008), one of Mankell's non-Wallander novels, presides over cases involving Romanian thugs, Iraqi people smugglers, and Vietnamese gangsters before going to China in pursuit of a mass murderer.

Ystad and its surrounds have never quite become the violent place depicted in the thirteen Wallander books. Although the area is reported to have become a conduit for Baltic drug gangs, foreign visitors are more likely to be Wallander fans eager to explore the fictional detective's hometown and the bleak, featureless, and haunting countryside around it than criminals. (Scania has experienced a major boost to tourism as a result of the hugely popular *Wallander* television series.) But although Sweden's crime figures are not high by international standards, it is undeniable that parts of Stockholm, Malmö, and Gothenburg have become increasingly crime-ridden, dangerous, and violent.

In 2017, Donald Trump attracted international opprobrium when he linked terrorist acts in Sweden to immigration. Subsequent White House clarifications suggested that the real link was not between immigration and terrorism but immigration and crime. When reformulated, the White House statements contained at least as much truth as the

outraged denials of this fact by Swedish government ministers and prominent liberals: according to the Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention, violent crime last year stood at a twenty-year high, with murder and manslaughter at their highest levels since the organization began recording them in 2002. It is also the case that major Swedish cities, uniquely among those of Western Europe, are regularly the scene of explosions arising from the use of grenades and improvised explosive devices—mostly thermos flasks stuffed with explosive materials—by drug gangs. In each of the years 2018 and 2019—the last years for which I was able to obtain figures—there were well over a hundred such explosions.

The link between immigration and crime in Sweden is difficult to demonstrate conclusively for the simple reason that as a matter of policy the authorities neither record nor release details of criminals' ethnic backgrounds because it is considered "divisive" to do so. Instead, statistical analysis concentrates on issues relating to socioeconomic conditions, thus shifting the responsibility for crime from individuals and immigration policy to economic disadvantage.

Although the past few years have seen the steady rise of the Sweden Democrats, an anti-immigration party (with which other parties have so far been reluctant to do business, a situation that may now be on the verge of changing), pro-immigration attitudes remain deeply embedded in Swedish society. In 2002, resisting demands that details of a criminal's ethnic background should be recorded in the official data, an editorial in *Aftonbladet*, Sweden's best-selling tabloid, screamed: "Do not strengthen racist prejudices." Recording ethnicity, it concluded, "would instantly play into the hands of racists. . . . The right-wing extremists and their lies about a connection between ethnicity and crime cannot go unchallenged. We certainly do not need crime statistics, the mere presence of which only fuel racist prejudices." *Aftonbladet* and its political allies won the argument: Sweden still does not record the ethnic backgrounds of those who break the law. (An independent study by the professors Göran Adamson and Tino Sanandaji found that between 2002 and 2017, 58 percent of those suspected of crime on reasonable grounds were migrants. In the case of murder, manslaughter, and attempted murder, the figure was 73 percent. In the case of robbery, the figure was 70 percent.)

While the government refuses to accept that its immigration policies have increased crime levels, it acknowledges that immigrants are more than twice as likely to be *suspected* of crime—which of course allows the possibility that the real problem may not be immigration, but prejudice.

In responding to the controversy sparked by Trump's remarks, ministers were anxious to deny foreign-media claims that there are now no-go areas in Sweden's major cities. Under pressure they did, however, acknowledge the existence of "especially vulnerable areas." These were, to paraphrase their words, characterized by social issues and criminal presence which have led to a widespread disinclination to participate in the judicial process. In 2019, there were twenty-two such areas, mostly in Stockhom, Malmö, and Gothenberg. In addition, there were a further number of areas which were viewed as being somewhere between "vulnerable" and "especially vulnerable." In responding to this situation, the police have developed special techniques. These include instructing police drivers to enter trouble spots in reverse gear—so that they can make a fast getaway when attacked. So, if not actually no-go areas, these are certainly fast-getaway zones of a kind, a state of affairs which does not sit easily with Sweden's self-image as a safe society at ease with itself.

None of the realities described above would come as a surprise to Kurt Wallander; indeed, his creator's imaginative powers were such as to anticipate developments that were to occur after the time of writing. But apart from a love of opera, which Wallander listens to on his squad-car radio, he has little in common with Mankell. Indeed, the latter is on record as expressing dislike for the fictional character who made him rich, admitting that he would not have gotten along with him, despite the detective's huge popularity with readers.

Wallander plainly has his faults: he is overweight, drinks too much, eats too much junk

food, and is prone to anger, though not without cause. His personal life is a mess: relations with his father and daughter are difficult, his marriage has collapsed because of his commitment to his work, and largely for the same reason any attempts to form a lasting relation with a female colleague falter. Wallander is also intelligent, perceptive, brave, and sensitive in his dealings with the relatives of crime victims. Kenneth Branagh, one of five actors who has played the part on television or film, and who lobbied Mankell to win the role, said he had been impressed by Wallander's deep empathy for the murder victims. Wallander dislikes the dystopian world in which he finds himself, and although he is very good at it, he does not like his job. He dreams of a career as a producer of opera, but nevertheless remains bound to the Sisyphean task of combating a rising tide of violence and criminality.

How to explain the diametrically opposed nature of the author and his character? One possibility is that Wallander expresses Mankell's inner fears, that Wallander is Mankell's *alter ego*. But there is little evidence for this. The disconnect between Mankell's imaginative world, which in truth seems to correspond more closely to reality than to his public statements and media interviews, is total. Mankell gave no sign of self-doubt, indeed quite the reverse. His Stockholm publisher, Dan Israel, provides an important part of the explanation:

> If Wallander was a leftist, progressive detective, these thrillers would not be half so popular. Really, Wallander's a kind of spokesman for the worries of the common man. Henning has an uncanny ability to decipher the signs of the time—he knows how to tap into people's fears and uncertainties.

Mankell most certainly did not regard himself as a common man, but as an intellectual whose work as a writer stood in the tradition of Euripides, Shakespeare, and John le Carré. What Mankell did in the Wallander books, in effect, was to sub-contract the task of acknowledging an unpalatable, ideologically inconvenient, but for him highly profitable, state of affairs—that arising from unregulated immigration—to his fictional hero, a task which he evidently believed to be unworthy of a liberal intellectual. This enabled him to concentrate in his public utterances on what he regarded as the deeper truths about society, those relating to the evils of racism and the consequences of colonialism. It was a division of labor that worked well. Mankell died from cancer in 2015, a much-honored darling of the liberal establishment, but not before showing what he thought of his fictional hero by giving him an unheroic ending to his career: by the end of the last novel, Wallander suffers increasing memory loss and the onset of dementia. Loved by millions, but disliked by his creator, Wallander had served his purpose.

Theater

Acceptance

by Kyle Smith

The issue of injustice towards blacks is consuming the theater as it is every other institution, so in the interest of avoiding another reminder that the United States in 2021 is a land consumed by white supremacy, I took myself to a comedy about black life, *Chicken & Biscuits* (which is at the Circle in the Square through January 2) in hopes of something light. The piece is to be commended for being different, but that doesn't mean it's good.

Written by Douglas Lyons, an actor turned playwright who has no previous writing credits worthy of note and says on his website that he "is drawn to telling Black and queer stories that illuminate joy," the play looks at a quarrelsome family reunion prompted by the death and funeral of a beloved grandfather. There is no plot. The comic energy is meant to emerge from the contrast between urbane and urban: on one side of the family are stuffy, upscale, educated blacks in New Haven who speak standard English; on the other are colorful working-class types who communicate in a profane vernacular that keeps upsetting the intended atmosphere of piety and mourning. The posh blacks try to keep things dignified, but their low-class relatives keep throwing them off.

The genteel side of the family is personified by the dead man's daughter Baneatta Mabry (Cleo King), a fussy and decorous professor, and her husband, Reginald (Norm Lewis), the pastor who will lead the obsequies and deliver the eulogy. The bull in the china shop is Baneatta's sassy, loudmouthed sister Beverly (Ebony Marshall-Oliver), a free-spirited Atlanta hairdresser who shows up for the funeral in a low-cut dress more suggestive of a streetwalker than a mourner. Her fifteen-year-old daughter, La'Trice (Aigner Mizzelle), is equally uncouth, outspoken, and inappropriate, in contradistinction to Baneatta's polished upper-middle-class daughter, Simone (Alana Raquel Bowers), who is smarting over having been abandoned by her boyfriend for a white woman. Simone's brother, Kenny (Devere Isaac Rogers), a New York City stage actor, has brought his Jewish boyfriend, Logan Leibowitz (Michael Urie), the sole white person present. Although the pair has been in a romance for four years and might soon marry, Kenny's mother and sister are frosty toward the boyfriend, and Kenny feels so awkward about the situation that he plays along with pretending that Logan is a mere "friend," though all present are aware of the truth. Kenny also tones down his mannerisms to de-emphasize his homosexuality, a habit that Logan complains amounts to self-re-closeting.

The text of the play, a long single act, contains nothing that's funny or witty or even mildly amusing. Seemingly aware of this problem, the director Zhailon Levingston, who is also making his Broadway debut, has the actors play their trite, dull characters as broadly as they can in hopes of a generous response from the audience. Beverly and everyone around her keep referring to her habit of showing off her breasts (referred to as "puppies" or "titties"); Baneatta keeps coldly offering her

wrist to Logan in lieu of a welcome kiss; Kenny keeps gets flustered about his homosexuality around his mother.

When a late development exposes a family secret and introduces a new character, Brianna (NaTasha Yvette Williams), everyone on stage dashes around the space screaming indiscriminately over one another to signal that hilarity is underway, though the twist is nothing but a bog-standard soap-opera convention that has been trotted out in any number of family-reunion tales down the decades, and anyway it doesn't actually alter the story, because there is no story in the first place. The climactic moments consist merely of everyone coming to accept one another's differences (while dining on the titular meal) amid dull inspirational maxims and statements of self-esteem. A major element is the play's urgent plea for gay acceptance, but is such an entreaty really necessary on the New York stage, which has been pushing the idea for more than fifty years? When Brianna refers to her brother's gay "lifestyle," he explodes with indignation, explaining that his sexuality is part and parcel of "my identity." The audience erupts on cue, but this is just pandering. You might as well go to a NASCAR rally and make an urgent plea for acceptance of beer, or hamburgers. Another major applause line follows Simone's decision to get her groove back by noting that her ex must have broken up with her because, while he was obsessed with her body, he was "intimidated by my mind" and tried to reduce her to the level of arm candy when, in reality, "I'm a whole damn candy bar!" (Is a candy bar really much different from candy? Discuss.)

The audience on the evening I attended loved this sub-greeting-card-level affirmation, and was even more rapt when Simone, in discussing her dislike of perfidious whites (having lost her boyfriend to a white "Becky," she dislikes Kenny's relationship not because it's homosexual but because it's with a white person), casts a hostile gaze into the (90 percent white) audience. In the stalls, everyone cheered, because apparently racial animus is funny when it's directed at white people. Curious folk, these rich white progressives. You could make a fortune staging something called "The White Privilege Show" and charging theatergoers eighty or a hundred bucks to be paraded across a stage in front of their peers, then whipped with a cat-o'-nine-tails by a duly appointed black person. The way white self-loathing is overtaking all other considerations in the theater, such an offering might have the virtue of skipping over the formalities and getting right to the point. As a bonus, six or ten lashes would be over much sooner than this dismal and exhausting 140-minute play.

Martyna Majok, who was born in Poland and grew up in New Jersey, won a Pulitzer Prize for *Cost of Living*, a little-seen 2016 play that appeared off-Broadway in 2017 and was about a double amputee and a man with cerebral palsy. The piece hasn't been revived in New York since it ran for a month that summer, and Majok remains a fairly obscure figure. Her latest effort is a poorly wrought and fairly nonsensical social-justice plea in the form of an off-Broadway play, *Sanctuary City*, which was running in March of 2020 when production was halted. It then returned to the stage at the Lucille Lortel Theatre this September and October.

Sanctuary City, which is mostly a dialogue between a teen boy and girl as they grow up together and enter adulthood, begins as one kind of left-wing propaganda piece and ends as another, with the middle occupied by a standard high-school coming-of-age story of the kind reliably churned out by Hollywood and young-adult novelists. Both immigrant characters go unnamed, the boy identified in the program as B (Jasai Chase-Owens) and the girl as G (Sharlene Cruz). Nor are we told which country they're from, because the pair is supposed to be archetypical of the American immigration dilemma. Both arrived illegally as children, though G gets naturalized in the course of the play, and are meant to personify the playwright's sense that there is an urgent need for programs to provide permanent residency to youthful illegal aliens. Since the United States seems barely to take notice of illegal immigrants unless they commit serious crimes, and since Newark (the play's setting) and many other cities vow to interfere with

any such federal efforts that might take place, the play amounts to pushing on a string.

Though staged as a single act that runs one hundred minutes, *Sanctuary City* is in effect a two-act drama without an intermission. The first half is told in brief, cinematic vignettes, which last in some cases only a few seconds, and are set apart by blackouts that indicate disruption of time and space. The two young people are neighbors in a Newark apartment building who meet shortly after the events of September 11, 2001, and tremblingly begin to share the details of their woebegone lives. His mother goes back to the old country, leaving him to fend for himself; she gets beaten up regularly by her stepfather, and the pair repeatedly strategizes about what excuses she should use to explain her absences from school, as if anyone in the inner-city public schools system is likely to care when students fail to show. Huddled together in solidarity against a cold, cruel world, the two begin sleeping together, have a charmingly awkward time at the prom, and agree excitedly to marry.

Gormless and dull-edged as it is, the play, directed by Rebecca Frecknall on an empty square of a stage, passes painlessly enough for its first hour. Halfway through, though, there is a tonal shift as we skip ahead several years. The second half is one extended scene that finds B moody and tense while G, who has returned temporarily from college in Boston, is needy and demanding. The playful flirtation of the first half is gone; now the duo is divided by acrimony. It turns out that the sleeping together in the first half was merely literal; there is no sexual relationship between the two because B is gay, as becomes evident when his lover, a law student named Henry (Austin Smith), turns up in his apartment. The bruited marriage was to be purely a *pro forma* exercise to secure a green card for B.

The play's attempts at producing dramatic tension are absurd contrivances: Majok would have us believe that naturalization officers are exacting inquisitors eager to detect and punish sham marriages by cross-examining their participants, jailing those who give incorrect answers. Anyone who has any familiarity with the porous nature of the actual green-card system will laugh at the absurdity of these exchanges, but since B and G have known each other for years there is little chance that they would be tripped up by questions meant to check whether they are well-acquainted. Far from having to create a fake story under high pressure, they need not change a thing about their relationship except to suggest that it's sexual.

Silly and fake as all of this chatter is, it's less silly and fake than what becomes the primary source of conflict in the play: G's anger with B for not wanting to enter into a genuine marriage with her, despite his homosexuality. She even baits him by reminding him that he can never marry Henry, because it's 2006 and gay marriage seems inconceivable. The obvious solution—that the pair should simply go through with their friendly pretend marriage so that he can get a green card and live happily ever after with his boyfriend—seems not to be on the table. Never mind that the vast majority of gay people are unmarried even today, or that even the most clueless millennial woman must grasp the utter pointlessness of trying to forge a meaningful marriage with a homosexual man. In addition to being hamfisted in her themes, Majok lacks the most elementary skill of a playwright: to engineer a plausible plot. *Sanctuary City* is a laughably amateurish work that ought never see the stage again.

Rajiv Joseph's ninety-minute single-act drama *Letters of Suresh*, which was produced by the Second Stage Theater earlier this fall, might generously be termed a play of ideas. Less generously, it could be dismissed as a farrago of half-formed thoughts. Since the vague and foggy ending left me in an ungenerous mood, that is exactly how I shall dismiss it.

Speaking mostly in long monologues, its four characters consider faith, death, family, science, infidelity, war, peace, and origami. But Joseph fails to bring matters to a dramatic point, to offer any conclusions, or even to offer any fresh reflections on anything. To the extent the play "unfolds"—hey, just like origami!—it doesn't do so in any effective way. The characters talk (and talk) about various matters on their minds, and at the end nothing is resolved, intellectu-

ally, morally, or dramatically. Joseph is an experienced forty-seven-year-old playwright—his 2010 Iraq War–set *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo* made a splash, was nominated for a Pulitzer, and attracted Robin Williams to star—but *Letters of Suresh* contains so little in the way of either structure or momentum that it feels like a thesis or a first draft.

Smartly directed by May Adrales, who does what she can with this porridge of ideas, the play opens with a chatty long monologue delivered by a likeable forty-year-old Seattle college writing teacher, Melody Park (winsomely played by Ali Ahn), who never meets any of the other three characters. What is she doing in this play? She is simply a contrivance to introduce us to a cache of letters written to her great-uncle, a Catholic priest named Father Hashimoto who grew up in Nagasaki and continued to live there his whole life. It seems unlikely that she would travel so far to attend the funeral of this man she never knew, but she does, and she comes home with a mysterious cache of wonderful letters that fascinate her, inspire her, and even heal a major rift in her family after she reads them to her aged parents.

The letters were written to the priest over the course of years by a goofy but appealing young man from Boston we meet in the next monologue: Suresh Thakur (Ramiz Monsef), who over the course of the play ages from a teen who speaks in the idioms of hip-hop to a thoughtful scientist in his late twenties. Suresh, as a high-school student, exhibited a genius for origami, which led him to a demonstration of the art for children in Nagasaki, which is where he became friends with the priest who lived there. Later we'll meet a married woman, Amelia (Kellie Overbey), with whom he has an affair that upends her life and destroys her marriage.

The play is a sort of jigsaw puzzle that keeps the audience guessing until the final moments reveal the missing central pieces, which are the actual unmediated words of Father Hashimoto. When Suresh goes to Nagasaki after the priest's death, he discovers an unsent letter in the pocket of the dead man's clothes when they are returned from the dry cleaner. In the climactic final scene of the play, the priest (Thom Semsa) will finally explain himself in this ultimate letter to Suresh before dying at ninety-three.

Minute by minute, the play is unpretentious and pleasant enough; the characters are thoughtful and well-meaning. But it never manages to bring elements together. The adultery story of Amelia, for instance, is tangential to matters. Her sole dramatic purpose is simply to be the listener on a phone call in which Suresh explains why he came to Japan and spent months there on an interior quest for meaning. The play is building to what we're led to believe is an explosive revelation at the end, but, far from being a dramatic shock, it's yet another matter of homosexuality being revealed. This kind of "reveal" has been a cliché on stage for at least twenty years; will the theater ever accept that homosexuality is now accepted?

Art

Richardson's Picasso, volume IV

by Karen Wilkin

This year marks the thirtieth anniversary of the beginning of a dauntingly ambitious project: the 1991 publication of John Richardson's *A Life of Picasso: Volume I, 1881–1906*. The second volume, *The Painter of Modern Life, 1907–1917*, followed in 1996, with *The Triumphant Years, 1917–1932* appearing in 2007. (The first two volumes, written in collaboration with the Picasso scholar Marilyn McCully, are subtitled *The Prodigy* and *The Cubist Rebel* in subsequent editions.) The long gaps between books were occasioned by Richardson's having to write saleable memoirs of his remarkable career to finance *A Life*. Impressively researched and copiously illustrated with vintage photographs and images of works of art, the three volumes present a vivid portrait of the preternaturally gifted, mercurial, superstitious, bullfight-loving Spanish émigré whose name is synonymous with modern art. Starting with the particulars of his childhood in Málaga and his youth in Barcelona, the books marshal facts and demolish myths. We meet Picasso's family and friends, his lovers, admirers, and enemies, his patrons and art dealers. We learn where and how he lived, and with whom. Richardson, who knew Picasso from the late 1940s on and, for many years, with his partner Douglas Cooper, was a neighbor and frequent visitor in the south of France, zeroes in on the complexities of the artist's domestic arrangements. He dissects Picasso's foibles, superstitions, and obsessions, and he is perceptive to the ways the artist alluded in his work to his own history and the people in his life—notably the women—overtly, obliquely, or metaphorically. Richardson is a connoisseur of gossip, with a keen appreciation of malice, but he's also good at discussing works of art, so the three volumes are informative about the evolution of Picasso's paintings and sculptures, as well as his forays into other mediums. Richardson explores, too, the often contradictory responses to the artist's work and, the near-constant controversy notwithstanding, the steady growth of his reputation during the decades covered by the three books.

But. There is virtually no acknowledgment of world events during the years under review in volumes I through III, an omission that Richardson admits to and explains by saying that Picasso was reported by his friends and acquaintances to be completely apolitical. More disturbing is the writer's conviction that Picasso's behavior was always not only of interest and worth reporting, but also admirable. No matter how egregiously awful the artist's treatment of the women with whom he surrounded himself, Richardson takes Picasso's side. He is notably unsympathetic to Fernande Olivier, the intelligent, articulate companion of the early years in Paris, when, on holiday with the artist, she writes to complain to her friend Alice B. Toklas of the rigors of living in a primitive, comfortless house in remote, rural Gossol while suffering from a painful kidney infection. Richardson faults Fernande for finding the situation difficult. He is untroubled by Picasso's having picked up the seventeen-year-old Marie-Thérèse Walter outside a Parisian department store and inveigled her into a relationship, when the painter was very much married to the Russian ballet dancer Olga Khoklova. Richard-

son's treatment of Olga is scathing, with good reason, by all reports. Many of her contemporaries described her as insane, and Paulo, her son with Picasso, is supposed to have hated her, so it's not wholly surprising that Richardson approves of the artist's installing the teenage girl in an apartment convenient to the one he occupied with his wife and young son. Nevertheless . . . (One must also wonder about Marie-Thérèse's compliant mother.)

Now, two years after Richardson's death at ninety-five in 2019, the story continues in the posthumously published *Life of Picasso IV: The Minotaur Years, 1933–1943*, written with the collaboration of the art historian Ross Finocchio and the researcher Delphine Huisinga.[1] All the virtues of the first three volumes—the careful research and scrupulous deployment of information, and the often insightful discussion of works of art—are on display in volume IV. There is the same attention given to the details of Picasso's daily life and the accounts of the people he spent time with, along with descriptions of his apartments and studios, the places where and the people with whom he spent his holidays, and more. There is, as well, the same itemizing of what was happening in the studio and the same interpretation of Picasso's imagery in relation to the events of his life. There's a lot to discuss, since the decade covered by volume IV saw the birth of such iconic paintings as *Guernica* (1937), the Weeping Woman heads (1937), and the Museum of Modern Art's *Night Fishing at Antibes* (1939), as well as the prints *La Minotauromachie* (1935) and *The Dream and Lie of Franco* (1937) and the sculpture *Man with a Lamb* (1943), among other celebrated works in various mediums.

Richardson's interpretations are largely presented as incontrovertible fact, which, given his intense familiarity with the minutiae of Picasso's life, I suppose we must allow him. He reminds us of Picasso's abiding interest in the Roman mystery cult of Mithras, centered on a bull-slaying god of the sun, justice, and war—a natural fit for an anti-clerical lover of bull fights. Every image of a sun or a light source, natural or manmade, is seen as a reference to Mithraism, including the explosive light fixture illuminating *Guernica*, above the agonized horse. Richardson also tells us that the woman with a lamp leaning out the window in *Guernica* (as well as every other female in Picasso's oeuvre holding a lamp or a candle) stands for his adored younger sister Conchita, who died of diphtheria at seven, when he was thirteen and the family lived in La Coruña on the Atlantic coast. Richardson first proposes the idea in connection with the sculpture *Woman with a Lamp* (1933), a new interpretation that could explain why Picasso wanted the work, traditionally called *Woman with a Vase*, placed on his grave. Richardson sees the sculpture as an ex-voto or an atonement. When Conchita fell ill, Picasso vowed to stop painting if her life was spared. But he did paint again: the serum that would have saved her arrived too late from Paris, the only source, and Conchita died at the beginning of 1895. Richardson's fundamental assumption is that everything, including the objects in still-life paintings, has meaning beyond its appearance, despite Picasso's having said that he put everything he liked into his paintings and that the things had to get along as best they could. *Still Life with a Lamp* (1939), for example, a seemingly straightforward image painted after the death of a French journalist whose vivid reporting of the Spanish Civil War was regularly read by Picasso, is understood by Richardson as a *memento mori*; in it, he tells us, Picasso "as he often did, represents himself as a jug and his mistress as a compotier."

Richardson recounts Picasso's strenuous shuttling among the many women in his life. During the years covered by volume IV, these included Olga, whom he was seeking to divorce; Marie-Thérèse, with whom he had a daughter, Maya; the photographer Dora Maar; Alice Paalen (later Rahon), a celebrated beauty and the wife of an Austrian painter; and the young intellectual and aspiring painter Françoise Gilot. The majority of the female figures in the works of the 1930s and early 1940s are identified as responses to these women, with clues to Picasso's feelings at the time revealed by his treatment of the image. We are alerted to the visible manifestations of Picasso's affection for the patient, voluptuous Marie-Thérèse in the references to breasts, but-

1 *A Life of Picasso IV: The Minotaur Years, 1933–1943*, by John Richardson; Knopf, 320 pages, $40.

tocks, and genitals in paintings constructed with sleek, swelling forms. His continuing connection to Marie-Thérèse seems to have been an antidote to his rage against Olga—whom Richardson calls a "termagent" and whose friend Misia Sert described her as "the most boring woman in the world." It was also an alternative to his vexed affair with the volatile Dora Maar, whose letters of apology for angry explosions Richardson frequently quotes. Dora Maar, of course, is the Weeping Woman, a testimonial to her tempestuous character. Picasso is quoted as saying that he could not have painted her smiling. Since the artist seems to have enjoyed playing one woman against the other, he often painted contrasting images relating to different subjects more or less concurrently. Witness two horizontal canvases made in 1939, *Woman Lying on a Couch (Dora Maar)* and *Reclining Woman Reading*, the former all angles and spikes, the latter clearly recognizable as the blonde, soft-featured Marie-Thérèse, a symphony of suave, interlocking curves. In volume IV, Richardson seems less hostile than he did in the earlier books to Picasso's women—apart from the increasingly unstable and erratic Olga—but he appears to find nothing problematic in the artist's living with Dora Maar in Paris during the week and spending weekends with Marie-Thérèse and Maya in a small town west of the city, with other amusements in between. Richardson does take exception to Picasso's ignoring Paulo's troubled and troubling adolescence, which was marked by drug use and petty crime, quoting Olga's urgent letters demanding help and noting that it took the artist a year to arrange, finally, for the boy to stay at a posh Swiss sanatorium for rehabilitation. The art dealer Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, who was close to the family, observed, "The boy really has a heavy burden in his ancestry—the son of a genius and a madwoman." Paulo turned out all right, Richardson tells us, becoming a stable adult who served as his father's chauffeur and confidant. His dreadful early behavior is blamed on his detested mother's suffocating attention.

In addition to such intimate revelations, volume IV also tracks the larger context of what was happening in the studio. The subtitle, *The Minotaur Years*, refers to Picasso's frequent and persistent inclusion of the mythical man-bull, slain by the hero Theseus, variously as aggressor, guardian, lover, and sometimes victim, in works of the 1930s and early 1940s. But the phrase also encompasses Picasso's tentative relationship with the Surrealists, beginning with his cover for the inaugural 1933 issue of the magazine *Minotaure*, a richly textured assemblage centered on a delicate drawing of a muscular bull-headed man with a bovine tail. The project brought him closer to the artists and poets of Surrealism, who, since the inception of the movement a decade or so earlier, had been courting the increasingly celebrated artist. Yet while he was friendly with many of the group and often seemed to embrace Surrealism's fascination with the unconscious in his imagery of the period, he remained independent. Picasso's most overt link with the movement was in his writings, which are amply quoted. Unable to paint while his studios were closed during an inventory occasioned by his efforts to divorce Olga, he concentrated on free-associative, difficult-to-untangle poetry, enraging his friend Gertude Stein, who felt that words were her purview. Picasso continued to write poetry, on occasion, as well as a highly stylized play in his idiosyncratic French. He even, during the war years, in 1940, combined words and a drawing of an ox skull on a notebook page. Richardson quotes from the dense, tiny script surrounding the image: "ox tongue of the metal quaking in the crystal cup enveloping the winded head of the bouquet of flowers with so much tender love." With the same unquestioning approval that he accords Picasso's treatment of women, Richardson concludes that "the ambivalence of his writing—the love and fear, tenderness and cruelty, laughter and tears—entitles the artist to be recognized as a formidable surrealist poet."

The farthest-reaching events to have touched Picasso during the years covered by volume IV were, of course, the Spanish Civil War (1936–39) and the German occupation of Northern France beginning in 1940. Richardson gives a lucid account of the political complexities, beginning in 1933, that led to the horrific conflict between the Spanish Republicans and Franco's right-wing Nationalists, after the failure of a military coup by the ultraconservative right against the progressive Republican government. It's complicated.

Picasso was appointed the director of the Prado Museum by the Republicans in 1936, an essentially honorary position at a time when all energies were being directed to moving the collection to safety. Two years earlier, on his last trip to Spain, a prominent right-wing politician had dangled the possibility of a major exhibition in Madrid, a tempting idea that the Republicans had also promised earlier but never realized because of lack of funding. Picasso was deeply troubled by the rapidly escalating warfare in Spain—apart from anything else, his mother and sister were in Barcelona—as atrocities were being committed by both sides. In the face of the turmoil, in the fall of 1936, the Spanish Republic decided to focus international attention to its cause with a pavilion in the International Exposition of Arts and Technology in Modern Life, to be held in Paris the following spring. Josep Lluís Sert designed the building; Picasso, Joan Miró, and Julio González were recruited for murals and sculpture. (Alexander Calder, probably because of his technical abilities, was brought in to update a fountain of mercury.)

On April 26, 1937, the Nazis mercilessly bombed the historic Basque town of Guernica, in a province that had not entered the war, destroying the town and massacring over 1,500 of its citizens. The attack was organized, it was revealed by the historian Xabier Irujo, as a birthday present for Hitler. Until then, Picasso had not decided on a subject for his World's Fair commission. The catastrophe of Guernica galvanized the allegedly apolitical artist and provoked the enormous, ferocious, austere black-and-white painting that became a symbol of his name. Prints of the related angry, cartoon-like *Dream and Lie of Franco* were sold during the Expo to raise money for the Republican cause, while a subsequent tour of the vast painting was arranged to elicit support and funds. During its display in Paris, however, *Guernica* was controversial. The public and the officials preferred a social-realist, full-color commentary on the bombing of Madrid by a different artist. When Picasso offered *Guernica* to the Basque people, their president rejected it. A Basque artist, who felt the commission should have gone to a Basque, denounced *Guernica* as "one of the poorest things ever produced."

The year 1939 was a dramatic one for Picasso. In January his mother died, followed by the fall of Barcelona to the Nationalists and the imposition of Franco's Fascist regime. Paul Rosenberg Gallery, in Paris, showed thirty-three still lifes to great acclaim, Picasso appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine, and in November a four-decade retrospective opened at the Museum of Modern Art. That year, too, France declared war on Germany, and as the Germans grew closer, Picasso decamped with Dora Maar, Marie-Thérèse, and his entourage for the Atlantic seaside town of Royan, where he settled into work, traveling occasionally to Paris to make arrangements to protect his art and unsuccessfully seek French citizenship. He returned after several months to Paris. Richardson evokes the stress and uncertainty of life in occupied Paris. Although there were opportunities to leave, which many "artists in exile" accepted, Picasso, like Georges Braque and Henri Matisse, elected to stay in France. During the war years, he laid low, living and working under strenuous conditions, harassed by the German occupiers and under threat of extradition or kidnapping by the Spanish Fascists. Yet, Richardson observes, "Worldwide renown apparently saved him." So did a clever performance for the ignorant German soldiers sent to inventory his and Matisse's work. (The Nazis preferred Old Masters, but collected valuable "degenerate" art to trade for more acceptable works.) Picasso confused them into cataloguing only a fraction of his work and none of Matisse's and accepting his valuation of about $1,600 of today's money for the artists' storied oeuvres.

Volume IV ends with an epilogue. In 1943, Picasso's separation from Olga was legalized. His long, vexed relationship with Dora Maar ended. The young law student and aspiring painter Françoise Gilot entered his life. Surprisingly, Richardson is for once mildly critical of Picasso, observing that Gilot's "lack of tragic impulses, her youthfulness and strength, would not inspire the harrowing masterpieces her predecessor had done. Picasso's art tended to thrive on the dark side. He had destroyed Dora, beaten her to bits, and cut her up in paint." After the war Dora had a succession of breakdowns and became an ultra-devout Catholic. Volume IV ends by quoting her: "After Picasso, there is only God."

A Rickey renaissance

by Eric Gibson

Along with his contemporary Alexander Calder, George Rickey (1907–2002) is the artist most associated with motion in sculpture. Only of late has he not been much in the public eye. His nearly forty-foot-tall *Three Red Lines* (1966)—so many upright, painted needles swaying gently from side to side—that had stood like a beacon in front of the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden since its opening in 1974 has not been seen there since 2003. And while Rickey's work has been shown in galleries, the last retrospective was in 2007, and it bypassed the major institutions on both coasts—institutions, it should be said, that had at one time been avid supporters of his work.

So it is cause for celebration that a flurry of events now brings Rickey and his art once again front and center. In September the art historian and biographer Belinda Rathbone published *George Rickey: A Life in Balance*, the first biography of the sculptor.[1] Shortly before, an outdoor installation, "George Rickey: Monumental Sculpture on Park Avenue," went up featuring nine of the artist's stainless steel constructions on the median between Fifty-second and Fifty-sixth Streets.[2] At the same time, his gallery, Kasmin in Chelsea, installed three works—one comprising six individual sculptures—on the High Line directly above its gallery space, within which it is also showing seven smaller-scaled works.[3] As it happens, all this has taken place against the backdrop of MOMA's "Alexander Calder: Modern from the Start," a show of works drawn mainly from its permanent collection that has afforded the opportunity to compare the two artists even as we have reacquainted ourselves with Rickey's singular achievement.[4] He enlarged and extended Calder's innovation of the mobile and invented what I've long felt to be a perfect public art: intellectually rigorous yet warmly, even wittily, ingratiating; striking yet unobtrusive; at one with its surroundings even as it sets itself off from them.

Rickey was born in South Bend, Indiana, the third of six children and the only boy. When he was six his engineer father, who worked for the Singer Sewing Machine Company, was transferred to Scotland to run its factory just outside Glasgow. There George received a British education, eventually graduating from Oxford University in 1929. His father's plans for him to follow as an engineer were thwarted by his son's nascent interest in fine art, which led him to Paris that year and tutelage under André Lhote, Fernand Léger, and Amédée

1 *George Rickey: A Life in Balance*, by Belinda Rathbone; David R. Godine, 480 pages, $40.

2 "George Rickey: Monumental Sculpture on Park Avenue" opened on August 30 and remains on view through late November 2021.

3 "George Rickey in New York" opened at Kasmin, New York, on September 9 and remains on view through late November 2021.

4 "Alexander Calder: Modern from the Start" opened at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, on March 14, 2021, and remains on view through January 15, 2022.

Ozenfant. He was at this time a painter and, despite his exposure to modernism, remained a committed realist, maintaining this position well into his thirties.

By this time familiar with Calder, Rickey turned to sculpture in 1945, with rough-and-ready mobiles made from scavenged bits of wire and broken glass. He was sure he was on to something but worried that it was not as serious an avenue as had been his socially committed art. (He'd been a New Deal muralist during the Depression.) He also wondered if it was possible to be more than a Calder imitator. It took him nearly a decade to answer both questions in the affirmative. Calder's works are suspended from the ceiling; Rickey's are upright and mostly anchored to the ground. Technically speaking, Calder's works are relatively simple. He constructed them using a catenary system. Rickey's process was far more complex, involving hidden elements such as ball bearings, lead weights, gimbals, and rotors. As Rathbone writes in her book, "Experimenting with a variety of balancing acts, he was combining swings with pivots, rocking parts with fluttering parts, circles churning within circles, towers of pins upon pins." In terms of technique, Rickey's work stands midway between David Smith's welded constructions and Richard Serra's prop pieces, where the elements are held together by gravity alone.

Though both Rickey's and Calder's work is dependent for its actions on the pressure exerted by currents of air, Calder's movements are governed by chance; Rickey's are carefully calculated, calibrated, and governed by the laws of mechanics, the ultimate goal being to achieve a state of equilibrium and balance. No part moves more than it should in any direction, and no matter how far from the center of gravity it travels, it always makes its way back. In its cultivation of randomness and chance—as well as in some of its iconography—Calder's work is, in spirit, fundamentally Surrealist. This much was clear from MOMA's show, where one became aware of the imprint of his friend and early mentor Joan Miró as never before. By contrast, Rickey's art is fundamentally Constructivist in spirit. Its rationalist roots track right back to the Bauhaus and De Stijl, and one feels that he found a way to express in sculpture—in moving sculpture, no less—the harmony, balance, and distillation of nature one finds in a classic Mondrian painting. To separate himself thoroughly from Calder and the idea of mobiles, Rickey used the word "kinetic" to describe his sculptures.

Though most familiar as a public artist, Rickey started small and continued to work in modest scale throughout his life. One of the gems of the Kasmin show is *Crucifera—Pillar of Light* (1994), a glittering, eight-foot-tall pointillist work consisting of a column attached to a wall aflutter with dozens of tiny stainless steel squares on rods that spin in the breeze. His signature works are his "blade" sculptures—the Hirshhorn's *Three Red Lines* is one—in which two or more needle-like forms are mounted on a vertical support where they move in the breeze. (The works on the High Line are also blades.)

That the range of his invention was not limited to those typical blades is evident in the Park Avenue installation. (*Annular Eclipse*, made in 1998 of two large, rotating circles atop a pylon, has been on permanent view outside the News Corp building in Manhattan since 2017.) *Breaking Column II* (1989) is a tall, skinny sculpture of five superimposed rectangular boxes, the top three of which move independently off-axis, often it seems precariously (Rickey loved to challenge our expectations), before returning to the vertical. It is both anthropomorphic, suggesting a circus stilt walker and, in this context, a witty commentary on the skyscrapers that surround it. *Four L's Excentric II* (1987–90) exemplifies a recurring theme in Rickey's work, perhaps derived from his background as a painter, of playing off the idea of a two-dimensional plane and a three-dimensional sculpture. Seen face-on and at rest, it appears to be a flat rectangle formed by four L-shaped sheets of stainless steel. But in the breeze, however, everything changes. Each L is attached to its own rod and, as it angles away from the vertical, reveals itself to be a three-dimensional volume. Two other Park Avenue works partake of a similarly playful impulse. And in *Six Lines in a T II* (1979)

Rickey shows how his signature blades can be endowed with an entirely new expressive effect through the simple device of shifting them from the vertical to the horizontal. Six of them sway gently up and down, and again the associations are multiple: with the landscape, with the swells and eddies of a body of water, with birds seeking to take flight. Besides beauty, the unifying element to all these works is calm. Rickey calibrated the movements of his works so they would be slow. This may be his greatest gift. For while in their constant motion they echo the noise and bustle of their Park Avenue setting, in their pacing they are also an antidote to it, the perfect balm for our harried, frenzied age.

Rathbone has written a model artist's biography. She chronicles her subject's life, offering illuminating insights into his character, personality, and motivations, while not whitewashing his faults. She deftly interweaves life and art, showing how Rickey's real-world experiences shaped his evolving aesthetic. In her limning of his youthful formation, for example, the expression "the child is father of the man" has never been more appropriate. We see Rickey sitting with his clockmaker grandfather at his workbench, assembling Singer sewing machines during a summer job, and sailing with his family. With these outings, she writes, "George became intimate with the water and the wind and the movements of the boat—pitch, roll and yaw—that would inform his art in years to come." She discusses the work with authority and insight (although a section speculating on the influence of Rickey and David Smith on each other's work seems forced) and places both art and artist in the broadest possible aesthetic and historical contexts.

In writing about Rickey, Rathbone faced two challenges. First, he led a relatively uneventful life, at least by the tabloid standards we have come to expect from certain art-world figures. A man, as she puts it, "of rigorous self-discipline and constant preoccupation with his work," he knew what he wanted to do early and pursued it with no salacious detours. Yet while uneventful, his life was not unperturbed. His father died early, leaving him in charge of his family. Two sisters were deeply troubled, with one dying by suicide. And he was married twice, the second union being marred by two miscarriages and a difficult, contentious end.

The larger problem is that Rickey spent the first third of his professional life as a teacher, making work in his spare time. So his career didn't fully blossom until he was in his forties. This might have made for a few hundred tedious pages of curriculum discussions and faculty-lounge gossip—and through no fault of Rathbone's there are a few such longueurs—but some discussion of his classroom career is necessary, given that much of Rickey's teaching proved crucial to his formation as an artist. In the late 1940s, in part to broaden his horizons in his job at Muhlenberg College in Pennsylvania, he enrolled in Chicago's Institute of Design and signed up for its foundation course, which was based on the Bauhaus's *Vorkurs*. "The pedagogical goal was essentially to offer students an approach to problem solving rather than rote vocational skills," writes Rathbone; "The program offered him a new approach to teaching but just as important, a reassessment of his own direction as an artist." It also exposed him to advanced thinkers like the faculty member Buckminster Fuller and, as a visiting speaker, the sculptor Naum Gabo, whose concern with what he called "movement itself" in sculpture had a decisive impact on Rickey. Four years later, now at Indiana University in Bloomington, he reconnected with Smith, whom he had previously met and who was now joining the faculty. Smith taught him oxy-acetylene welding and converted him to the virtues of using stainless, rather than mild, steel. Though much more expensive, it was lighter and stronger and, when burnished, reflected light off its surfaces. This play of light is one of the most distinctive aspects of the Park Avenue installation and of Rickey's work as a whole.

One notable feature of this book, and one for which Rathbone deserves much credit, is the attention she gives to the role played by Rickey's wife, Edith, in his career. She func-

tioned as his executive secretary and business manager, chairing morning strategy meetings every day and typing his correspondence. So indispensable was she that Rickey began paying her a salary. As Rathbone writes:

> Long before the advent of interactive digitized spreadsheets, which would have served her well, she created a work plan on paper of all the sculptures George expected to produce over the next year to fulfill his obligations to galleries, private collectors, museums, and public spaces. She calculated the time it took to pack and assemble sculptures, included contingencies such as if a work should sell, and reserved about eight weeks of his time under a special category called "new experimental work" that she knew he would count on. . . . Far beyond the duties of wife and mother, Edie was proving herself to be a *secrétaire extraordinaire* with a unique style and inside knowledge of every facet of her husband's operation.

In addition, her ebullient personality—so different from Rickey's more rational, sober nature—proved indispensable when it came to wooing collectors and other influential individuals. Sadly, a lifelong sense of insecurity got the better of her late in life, and she spiraled into a mental and physical decline, predeceasing Rickey by seven years. Artists' wives are often off-screen presences in the biographies of their spouses. Edith Rickey was anything but, and, thanks to Rathbone, she gets her due.

There is one serious flaw to this book and it is not of the author's making: It is woefully—indeed shamefully—short of reproductions of Rickey's work. Of the two dozen photographs in the book, only a quarter are of Rickey's sculpture. For a publisher of art and photography books of Godine's stature to have scanted images here is a grave disservice to author, subject, and reader. That aside, Rathbone has written a very important book, one remarkably like the creations of her subject, where all connections are made clearly and cleanly and the whole structure is well-balanced and completely transparent.

Exhibition note

"Suzanne Valadon:
Model, Painter, Rebel"
The Barnes Foundation, Philadelphia.
September 26, 2021–January 9, 2022

The woman christened Marie-Clémentine Valadon (1865–1938) earned a number of monikers, both during her lifetime and subsequent to it. History remembers her as Suzanne—a reference to the biblical story of Susannah and the Elders made by her sometimes lover Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec: Valadon, you see, began her career modeling for old men like Auguste Renoir and Pierre Puvis de Chavannes. Edgar Degas, a lifelong friend of Valadon and collector of her art, gave her the nickname "terrible Maria." The historian Catherine Hewitt titled her 2017 biography of Valadon *Renoir's Dancer*, based on Valadon's having posed for Renoir's signature canvas, *Dance at Bougival* (1883). The journalist June Rose referred to the artist as "The Mistress of Montmartre" in recognition of Valadon's freewheeling lifestyle. The Barnes Foundation, which has mounted the first U.S. retrospective devoted to Valadon, is heralding her as a model and painter, but also as a rebel.

"Model, Painter, Rebel" includes close to sixty works, the majority of them oil on canvas, along with a handful of drawings and prints. The pieces we encounter upon entering the exhibition aren't by Valadon, but, rather, feature her as subject. Paintings by Toulouse-Lautrec, Santiago Rusiñol, Jean Eugène Clary, and Gustav Wertheimer—whose *Kiss of the Siren* (1882) starts things off with impressive bluster—do much to establish Valadon as an integral presence in the Parisian art scene. Her biographical details are rich and varied and, given Valadon's tendency for the fanciful, best taken with a degree of skepticism. Her formal education was minimal: she started working at the age of eleven to support her mother and sister. She joined the circus as an acrobat only to be sidelined by an injury. Around 1885, Valadon found employment as an artist's model and, with it, a measure of financial stability. She wasn't a passive presence in the studio. Valadon brought energy and enthusiasm to her poses;

she also kept an eye on the what and how of art-making. Persistence and ambition led Valadon to become an artist of some notoriety and considerable success. Degas touted the self-taught painter as "one of us." Given the source, that's no small praise.

The showpiece of "Model, Artist, Rebel" is *The Blue Room* (1923), a portrait of a clothed, reclining woman that serves as a tribute, of sorts, to Manet's *Olympia* (1863). Like Manet's consort, Valadon's model comes across as blunt and aggressive, though less because of a one-on-one confrontation—the woman in *The Blue Room* looks away from the viewer, lost in a moment's distraction—than in material physicality and coloristic punch. Clad in green-striped pajama bottoms and a pink halter top, the woman gives off a prole vibe, what with a cigarette cocked in her mouth and hands whose muscularity evinces hard labor. Valadon preferred models who were not Apollonian ideals. No sleek odalisque is our heroine, especially given the steadfastness with which Valadon's brush pays heed to convex forms and optical weight. Couched within a deep-blue field of floral patterning and set against a backdrop of earth-toned hash marks, *The Blue Room* nods to Matisse and Gauguin, and, in some regards, is seriously *au courant*. You want body positivity and gender fluidity? Well, here you go. The reason we can entertain such notions is that Valadon the painter is in bravura form here. Would we be willing to do so were that not the case?

As a marketable term, "rebel" is likely to generate some buzz and contains more than a modicum of truth—particularly given Valadon's role in the demimonde and, eventually, the avant-garde. Certainly, it's preferable to "racist"—which is a suggestion that figures in the literature attending "Model, Painter, Rebel." The scholars participating in the catalogue roundtable do make a point of stating that "we cannot blanketly assume that Valadon was a racist." Which doesn't prevent them from "blanketly" assuming that Valadon was deeply suspect in terms of racial matters. The impetus for the discussion is *Black Venus* (1919), a close-to-life-size portrait of a nude woman of African descent. The model's name has been lost to history, but Valadon worked with her on a number of occasions: at the Barnes, *Seated Woman Holding an Apple* (1919), another depiction of the same model, is displayed near *Black Venus*. Reading through the essays and wall texts accompanying the show, I became certain that Valadon's sin was not racism—an accusation for which there is no hard evidence—but that she didn't have a crystal ball into the exacting standards established here in the twenty-first century. Albert C. Barnes, the museum's founder, is similarly taken to task for a lack of feminist bona fides in not collecting Valadon's paintings—concentrating, as he did, on the work of her son, Maurice Utrillo. What's largely absent from all of this pontificating is a discussion of whether Valadon was any good as an artist.

The works comprising the remainder of the show have difficulty matching the authority of *The Blue Room* or, for that matter, *Black Venus*. Though Valadon gleaned important lessons from mentors and peers, her paintings are, on the whole, chock-a-block in composition and halting in their navigation of pictorial space. Even with an enduring dedication to figuration, Valadon never fully mastered the human form. Like Gauguin and Van Gogh, she was a ham-handed draftsman with a gift for color, facture, and brio. Unlike her friend Amedeo Modigliani, Valadon didn't synthesize stylistic tics within cohesive compositional structures. There are, to be sure, arresting images on view—my vote goes to the dour *Marie Coca and her Daughter Gilberte* (1913) as best in show, with the resplendent *Nude Sitting on a Sofa* (1916) a close second. What a contemporary audience will make of Valadon's efforts remains to be seen. One gallerygoer, upon exiting "Model, Painter, Rebel" on the afternoon I visited the Barnes, remarked to a friend: "Now let's go to the permanent collection and see some real painters." This remark seems a mite harsh for an exhibition that does a solid job of introducing us to a singular character and her vital relationship to early modernism. For those interested in the quiddities of that heady era, a trip to Philadelphia should be in the cards. And, yes, there is the permanent collection.

—*Mario Naves*

Gallery chronicle
by James Panero

The fall openings are the temperature check of the New York gallery scene. Despite the ridiculous mandate that arts venues must now demand "vax cards and IDs" at the door—an ordinance that I was happy to see only sporadically enforced—the showing of exhibitions in September and October was alive and well. Just no undocumented arts lovers here, please.

Lois Dodd is one of those artists whose paintings I always look forward to seeing. Dodd finds her subject matter in her domestic surroundings, from her apartment in New York's East Village to her cottage in Cushing, Maine. With thirty of her paintings ranging from the 1960s through today, an exhibition last month at Alexandre Gallery presented a survey of the nonagenarian's work in the gallery's new Lower East Side location.[1]

From clothes drying on the line to sun-dappled doorways, Dodd looks to the ease of home. But there can be something uneasy in the spare compositions that result. Much of art is about conveying a personal vision, of course, but Dodd's reveals a strange intimacy. Maybe it was the shift to the gallery's rougher, new downtown venue, but through their close-cropped glimpses and glances, her paintings seemed oddly private, even unsettling.

Take the window-on-window view of *Back of Men's Hotel (from My Window)*, an opening painting in the exhibition and a recent one from 2016, with its dusky, abstract anonymity. Or *My Shadow Painting* (2008), another introductory work, of the artist's silhouette in the grass. While Dodd's paintings at first seem like still lifes and landscapes, addressing what is seen, they ultimately reveal themselves to be self-portraits, with a vision that captures the seer.

Doors and windows are recurring motifs. These squares and rectangles add visual order and organizational angles to her compositions. They also suggest the division between interior and exterior. In the darkened doorways and obscured windows of *Shed Window* (2014) and *Door, Window, Ruin* (1986), the looming thresholds obstruct rather than allow our passage. Where light enters in, such as in *Sunlight on Floor + Door* (2013), *Sun in Hallway* (1978), and the doorway of *Chicken House* (1971), the surrounding shade can have an even greater presence. The arcing shadows of *Two Red Drapes and Part of White Sheet* (1981) punctuate the angular forms of clothes on the line. Even in an earlier painting such as *Six Cows at Lincolnville* (1961), the long shadows of the nearby cattle and the distant trees can seem as present in paint as the figures and landscape.

The seasons are similarly observed. In the exhibition, a wall of trees depicting the shifting seasons contrasted the long light of fall with the flat light of winter. Dodd paints the poetry of the everyday through a remarkable economy of form. Her frugal sense for composition is often at its best in winter. In *Neighbor's House in Snow* (1979), a white house and landscape dissolve into the white canvas. Meanwhile

1 "Lois Dodd" was on view at Alexandre Gallery, New York, from September 9 through October 23, 2021.

Steamed Window (1980), the highlight of the show and a remarkable display of division and form, reveals both the cold exterior and the warmth within.

Whether on the coast of Maine or the shores of New York City, John Marin (1870–1953) was at his best in water—depicting port life, which he often rendered in watercolor. Last month at Menconi + Schoelkopf Fine Art, "Marin in the White Mountains" brought together more than a dozen sketches and watercolors from the artist's lesser-known drawing trips up into the mountains of New Hampshire, which he observed while traveling by car between his two homes.[2] Gathered from the artist family's collection and estate, the works here replaced the skyscrapers of New York harbor and the seascapes of Maine that we usually associate with Marin with those mountains that similarly influenced the Hudson River School painters more than a generation before him.

Filtered through his modernist sensibility, Marin's watercolors signal their living complexities through wet brushstrokes that seem awash in dew. A series of three plein-air sketches in colored pencil from the 1920s and 1930s that introduced the exhibition also revealed the sense for immediacy that he carried into his watercolors and oils. Like Cézanne, Marin sought to paint the way he sketched, rather than sketch the way he painted, letting observation and action guide his forms.

A main room of eight watercolors from the mid-1920s showed how wide-ranging and various these observations and actions could be. The variety of his compositions, while all depicting similar mountains in landscape, demonstrated how Marin did not fall back onto formal idioms, painting the same thing the same way. Instead he let himself stay open and exposed, allowing observation, both of landscape color and of watercolor, to guide his way. At times the results filled the paper, such as in *Mt. Chocorua and a-Couple-a-Neighbors* (1926). Other watercolors he left more open and spare, for example *White Mountain Country, Autumn No. 44, Franconia Range, The Mountain No. 1,* (1927), still in Marin's original red-painted frame, and the wonderfully aqueous *White Mountains* (*ca*. 1924). Just beyond the official exhibition, hanging in the gallery's office, a selection of three oils ranging from 1921 to 1950 showed how Marin even carried these compositional lessons to canvas. Marin could paint his landscapes with as much openness as those small introductory sketches. Like a writer learning on the page, Marin let his art teach him as he remained open to the many possibilities of composition.

John Ferren (1905–70) was one of the original Americans in Paris. "He is the only American painter foreign painters in Paris consider as a painter and whose paintings interest them," Gertrude Stein gnomically observed. That interest must have gone both ways. Even as he became a member of "The Club" of mid-century New York artists and a neighbor of Willem de Kooning on Long Island, Ferren retained a Continental sense for modernism. "From Paris to Springs," a survey of Ferren's work now at Findlay Galleries, follows his development from the late 1920s through the early 1960s.[3]

Beginning with his Paris-based compositions, Ferren's paintings were well-studied, well-made, and well-mannered. An early selection of small work reveals his range but also a certain lack of voice. His abstractions echoed the ferment of interwar Paris even as Paris echoed him. These allegiances set up a tension as he returned stateside and his School-of-Paris sensibility ran up against the emerging artists of the New York School. "John, you have betrayed us," Elaine de Kooning supposedly said to him as Ferren turned to vase-like forms in the 1950s to structure his expressionistic brushwork.

But in fact, Surrealist shapes had always undergirded his abstractions. "Color demands control," he said, "I was not one of the red-

2 "Marin in the White Mountains" was on view at Menconi + Schoelkopf, New York, from September 13 through October 15, 2021.

3 "John Ferren: From Paris to Springs" opened at Findlay Galleries, New York, on October 4 and remains on view through November 12, 2021.

hot brush throwers." As he turned to larger canvases with a looser, all-over abstraction in the 1960s, Ferren retained his architecture, using squares of color to anchor his brushwork. Through this framed expression, Ferren's impressive later work prefigures the more controlled post-minimal art of the decades after his death.

"The Sound of Color" was an appropriate title for an exhibition of Frederick J. Brown's paintings.[4] Curated by Lowery Stokes Sims and on view last month at Berry Campbell, the show collected a large selection of Brown's abstractions from the late 1960s and early 1970s, around the time the young artist first moved from his native Chicago to New York's SoHo. The foment of this artist enclave included not only painters but also performers, writers, and musicians. Growing up in a musical milieu that included Anthony Braxton and Leroy Jenkins, Brown (1945–2012) followed the music to New York and settled around Ornette Coleman's loft, where the free-jazz musician performed, lived, and recorded. Now at the center of both experimental music and painting, Brown gravitated to abstraction. He studied the color theory of the nineteenth-century French chemist Michel Eugène Chevreul, whose *Laws of Simultaneous Color Contrast* had influenced the Pointillists. At the same time, he brought to canvas his experiences observing an uncle who was an auto-body repairman and a mother who was a baker. "So I grew up with the tactility and love of paint and color," he said. "In my mother's case I was actually able to eat it."

These confluences resulted in bold abstractions of color and variety. Brown spread, splattered, and soaked his compositions. Unusual media such as glitter might appear in the corner, as in one untitled canvas from 1969. Or he might carve a wavy white line into his colorful swirls, as in another numinous canvas from 1977. *In the Beginning* (1971), the largest painting in the show, is a powerhouse of amplified visual energy.

Brown was an even more independent artist than this survey suggested. One abstraction from 1974, *Second Time on the Wall*, introduces wild chalkboard-like doodles and calculations onto a soaked abstract background. Brown's work from later in the decade thickened with such rebus-like components. In the 1980s, he turned to figuration, painting a suite of portraits of jazz musicians and his mentor Willem de Kooning, for which he is best known. This focused survey, the first at the gallery of the artist's estate, calls out for further examinations of this varied body of work.

Amy Lincoln can be a master of gradation. Her paintings are well-wrought studies in stepped color and tone. At Sperone Westwater, in her first exhibition at the Bowery gallery, she made the most of her gradations through uncanny acrylic compositions that took deliberate steps across the spectrum.[5]

Moving beyond the vegetative still lifes of earlier work, Lincoln conjures up tableaux of sun and waves, moon and stars. The ordered arrangements and moonbeam kitsch have a naive aura, with a fun, knowing new-ageness that can be haunting and strange. Sometimes these paintings seemed overly repetitive and flat, trapped in some screensaver afterglow. The best were the ones where Lincoln's acute sense for shade and depth allowed her compositions to live and breathe. The claw-like waves of *Storm Clouds with Lightning* (2021), reaching up to a jagged bolt and raining cumulus, were a tour-de-force, suggesting a narrative power both within and beyond the color wheel.

4 "Frederick J. Brown: The Sound of Color" was on view at Berry Campbell, New York, from September 9 through October 9, 2021.

5 "Amy Lincoln" was on view at Sperone Westwater, New York, from September 9 through October 30, 2021.

Music

New York chronicle

by Jay Nordlinger

In September—on the day itself—the Metropolitan Opera gave a performance of Verdi's *Messa da Requiem* to mark the twentieth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks. The Met has performed the Requiem many times, especially on mournful occasions. (Obviously?) The very first Met performance was in 1901, after the death of the composer.

Conducting that performance was Luigi Mancinelli, whose name we would know today if he had lived into the age of recordings (or longer into it). The four vocal soloists included two legends-to-be: Lillian Nordica and Ernestine Schumann-Heink. The latter was a mezzo-soprano, born in the Austrian Empire, later a U.S. citizen. Nordica was a soprano from Maine, the "Yankee Diva"—the first international opera star of American nationality. She was born Lillian Allen Norton. That was a little white-bread, for a big career—so "Nordica" it was.

I had the pleasure of knowing Nordica's great-great-nephew, Clive Babkirk, a woodworker and furniture-maker. His mother's name was Ellen Nordica Norton. Her great-aunt, the singer, was present at her birth.

The Met again performed the Verdi Requiem in March 1964, about four months after the assassination. This performance was in memory of President Kennedy. Georg Solti was on the podium, with a stellar quartet: Leontyne Price, Rosalind Elias, Carlo Bergonzi, and Cesare Siepi. The Requiem was not alone on the program: Solti also led a scene from Wagner's *Parsifal* (Act III, Scene 2). In 1982, the Met performed the Requiem in memory of Francis Robinson, a longtime official of the company—"Mr. Metropolitan," he was called. Price again was the soprano, and this time the conductor was James Levine, six years into his tenure as the Met's music director.

Luciano Pavarotti died in 2007. The next year, the Met honored him with a Verdi Requiem. Among the soloists was Marcello Giordani. "As the tenor," I wrote in my review, "he occupied a tricky position: the Pavarotti position. One can imagine that it was both an honor for him to be in the quartet and a bit of a burden."

Sometimes, the Met performs the Requiem because the company is on tour—and, with a requiem, you don't have to go to the trouble of staging an opera, and you can still show off your conductor, your orchestra, your chorus, and four of your biggest stars. Does the Met ever perform the Requiem at home, just because? Not to honor anyone, but just to sing and play the Requiem?

In 2017, the Met was supposed to stage *La forza del destino* (the Verdi opera). But the production fell through, and the Met substituted a run of Verdi Requiems. Just before the first performance, Dmitri Hvorostovsky, the great Russian baritone, died. So the Met dedicated the Requiems to his memory.

One of the greatest performances I have ever heard—of any work, in all my life—was of the Verdi Requiem by Met forces. This was in Carnegie Hall, in April 2001. Levine was on the podium. The quartet was Renée

Fleming, Olga Borodina, Giordani, and René Pape. When it was all over, something strange happened. Most of the audience filed out—but many in the audience remained, just sort of milling around, not saying much. They were reluctant to leave. I think they wanted to stay in the atmosphere of that remarkable Requiem—that peak musical experience—for as long as they could.

When the Met performed the Requiem on 9/11/21, the concert was broadcast on PBS, in the *Great Performances* series. (Are all of these performances "great"? That may be a hope, more than a promise.) Introducing the evening for PBS was Misty Copeland, the ballerina, a principal with American Ballet Theatre. She did her hosting duties at Ground Zero. Copeland said that the concert would be "dedicated to the innocent lives lost on 9/11, twenty years ago to this day; to the valiant first-responders, many of whom died trying to save them; and to all the families who still bear the weight of that unspeakable tragedy."

I don't wish to quibble with Misty Copeland, or the scriptwriters, but I will record a memory: many of us, at the time, balked at the word "tragedy," saying that this was a crime, an atrocity, an act of war.

Copeland further said that the Met would be "offering commemoration and solace with a live performance of classical music's most beautiful and stirring homage to those we've lost: Verdi's Requiem." Is that characterization true? It is certainly arguable. In the field of requiems, you also have the Mozart, the Brahms, and the Fauré. In any event, Verdi's Requiem is doubtless one of that composer's greatest works—an oratorio suffused with the operatic—and one of the greatest works in all of music. Misty Copeland was 100 percent right when she said that "Verdi summoned all of his genius in creating the work you are about to hear."

She said something else—something that was surprising and touching, at least to me: "We also pray for what someday might be a better world."

The conductor for the evening was the Met's music director, Yannick Nézet-Séguin. When he and the four soloists entered, the crowd erupted in applause. It was a huge, roaring ovation—a standing one, too. It went on and on. The night's performance was the first in the Metropolitan Opera House since the onset of the pandemic. The applause, pent up, poured forth.

For a second, I was afraid that Nézet-Séguin was going to talk. But he turned to the orchestra and chorus and got to work. I noted something in 2008, when Levine & Co. performed the Verdi Requiem in memory of Pavarotti. "There was no announcement beforehand, no speech. Everyone knew what we were there for, and no talking was necessary." The music does all the talking necessary.

There is more than one way to conduct the Verdi Requiem. Some readings lean toward the Classical, the rigorous, the Beethoven-like; some readings lean toward the Romantic, or more relaxed. George Szell would be an excellent example of the first school—so would one of his apprentices, James Levine. As for the second, I once heard Sir Colin Davis give a performance that was almost Berliozian.

Please note, I have spoken in the most general terms. Any Verdi Requiem worth its salt will combine both discipline and, to a degree, liberality.

Yannick Nézet-Séguin conducted a beautiful Requiem. In my estimation, it was often too relaxed, needing more of a pulse, more of a spine. There were little pauses and other interpretive choices that would not have been my own. But was it Verdi? That is, was this reading within Verdian parameters? It was.

In a sense, the chorus is the most important "soloist" in the Requiem, and the Met's, prepared by Donald Palumbo, was equal to the challenge. The Met's orchestra, too, was commendable. There were smudges and glitches here and there, but this is part of the glory of live (as distinct from studio, and doctored). I might say, too, that this was a chance to *see* the Met orchestra. In the house, the orchestra is customarily in the pit, while on this night it was on the stage.

As there is more than one way to conduct the Verdi Requiem, there is more than one way to sing it, if you're a soloist. You have classic Verdians, of course—powerful, rugged singers.

You also have those of a more lyrical bent. For many of us, Elisabeth Schwarzkopf handled the soprano part superbly—untraditionally but superbly. The main point is, singers ought to use what they have, not trying to be other than as they are.

Matthew Polenzani was the tenor soloist at the Met. He is a beautiful singer, a lyrical singer—yet with enough heft for, say, the Ingemisco (a section of the Requiem, almost a tenor aria). In the Hostias, some tenors fake a *piano*—but Polenzani is capable of a genuine one, an honest one. This was an outstanding moment of the performance at large. The bass part was taken by Eric Owens, a bass-baritone, from whom one might have wanted more sound. Yet he made use of what he had, and he was effective in doing so. Sometimes his singing was rough around the edges—but he always had a gravity that communicated the music.

The mezzo-soprano—another American, in this all-American quartet—was Michelle DeYoung. She sang her music incisively and dramatically. She was holding nothing back, as why should one? From the soprano—especially in the closing section, the Libera me—you want lyricism and power, or at least an ability to cut: a knife-like power. You want high notes that float, and other notes that scald, or importune. Ailyn Pérez delivered.

Later in September, the Met opened its 2021–22 opera season. Again, the audience exploded in applause at the beginning. This happened when the concertmaster (I gather) appeared on the podium, to tune. It took a long, long time for the tuning to begin, as the audience wanted to release its applause. Then Yannick Nézet-Séguin appeared on the podium, to lead the orchestra in the national anthem, as the audience sang.

Both the Met and the New York Philharmonic begin their seasons with the national anthem. As I have long observed, the way a maestro conducts the anthem tells you something essential about the maestro himself. In the anthem, Levine was always straightforward, brisk, and virile. Lorin Maazel was rather freer, and spontaneous. Under Nézet-Séguin, the orchestra was both light-sounding and energetic.

By the way, when the anthem got to the word "free"—at the end of the phrase "o'er the land of the free"—more than a few in the audience went up to the high B flat. Obviously, there were singers among us.

I will quote Met publicity: "Opening Night of the 2021–22 season will be a historic occasion—the Met's first performance of an opera by a Black composer." That opera was *Fire Shut Up in My Bones*, by Terence Blanchard. It premiered in St. Louis two years ago. The opera is based on a memoir—also called *Fire Shut Up in My Bones*—by Charles M. Blow, best known as a *New York Times* columnist. The title comes from the Bible—Jeremiah 20:9, which, in the King James Version, reads, "his word was in mine heart as a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I was weary with forbearing, and I could not stay."

Terence Blanchard is a New Orleanian, born in 1962. True to his city, he is a jazzman. Blanchard grew up with, among others, the Marsalis brothers. He is a trumpeter, who started his career with the Lionel Hampton Orchestra. He has composed many film scores, especially for the director Spike Lee. *Fire Shut Up in My Bones* is his second opera.

His works, says Met publicity, "express his roots in jazz but defy further categorization." I can report that this is true of *Fire Shut Up in My Bones*. The score has standard American neo-Romanticism, found in many contemporary operas. It also has jazz, blues, gospel, pop, funk, and more. The score is earnest and competent. Does it tickle your fancy, engage your interest, touch your heart, stick to your ribs? That depends on *you*, of course. I found the second half of the opera—roughly Acts II and III—more engaging than the first, musically.

In any case, Yannick Nézet-Séguin was utterly committed to the work, doing it proud.

The story is about Charles Blow's boyhood and young adulthood in small-town Louisiana. He is an outsider, picked on, hungry for love, confused. At the age of seven, he is sexually assaulted by an older cousin. This haunts and consumes him, until he must work it out, come what may. The story is very touching.

Question: is it a black story? It is in a black-American setting, of course. But the story is a human one, and the protagonist could be anyone, in whatever setting. The suffering will be familiar to many, no doubt. It must have taken courage for Blow to write his book.

Kasi Lemmons fashioned the libretto. She is a film director and an actress, in addition to being a writer. The libretto is in the vernacular—natural and, to my mind, refreshing. This is an American tongue, right down to "mothafucka" and "heffa" (i.e., heifer). None of the profanity is gratuitous; it is simply right, and you could even say faithful.

The opera needs two Charles Blows—the boy Charles (called "Char'es-Baby") and the older one (up to the college years). The younger one was portrayed, touchingly and winningly, by Walter Russell III. The older one was portrayed by the baritone Will Liverman. He too was touching and winning. He has a beautiful voice. I wanted to pull it forward, so it could be heard better. The soprano Angel Blue played a trio of roles, supplying her lush, attractive sound. Another soprano, Latonia Moore, was Charles's mother, Billie. I have been praising this singer since she appeared in Weill Recital Hall, back in 2007. She has voice, technique, musical understanding—and that intangible, heart.

It is the Met's job—or one of them—to present the greatest singers of the age—whatever age it is—in their best roles. Chaliapin as Boris, or Mefistofele. Callas as Norma, or Lucia. Pavarotti as Rodolfo, or Tonio (of the nine-high-C's aria). Pape as Sarastro, or King Mark—or Boris.

On the night after Opening Night, René Pape, the German bass, sang Boris, which is to say, the title role of Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov*. It is arguably the greatest bass opera. (How often do tenors have pride of place? Not to mention sopranos and mezzo-sopranos. Even baritones!) *Boris Godunov* was much tinkered with—much revised—by the composer himself and by those trying to help him. The Met, for the first time, performed the composer's original version, from 1869: seven scenes. It is splendid. The Met performed the opera without intermission, making it, at two hours and twenty minutes, a long sit, but also providing for musical and dramatic continuity. Flow, if you like.

The singers, starting with Boris, are highly important, but no one involved in the opera is more important than the conductor, and Sebastian Weigle, a German, was magnificent in his role. Exemplary. The opera had its grandeur and its intimacy, both. The orchestra told the story—Pushkin's tragic historical tale—as much as the singers did. Weigle kept the opera moving along, with no sense of rushing. He discovered the motor—the internal motor—of the opera. There was no bombast whatsoever. I detected no imposition of personality, just the opera itself.

And the Met's orchestra was beautifully responsive. The low woodwinds ought to be singled out for praise.

Above, I said that, in a way, the chorus is the most important "soloist" in Verdi's Requiem. So too, the chorus is the most important "character" in *Boris Godunov*. *Boris* is one of the most choral operas in the repertoire. One could see—could hear—the importance of the Met chorus to the company's operation—and its success—as a whole.

Does René Pape still got it? He does. One had to make no allowances for age. If the voice is less than it was, it is negligibly less. And Pape communicated pathos with no overacting.

As *Boris Godunov* is possibly the most choral opera, it is possibly the most male opera: there is a lot of testosterone upon the stage. The Met's cast did not really have a weak link. Ain Anger, an Estonian bass, scored a triumph as Pimen. He has a voice of glowing beauty, putting me in mind of the veteran Englishman Robert Lloyd, somewhat. There is a nurse, or nanny, in this opera: she was played by Eve Gigliotti, an American mezzo. (Any relation to the Philadelphia Orchestra Gigliottis?) She has a huge, lush instrument, almost Blythe-esque.

This was a beautiful *Boris*. It was almost an oratorio, or an oratorio with operatic elements, like the Verdi Requiem. Alternatively, it was like an extended prayer. I had a funny thought after that two-hour-and-twenty-minute sit: I wanted to hear it again.

The media

Deliberate falsehoods

by James Bowman

Remember way, way back, five or six months ago, when you couldn't read a news story about Donald Trump's challenge to last year's election results without its being qualified, usually in the very headline, as "false" or "unfounded"? Soon the claim of electoral fraud became known in media shorthand as Mr. Trump's "Big Lie"—presumably to distinguish it from the 30,572 lesser lies supposedly told during his four years in office, according to the comically misnamed *Washington Post* "fact-checkers"—with no further description necessary. I always thought this a poor, self-discrediting strategy by the Trump-loathing media. To anyone not already as Trump-hostile as *The Washington Post*, the "Big Lie" *topos* must have sounded like protesting too much. If we had to be told every time that any questioning of the election results was a lie, maybe that was because there were good reasons, never mentioned by the reporters, for believing that it was *not* a lie.

Moreover, as with Jim Rutenberg's notorious announcement in August 2016 of *The New York Times*'s open hostility to the Trump campaign and candidacy—which obviously carried over to his presidency—the value of reporting on the "Big Lie," ostensibly as information, had to be discounted by readers' knowledge of its tainted source, which had already advertised itself as being hostile and therefore unfair to the alleged liar. Well, maybe it was a lie, but we know from long experience of the dubious "lies" catalogued by the fact-checkers that the *Post* would call it a lie whether it was or it wasn't. The paper, like so much of the media, is simply telling its by now exclusively Trump-hating readers what they want to hear. The readers themselves must know that as well as anybody, but they have no more interest in persuading any rational doubters of the media consensus to their own view than the *Post* does itself.

All this is old news, of course, but we are learning during the first months of the Biden presidency how the media's deliberate trashing of their own credibility also works in reverse. The benefit of the doubt, which was never extended to Mr. Trump, is so automatically given to his successor that he reaps the benefit even when, to sane and rational people anyway, there is no doubt—no doubt that he has, to put it with Swiftian politeness, *said the Thing which was not*. In this space last month ("No regrets," October 2021) I mentioned President Biden's pretense that the American withdrawal from Afghanistan had gone more or less according to plan and that the chaos surrounding it was inevitable—there was nothing he or his generals could have done about it. He said he had "no regrets." After that article went to press, the President put the capper on what was either an obvious falsehood or a sign of insanity by making the claim that the just-concluded evacuation had been "an extraordinary success."

Well, you see, the media told us there was a context for that remark. Not, of course, the context of twenty years of war and sacrifice, nor the context of the thousands of Afghan

lives now placed in jeopardy because of their belief in America, nor the $80 billion or so of military equipment left behind by us that will now benefit the Taliban and their terrorist allies. It certainly wasn't the context of America's standing in the world and its reputation as a reliable ally. No, in the narrowly defined Bidenian context, the glass, however empty it may appear to others, is always more than half full. The only things that counted to him, or to that considerable portion of the media which lives to do his bidding, were that the war was over (for us, obviously, though not for the Afghans) and that more than 120,000 people were airlifted out of Afghanistan before the deadline of August 31. However many were left behind need not concern us.

Remember back in January 2016, when the candidate Trump said that his supporters were so loyal that "I could stand in the middle of Fifth Avenue and shoot somebody and I wouldn't lose any voters, okay? It's, like, incredible"? Turns out that even such hypothetical loyalty as that was no more (or less) "incredible" than the media's actual loyalty to Sleepy Joe Biden. Emboldened, perhaps, by the comparative lack of reaction to his claims of "extraordinary success" in Afghanistan, Mr. Biden appealed to congressional waverers over the passage of his bill of $3.5 trillion in additional by saying that it would really cost nothing. In the words of *The Washington Post*'s headline, "Biden defends his social agenda bill, saying the cost will be zero."

Can we get a fact-check on that, please? No qualifier of the "falsely" or "unfounded" variety made it into *that* headline. There's only room for one "Big Lie" in the *Post*'s telling, and we know who was responsible, must be responsible, for that. Actually, the *Post* "fact-checker" Glenn Kessler and his merry band of Pinocchio-mongers took a few days to get around to it, but when they did, they didn't *quite* give Joe a pass for his "zero cost" $3.5 trillion spending bill—which, according to *The Wall Street Journal*, will actually cost much more than that. After a tortuous "analysis" of budget-speak, the *Post* fact-checkers concluded that Mr. Biden's obvious absurdity was only worth two (out of four) Pinocchios on the grounds that what he was *really* saying was that the infrastructure bills would be revenue-neutral, not that they would cost nothing—because projected tax-revenue increases, also in the bill, were said to cover the cost. Never mind that such projections are themselves invariably false. Given this highly restricted context, what to ordinary English speakers couldn't have been anything but a lie was no more than half a lie in the *Post*'s view.

Gerard Baker, also writing in *The Wall Street Journal*, sees in this and similar absurdities what he calls "Joe Biden's Economic Fantasy World." I would be the last person to deny that Mr. Biden and most of his party have long inhabited such a world, but that undoubted fact could not, by itself, have brought them almost to the point of passing such ruinous legislation and imposing its far-from-zero cost on every man, woman, and child in the country. For that, the fantasists and deluded ones must have had some means of imposing their delusions on quite a number of people, all of whom cannot themselves be so deluded. How did they do this? Well, it helps a lot to have the media on your side, thundering away about the Big Lie of your opponent while excusing (or half-excusing) any little fibs you may be guilty of yourself. But that only pushes the question back a degree or two. What is it that keeps the media and the not-quite-so-deluded Democrats walking in lockstep with the deluded ones?

I cast my mind back not to 2020, nor even to 2016, but to the election of 2012 when, as you may remember, then–Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid said in an interview with *The Huffington Post* that some anonymous investor with Bain Capital had told him that Mitt Romney, then the Republican candidate running against Barack Obama, "didn't pay any taxes for ten years." He was quick to disclaim the insinuation as his own, adding: "Now, do I know that that's true? Well, I'm not certain. But obviously he can't release those tax returns. How would it look?" Later, even on the Senate floor, he repeated the charge in his own voice, saying that he had heard it from an "extremely credible source."

Now here's the interesting part. At the time, the fact-checkers were all over Mr. Reid. Louis Jacobson for Politifact wrote that "Reid has made an extreme claim with nothing solid to back it up. Pants on Fire!" Mr. Kessler himself didn't hesitate to give the full "4 Pinocchios for Harry Reid's claim about Mitt Romney's taxes." Well, actually he did hesitate—at least long enough to check with several "tax experts" who claimed to think that, although it was not probable, it was just about possible that the candidate *had* paid no taxes for ten years—but then cited Mr. Reid's failure to provide any further explanation of his source's credibility as his reason for awarding the four Pinocchios.

So it seems that as recently as nine years ago, the word "lie" still retained enough of its old meaning—its non-political meaning, as we may say—as the utterance of a deliberate falsehood by *anybody*, regardless of political affiliation, for it to shock, or at least semi-shock, liberal journalists when they could tell that they had heard one. That may even have been true three years later, when *The Huffington Post*'s Ayobami Olugbemiga revisited the controversy—just over two months before Mr. Trump rode down the golden escalator at Trump Tower—and wrote as follows:

> When asked about it three years later, you would think Reid would apologize or at least show the proper level of contrition that matches the irresponsible and undignified act of using the Senate floor to spread false allegations about a politician from the opposing party. But Reid has no regrets. "I don't regret that at all," he told CNN's Dana Bash on Tuesday. . . . "Romney didn't win did he?"

By the time another year had passed, those words—"Romney didn't win did he"—were apparently tattooed on the eyeballs of journalists across the land. Also, perhaps, on those of Mr. Trump. Mr. Reid's parting gift to the republic (he retired after the following year's election) was to lay down for his fellow Democrats what has ever since been their guiding principle: that progressives' winning, by any means necessary, is the only thing that matters—not honesty or honor, fairness or justice, nor the truth itself when any of these things conflict with the will to win. Being, as they suppose, "on the right side of history," they have a positive duty to win over the forces of reaction (guess who), and old-fashioned ideas of truth, right, or law independent of party loyalty are no longer useful. Truth is what they say it is, *because* they say it is.

And, therefore, journalists whose historical (if previously more-or-less surreptitious) loyalty to the party might have wavered in the face of Mr. Reid's fierce, unprincipled partisanship had only to look at Mr.Trump—who, as they were only too willing to be persuaded, must have been playing by similar rules with a kind of bizarro, mirror-image ideology to that of the progressives—and they were ready to drink the Rutenbergian Kool-Aid. The struggle was all; truth is what we say it is. I think this is the only way to understand the blizzard of lies—unashamed lies, patent lies, obvious-to-the-meanest-intelligence lies—that have fallen from Mr. Biden's White House since he came to office and the media's willingness to post them with little or no comment after carefully cataloguing the 30,573 alleged lies of his predecessor.

Actually, the two things are connected. Mr. Reid put us on notice years ago that he and his fellow Democrats were prepared to lie and cheat in order to win. We should have believed him before the media became complicit in the lies and cheating—before they introduced their own "lie" strategy against Mr. Trump, which has now been revealed as prelude and cover for their own lies. These have become ever more blatant and shameless, as with Mr. Biden's proclamation of the "extraordinary success" of the U.S. evacuation from Afghanistan or the "zero cost" $3.5 trillion spending bill. He's obviously living in some private world of his own where reality can be turned into whatever he wants it to be, and the media continue to follow him there because, having made the accusation of bad faith routine as a partisan weapon, they have blunted it and rendered it impotent when used against themselves. People will say, they think, "So what if he's lying. They all do it, don't they?" And people

do say it. How else can the Biden approval ratings continue to be as high as they are? One recent poll shows that his rating for honesty has actually dropped less than his general approval over the last six months and still stands at 50 percent.

The allegations of lying against Republicans have been successful in the past partly because they were made by Democrats first and partly because of the old-fashioned manners of Republicans like Mitt Romney or George W. Bush, who would disdain to accuse others of lying almost as much as they would to lie themselves. But there is also the fact that the media, feeling themselves immune to lying, really believe in the lies of their opposition. The ideology they cling to tells them they can never be wrong, so long as they cling to it. And if they can never be wrong, the opposition, the would-be non-ideologues who timidly point out the other side's mere and doublessly negligent errors, can never be right. That's why Mr. Trump must have intuited that the only way to fight them was to play by their rules—or rather their non-rules. I think often of the caller to *The Rush Limbaugh Show* in 2016, Sean in Philadelphia, who said that the only way for the Republicans to win was to nominate Mr. Trump, since he was the only one of the candidates who would "fight dirty"—the way the Democrats do.

Such dirty fighting now appears to be the political equivalent of Mutually Assured Destruction (with media credibility as collateral damage), or MAD, which was once the strategic doctrine behind the stockpiling of Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles, each armed with multiple nuclear warheads. Was it Mr. Reid who pressed the button? Or was it Bill Clinton with his patent insincerity and his "worst economy in fifty years"—an oldie but goodie that I believe has also been trotted out against Mr. Trump's economy, which was actually very good until the coronavirus shutdown. Funnily enough, I think a case can be made that the missiles were launched first by none other than Mr. Biden himself, who, as chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee in 1987 (150 years ago, by his own account), presided over the shamefully partisan and mendacious "Borking," of one of the most qualified nominees to the Supreme Court there has ever been, the late Robert Bork. One can easily enough imagine Senator Biden's saying, "He didn't win, did he?" a quarter century before Mr. Reid did. Mr. Biden has certainly never apologized. There have been many turning points in America's political history, but the Bork episode, more than ever since the election of President Biden, begins to look like one from which there can be no turning back.

Fiction chronicle

Huis clos

by Andrew Stuttaford

With countless Afghans trapped by an extremist regime in a country where they no longer fit, the recent release of a new English edition of Ulrich Alexander Boschwitz's powerful, angry, and unsettling *The Passenger* (*Der Reisende*) was undeniably timely.[1]

Boschwitz was a German in a period when it was necessary to have parents who passed a malign muster. His mother was a Protestant, as was his late father, Salomon, a successful businessman who had fought in the trenches. In the Third Reich this was not enough. Salomon had been born Jewish. Under the Nazi Nuremberg laws, that meant that Ulrich was "mixed race" (a *Mischling*, in the insulting terminology of the time). He was still entitled to German citizenship, but for how long? Realizing where things were going and facing the perverse prospect of being drafted into the Wehrmacht, Boschwitz quit Germany and, after stints elsewhere in Europe, made it to the United Kingdom shortly before the outbreak of war.

Horrified by Kristallnacht, he wrote the first draft of *The Passenger*, his second novel, in four weeks. It was published first in Britain in 1939 (as *The Man Who Took Trains*). Interned as an "enemy alien," an ironic fate he shared with many other refugees from Hitler, first on the Isle of Man and then in Australia, Boschwitz was eventually reclassified as a "friendly alien." He headed back for England on a troopship. It was sunk by a U-boat en route. He did not survive.

This edition of *The Passenger* boasts both an excellent preface (by the CUNY professor and novelist André Aciman) and the fascinating afterword to its German counterpart by its publisher, Peter Graf. It took nearly eighty years for *The Passenger* to be published in the language in which it was written. In his last letter to his mother, Boschwitz told her he had revised the earlier sections of the book (more changes were planned) and that his emendations would be delivered to her. In the event of his death, he wanted her to find someone with literary experience to incorporate the revisions into the text. It appears his mother never received them, and that, it seemed, was that.

Tellingly, the book couldn't find a publisher in post-war West Germany. The original German typescript languished in an archive until, prompted by an interview that Graf had given to the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* about a Weimar-era novel he had rediscovered, Boschwitz's niece got in touch. Graf was "riveted" by the typescript but believed it obvious that it had "never been edited." Noting that Boschwitz himself had been revising the book, Graf started editing the manuscript just as he "would any other text . . . the only difference being that no exchange with the author would be possible." That's quite some "only." Then again, Boschwitz had himself accepted that the book could be worked on after his death. Graf's edited version was then translated into English by Philip Boehm and came out here this year.

1 *The Passenger*, by Ulrich Alexander Boschwitz, translated by Philip Boehm; Metropolitan Books, 288 pages, $24.99.

The increasingly desperate individual taking trains in *The Passenger* is Otto Silbermann, Jewish, a veteran of the Great War and an affluent businessman, married to an "Aryan"—a character surely partly inspired by the father Boschwitz had never known (Salomon died a few weeks after his son's birth in 1915). *The Passenger* opens with a conversation between Silbermann and Gustav Becker, an old wartime comrade who has, clearly as a defensive measure, recently been made a partner in Silbermann's business, a real partner, with real financial implications. Becker, previously an employee, is more, as he himself puts it, than "the goy of record." But Becker, it is made clear, had little money beforehand. Now he effectively has some of Silbermann's, something he relishes rather too much.

Thieves are at the helm, and expropriations, some subtler than others, are underway. Theo Findler, like Becker a Nazi Party member, shows up to buy some of Silbermann's property at a ridiculous discount, but it is Kristallnacht and the extortionist is confused for his victim by some thugs on "a little Jew-hunt" who arrive at Silbermann's door and beat Findler up. Silbermann gets away, but even before then he has been living with fear. Thus, earlier he was worried about remarks he made to Becker, a friend: "'Have I offended you?' asked Silbermann. His tone was part gentle irony and part mild fright."

Silbermann has been left—physically—untouched, largely (this is a thread that runs through the book) because he can pass as an "Aryan." He has "none of the features that marked him as a Jew, according to the tenets of the racial scientists," even if his "passport is stamped with a big red *J*" and his surname is . . . unfortunate. But what is he really? "A swear word on two legs, one that people mistake for something else," and for how much longer? A waiter, unaware, tells him that Jews should wear yellow armbands to avoid "confusion" (the yellow star was introduced in the Reich in 1941).

The corrosive, corrupting effect of going along with totalitarianism is evident, as are the contradictions that attend. The manager of a hotel who knows and likes Silbermann asks him to leave ("It isn't my fault"). Becker has a "kind, broad face" and denies that he is an anti-Semite while drawing a distinction between Silbermann, "a German man," and those "others," "real Jew[s]." It's not much of a spoiler to disclose that Becker ends up treating his old friend badly. A neighbor tells Silbermann that these are "terrible times," but "great times too." He needs, she explains, to be understanding.

Silbermann is not immune from the infection. He is uneasy to be seen in the company of acquaintances who look, you know, like *that*. His first response to the plea by one of them that the two should stick together is to complain that this would be too dangerous. Grasping the moral significance of what he has done, Silbermann recants (sort of), but too late: "I watch him go, and despite everything I'm glad to be rid of him."

On one of the to-and-fro train trips that come to define his life—and his attempt to preserve it—he decides that there are "too many Jews" on board, Jews he believes that he can identify because they "looked Jewish," something he resents, albeit *somewhat* guiltily (it's "undignified"):

> I'm not one of you. Indeed, if it weren't for you, they wouldn't be persecuting me. I could remain a normal citizen. But because you exist, I will be annihilated along with you. And yet we really have nothing to do with another!

Note that word "annihilated." Boschwitz vividly describes the racial hysteria of that time and place—the bullying, the brutality, the arrests, the constant fixation on the bogeyman conjured up by the Nazis (for instance, someone is suspected of being Jewish but turns out to be South American). He had little doubt where all this was leading. Silbermann wonders whether "they'll carefully undress us first and then kill us, so our clothes won't get bloody and our banknotes won't get damaged. These days murder is performed economically."

His neighbor may have told Silbermann "they'll never do anything" to him, but after Kristallnacht he has no doubt that "war has just been declared on me once and for all and right now I'm completely on my own—in enemy

territory." He has, he recognizes, left it "too long, far too long." He "also never thought they'd push things to the extreme," and he sees no way of escape: "To make it out of here you have to leave your money behind, and to be let in elsewhere you have to show you still have it." "For a Jew," he concludes, "the entire Reich is one big concentration camp." He crosses through some woods into Belgium but is turned back.

Silbermann's existence degenerates into train journey after train journey, as he goes hither and thither across Germany in search of an answer to his predicament, an answer that remains elusive. But just being on the train, is almost—*almost*—comforting ("I have already emigrated . . . to the Deutsche Reichsbahn").

> [H]e listened to the wheels rumbling over the rails, the music of travel.
>
> I am safe, he thought, I am in motion.
>
> And on top of that I feel practically cozy.
>
> Wheels rattle, doors open, it could almost be pleasant, if it weren't for the fact that I think too much.

As descriptions of hell or, maybe, a descent into hell—in the Third Reich *these* frontiers at least were porous—must perhaps inevitably be, Boschwitz's writing is ragged, at moments close to hallucinatory. The sense of disorientation it conveys is only increased by the way that he repeatedly switches the narrative from the first to the third person. And it is at its most intense chronicling Silbermann's trek on the trains, a mobile refuge, however illusory. As I read on, it was impossible not to think of the trains—different trains, to borrow the title of a remarkable, relentless Steve Reich composition inspired by the Holocaust—that shortly transported so many Silbermanns to their end.

"I am," muses Silbermann, "no longer in Germany. I am in trains that run through Germany. That's a big difference."

But it was no difference at all, as he understood perfectly well.

Hell has many mansions, a good number built in the twentieth century, including some in Communist China of often radically divergent designs: the latest has distinctly fascist touches. In the strange, enthralling, and crazed *Hard Like Water* (published in 2001, but translated by Carlos Rojas into English for an edition released this year), the Chinese writer Yan Lianke returns to the Cultural Revolution, a delirious, murderous paroxysm that owed more to John of Leiden's Münster or the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom than is normally acknowledged in standard analyses of Marxism's Maoist offshoot.[2]

One of China's best-known writers, Yan is said to have been born into rural poverty in China's Henan province in (perhaps: no one is quite sure) 1958, a time when Mao's "Great Leap Forward," one of the most devastating of all central planning's lethal experiments, was getting started, wreaking havoc in the countryside. By the time it was over, fifteen million or more were dead (other estimates are much, much higher).

Yan's break came from enlisting in the army, where he rose to the rank of colonel, thanks to his work for the propaganda department (he had, in the interim, joined the Communist Party), which must have taught him a bit about the malleability of literary reality. On the side, he began writing books that were—shall we say—unillusioned about contemporary China, something that eventually put an end to his military career.

That said, the censorship with which he has had to contend is oddly confusing, which, of course, may be the idea. Interviewing Yan in 2020, the *Financial Times*'s Yuan Yang noted that some of Yan's most well-known novels "are banned, but others can be bought online, reflecting how his rudely satirical writing is warily tolerated."

As the events described in *Hard Like Water* unfold during the Cultural Revolution, it is appropriate to indulge in some self-criticism. I have only read one other of Yan's novels, the more concise and, in my view, slightly better *Serve the People!* (2005), which, like *Hard Like Water*, is a novel of erotic obsession set during the Cultural Revolution. In *Serve the People!*,

2 *Hard Like Water*, by Yan Lianke, translated by Carlos Rojas; Grove Press, 432 pages, $27.

but certainly not *Hard Like Water*, sex subverts politics: thus the signal that the former's two lovers should meet is a small sign reading "Serve the People!," a famous slogan derived from a speech by Mao designed to encourage revolutionary sacrifice rather than, well, this:

> As the affair went on, the Serve the People! Sign seemed to grow legs. An instant after she decided she wanted him, it would lodge itself in a blossoming shrub as he weeded a flower bed. Or as he pruned the vines, it would suddenly appear, nudging at his shoulder.

Whatever else can be said about *Serve the People!*, it can boast the greatest review of any novel since Goebbels was burning books, in this case from China's central propaganda bureau: "This novel slanders Mao Zedong, the Army, and is overflowing with sex. . . . Do not distribute, pass around, comment on, excerpt from it, or report on it."

In a 2021 interview, Yan claimed that he did not possess "much talent" (untrue), but said that he was a "barbaric writer" who writes fiction "that does not follow the rules" (true). Savage, funny, and terrifying, *Hard Like Water* is, superficially anyway, a tale of the intertwining of revolutionary and sexual ecstasy, so much so that Maoist fervor occasionally has to act as, so to speak, a red flag to a bull. If the twentysomething Gao Aijun is having problems in fulfilling his, uh, quota with the lovely Xia Hongmei, they are resolved whenever the speakers he has installed in their trysting spot relays the "bright red music"—songs, marching slogans, "an important revolutionary leader's speech and the newest, highest directives."

Yan mimics the language of the revolutionary past and, one way or another, also appropriates it. In the course of a postscript that is likely to be an essential guide for most readers outside China to some aspects of *Hard Like Water*'s plot, Rojas, the book's translator, explains how Yan weaves allusion and (often distorted) quotation into the book's text. Left unsaid is that this turns the words of the Cultural Revolution—and, indeed, Maoism more generally—against their creators, both by shining a light on the absurdity of this language and as a demonstration of how it had deliberately been reduced to slogans and newspeak.

One result of this approach is that it's not always easy to divine which portions of the dialogue in *Hard Like Water* parody what the faithful might have said (or, more critically, thought) and which might plausibly have been the real thing. The difficulty in working this out serves, however, to underline the way that China had been transformed into a land filled with people who either believed (or had to pretend to believe) in the unreal. There was nothing imaginary about the consequences of breaking the rules, though. It doesn't give much away to reveal this about a book set in those times, but *Hard Like Water* begins with Aijun awaiting his execution: "Revolution must be like this."

And the depiction of the peculiarity of this era is only enhanced by Aijun's occasional descents into synesthetic frenzy:

> [T]he easternmost loudspeaker was playing the black-iron and white-steel song "Carry Revolution to the End"; the westernmost loudspeaker was playing the clattering strong song "Overthrow the Reactionary American Imperialist and Soviet Revisionist Party"; the southernmost loudspeaker was playing the song "Dragons and Tigers Race to the Top," while the northernmost loudspeaker was playing the red-filled-with-green-fragrance song "Please Drink a Cup of Buttermilk Tea" and the salty-sweat-and-tears song "Denouncing the Evil Old Society." Coming down from above was the earthy-smelling song "Not Even Heaven or Earth are as Vast as the Kindness of the Party," while coming from underground was the silken jumping-and-laughing sound of "The Sky of the Liberated Areas is Bright."

Some, perhaps all, of these songs exist. Turning to Google, I discovered that the last of them is one not to miss, whether for its (repeated) last lines or a rather jolly tune:

> The goodness of the Communist Party is
> boundless.
> Hurrah, hurrah, hurrah!
> Hurrah, hurrah, hurrah!
> Hurrah, hurrah, hurrah!

It's a point of view.

There is another way to read *Hard Like Water*. Just open its pages and go along for the ride. It features forbidden love, ambition, horror, conspiracy, murder, weird—and on at least two occasions ovine—sexual metaphors ("To my surprise, I found that her breasts were as large and white as a pair of sheep heads"; "her voluptuous breasts, like a pair of sheep on a mountain top"), unhinged eroticism, an "anti-revolutionary suicide," torture, iconoclasm, revolutionary fanaticism ("I spent the entire summer sitting at home contemplating the great and profound phrase, *We must rely on the masses*"), a tunnel to (unlike Yan, let's be coy) romance that extends over five hundred yards beneath a town, and (here I am quoting Aijun again—the novel is told in the first person) wild lyricism:

> The sky was full of red banners, the streets were filled with red scent, and the ground was covered with red blossoms. There were red seas and red lakes, red mountains and red fields, red thoughts and red hearts, red mouths and red words.

But, for all the fun that Yan has with Aijun, a stupendously vain, power-hungry schemer, who is also the truest of all true believers (Hongmei is marginally harder to decipher, if no less fanatical), the story returns again and again to the darkness that ran through the society that Aijun and Hongmei were helping build. For the most part, atrocity is offstage, referred to secondhand, but it serves its purpose. The encroachment of totalitarianism has so eroded the notion of private space that the inhabitants of the town where *Hard Like Water* is set are expected to display the same posters and banners in the same places in their homes. Aijun and Hongmei report a mayor who has quietly reversed collectivization in a remote village, with the result that there was food where there had been starvation: the mayor is sentenced to twenty years imprisonment, which, rejoices a proud, triumphant Aijun, "proved the forceful and irreconcilable nature of class struggle. . . . Heavens, to think Wang was exposed by me!" Even by the dismal standards of many anti-heroes, Aijun is as appalling as he is pathetic—and his girlfriend is no better.

Hard Like Water (the title, Rojas relates, alludes to an ancient Daoist saying about the way that seemingly formless water can undermine the strongest substances, and to Aijun's "bouts of impotence") veers wildly between maintaining some sort of connection—however distant and however unlikely—with the possible, and, at other times, abandoning it altogether with an exuberance that stands out, even allowing for the games with reality that are part of the satirist's toolkit (Yan has dubbed some of his writing mythorealism: make of that what you will). Sometimes his embrace of the fantastic is to illustrate a deeper truth, but on other occasions, I reckon, he does so just because he can. To have Aijun describe his and Hongmei's execution (oddly moving under the circumstances) is one thing, but then to have what are presumably their ghosts return to see that "people everywhere were reading a novel called *Hard Like Water*," well . . .

Finding similarities between the two hells on earth that were the Third Reich and the China of the Cultural Revolution is not too demanding a task. Putting early imperial Rome into the same grim class is a stretch that should not be attempted, but to read *Awake*—the first English translation (which is by Johanne Sorgenfri Ottosen) of *Vågen* (2010), a curious, earthy (that's a euphemism), not infrequently unpleasant, and occasionally darkly amusing novel about Pliny the Elder by the Danish writer Harald Voetmann—is to be given a cleverly crafted window into a civilization that was, for all its achievements, an early warning that sophistication and astounding cruelty are by no means incompatible.[3]

Awake's back cover offers the promise or the threat that the book is "the first . . . in a trilogy about mankind's drive to understand and conquer nature," words that could suggest that a green sermon is on the way, but any preaching (there's just a hint of it in a line or two towards the end) is drowned out by the remarkably compelling picture of Roman

3 *Awake*, by Harald Voetmann, translated by Johanne Sorgenfri Ottosen; New Directions, 112 pages, $14.95.

culture painted in scarcely more than one hundred pages. It is not a pretty picture.

Pliny attends a play "in celebration of the double Diana" (it's not clear why he goes, as he has seen it before, and it "wasn't any good"):

> A fat, ruddy savage stomps around in the sand in the costume of the goddess Diana with an amber wig and a woman's breast stitched onto the left side of his saffron tunic. He slices open the belly of a pregnant sow with a spear. She's howling and trying to flee. The contents flop out and trail after her in the sand, and yes, I can make out the young; a tiny bloody squirming clump that will be alive for a few more moments. Diana has appeared to the sow in both her guises: the huntress and the deliverer. . . .
>
> The scene is repeated: a pregnant goat, a pregnant doe, a pregnant heifer, a pregnant mare, a pregnant wolf . . .

It doesn't take much imagination to guess the nature of the killing that is the climax of this show. Nor is it particularly reassuring to learn that Voetmann is a translator of classical Latin literature, notably Petronius and Juvenal (a lively combination): he knows what he is writing about.

Awake barely merits the label of a novel (or even novella), and not just because of its brevity; it is more a collection of fragments, not the worst format for a book centered on a man only some of whose writings have survived from antiquity. Of those that have, the most renowned are his last, the *Naturalis Historia*. These ten volumes were divided into thirty-seven books, and they explain why Voetmann began his trilogy with Pliny. The *Naturalis Historia*, a kind of encyclopedia, although not laid out like one, was intended as a comprehensive guide to everything that was then known—or thought to be known. It is both invaluable and a cornucopia of unreliable information (not necessarily mutually exclusive categories), its unreliability compounded by Pliny's own unreliability, at least as it appears from *Awake*. A thoroughly disgusting story Pliny tells in the novel about an encounter he had in a tavern in Ostia would have been scientifically impossible then and, indeed, now, something for which we should give thanks. No further details will be supplied at this time.

Pliny's definition of "nature" was wider than the one we use today. "Nature," he wrote, "which is to say life, is my subject" (*natura, hoc est vita, narratur*). A creature of his time, Pliny believed that nature had a purpose, but not, in Voetmann's (perhaps a little too dour) interpretation, one we can celebrate:

> She created man solely so he could suffer, the only animal who cries, the only animal who knows death and understands the scope of its suffering. The only animal who understands that it is made to suffer for nature's amusement.

Pliny's nature is no benign "mother nature." In Book 7 of the *Naturalis Historia* he warns that "we cannot confidently say whether she is a good parent to mankind or a harsh stepmother." Yes we can. Pliny died in the immediate aftermath of the volcanic eruption that destroyed Pompeii, either through breathing in toxic fumes or from a heart attack.

Awake opens with an entertainingly bilious monologue by Pliny, before dividing into a story (of sorts) told by a narrator not inclined to accentuate the positive and through four "voices": quotes from *Naturalis Historia*; Pliny; Pliny's slave, Diocles; and Pliny's nephew, Pliny the Younger, his heir.

Prone to nosebleeds, short of breath, and overweight, Pliny is working on the final volumes of *Naturalis Historia*, which he is dictating to Diocles at night: "The final syllable of each sentence is extracted and rounded perfectly as it slowly transforms into a moan. Painfully and peepingly, the world is wrung from Plinius' fat neck in the dark."

Much of what we read in *Awake* is the marvelously misanthropic Pliny's account of himself, his past, and his present. His nephew's comments, meanwhile, are not as loyal as they could be. Beneath a section from the *Naturalis Historia* in which Pliny talks of seeing stars on earth, in one instance "forming a halo around the javelins of soldiers who guard the camp at night," the younger Pliny jeers that his uncle was "confusing stars with fireflies or something."

As for Diocles, forced to write so much that he has sores on his hands, he grumbles that "the master's mapping of the world doesn't amount to anything, it only steeps the world in doubt and hesitation and tedious references to other authors' doubts and hesitations."

Things don't end well for Diocles.

After all that, it's something of a relief to travel to the Paris suburbs in Dominique Barbéris' melancholy and softly off-kilter *A Sunday in Ville-d'Avray*, which was first published in 2019 as *Un dimanche à Ville-d'Avray* and is now available in an English translation by John Cullen.[4] The book's title is taken (more or less) from a classic French film about which one of its protagonists reminisces in a way that underpins the uneasiness permeating this later Sunday in Ville-d'Avray.

This is a beautifully written, extraordinarily atmospheric novel, a gorgeous jewel with something not right about the reflections it catches. The story revolves around the relationship between two sisters, who, since their childhood, have been searching for *something* else and still have not found it. One sister, these days a Parisian, goes on a rare visit to the other, Claire Marie, rare because her (possibly unfaithful) husband doesn't think very much of Claire Marie or the suburbs (in this case Ville-d'Avray) where Claire Marie now lives. To her sister's surprise, Claire Marie admits to "an . . . encounter, years ago," an uncertain affair with someone who almost certainly was not quite who he said he was, an affair which was almost certainly not quite as Claire Marie describes it.

Her confession reinforces the impression that all is not so orderly in this suburb as its neat appearance might suggest, an appearance evocatively summoned up by Barbéris, a poetess of seasons, soft rains, streetlights, Sunday gloom, and, even, a suburban house as dusk draws nearer: "Now the façade of the house was divided into two sections. The bottom part was black—the shadows had reached the upper floor—but the top half still shone in the sun."

The metaphor is difficult to miss. To be sure, trouble below the suburban surface is not the most original of themes, but here it is given force by the way that the disorder is nearly always just out of sight—footsteps in the park, rumors of a "suspicious man"—and, for the most part, appears in glimpses. The perennial fear that all is not as it should be, or, worse still, that all is as it should be, persists:

> Those neatly aligned gardens, each with its number . . . those numbered lives that go on, once the house is in place . . . until the little hitch—which is, after all inevitable—occurs: the day when the doctor comes in with the "bad results," when the doctor says further tests will have to be performed; when time, which has been slowly flowing along . . . suddenly seems to tip over into the void yawning just behind it.

4 *A Sunday in Ville-d'Avray*, by Dominique Barbéris, translated by John Cullen; Other Press, 144 pages, $20.

Books

Book nooks

by Brooke Allen

Like most people over the age of fifty, I have a tendency to think that the world of my youth (in my case the 1960s and '70s) was the norm, the way life was and is supposed to be, and that all the social changes since then are weird deviations from that norm. That this view is patently nonsensical does not prevent it from having a strong hold on many of us. And as a child of the prosperous, relatively stable, and relatively egalitarian post–World War II period, I imagined that the public library—a taxpayer-supported institution serving the entire community, from which books can be borrowed free of charge—has long been the historical norm, a communal benefit whose utility was obvious to all but the most benighted citizens. The quiet, well-tended New York City branch libraries provided both an education and a refuge for me—and countless other children. They were also an invaluable resource for older members of the community. How could this not always have been perceived as not only desirable but also necessary?

In their enlightening new study *The Library: A Fragile History*, the historians Andrew Pettegree and Arthur der Weduwen show that the opposite is true: the concept of the public library did not really bear fruit until the very end of the nineteenth century, and its survival far into the twenty-first, at least in the form we think of as a "library"—a place full of books—is far from certain.[1] Libraries have indeed proved fragile, as the authors show us again and again. No society, they say, "has ever been satisfied with the collections inherited from previous generations." Sometimes—as in the destruction of the great library of Alexandria or in the Nazis' wholesale demolition of Polish and Jewish libraries—collections are wantonly annihilated; more often they die from "neglect and redundancy, as books and collections that represented the values and interests of one generation fail to speak to the one that follows."

Thus the fabulous private library of Christopher Columbus's son Fernando Colón, the greatest book collector of his age—he wished his library, like that at Alexandria, to encompass all of human knowledge—was dissolved almost immediately after his death through the indifference of his heir, the iconoclasm of the Spanish Inquisitors, and the predatory greed of the monarchy. An equally extraordinary achievement, Cardinal Mazarin's vast Bibliothèque Mazarine in Paris, was seized and auctioned off by the Frondeurs during the Cardinal's own lifetime, and only partially restored after the crisis was resolved. "From Alexandria to the present: no one cares about a library collection as much as the person who has assembled it," the authors tell us. Among private collections, the Baroque library of Duke August of Braunschweig-Lüneburg, which against all odds still survives at Wolfenbüttel, is a rare exception.

Many libraries become war booty. The great medieval collection at the University of Heidelberg was appropriated by the Vatican in 1622. The excellent library of Queen Christina of

1 *The Library: A Fragile History*, by Andrew Pettegree & Arthur der Weduwen; Basic Books, 528 pages, $35.

Sweden was furnished by marauding Swedish armies in Germany and Central Europe during the Thirty Years' War, which among many other prizes got off with thirty-one barrels of books taken from the castle of Rudolf II in Prague. French revolutionaries vandalized monastic libraries and the collections of fleeing aristocrats, and Napoleon's armies systematically stripped Continental libraries of their treasures, leaving "no major library of distinguished medieval heritage unscathed: Milan, Urbino, Pavia, Verona, Florence and Mantua all suffered losses. Commissioners arrived with carefully prepared lists." Napoleon's administration "adopted the most centralized and efficient system of looting thus far known. . . . Instead of forcing their way into the libraries, the number of manuscripts that each state had to give up to France was written into the terms of the armistice."

Many millions of books, as we all know, have been destroyed for ideological reasons. Books and libraries "have frequently been the advance guard in campaigns to impose on a population a new kind of society, promote a new religion, or win back territory lost to a rival ideology," and if "the balance of power shifted, the libraries were regarded as legitimate targets." The library of the Aztec emperor Montezuma was among the first casualties of the Spanish conquest of Mexico; the systematic destruction of this testament to the sophistication of Aztec civilization did more than just demoralize the surviving Aztecs. Simultaneously, back in Europe, Martin Luther's theological protests were "accompanied by a torrent of print," with Luther himself acting as an early champion of the printing press through myriad pamphlets written in the vernacular. The upheaval of the Reformation "established a standard for the destruction of disapproved texts that would continue to haunt European society down to the twentieth century": religious houses were disbanded and their libraries, the fruit of centuries of labor, dispersed, while the Catholic Counter-Reformation destroyed many works of the new heretics; the first *Index Auctorum et Librorum Prohibitorum* was published by Pope Paul IV in 1559 during the Council of Trent.

What people did in the name of religion during the sixteenth century they did again in the name of political ideology in the twentieth. Pettegree and der Weduwen's accounts of the book wars of the last century are dizzying: vast libraries were built up to support particular ideologies only to be burned or purged when those ideologies collapsed. "Libraries were not only the victims of war, but were active participants in the conflict." They were "weaponized." In World War II, the libraries of Strasbourg, Louvain, Beauvais, Tours, Caen, Coventry, Manchester, Plymouth, Liverpool, and Exeter were bombed, along with all the booksellers' warehouses on London's Paternoster Row. British air raids specially targeted German institutes of technology and their libraries. Nazi troops went into Warsaw's libraries with flamethrowers in an effort to systematically destroy Polish culture at its roots; the authors classify this as "libricide," an attempt to wipe cultural memory from the face of the earth. After the war, three-quarters of the books in German libraries were deemed too Nazified, and therefore purged. In East Germany, the DDR, they were replaced by tomes consistent with the country's new socialist ideology, but four decades later, at German reunification, 80 to 90 percent of the former DDR's communist-leaning university library stock was declared functionally obsolete.

Pettegree and der Weduwen are fascinating when they discuss great private collectors and monastic libraries, but the most important aspect of their book is its exploration of the practical and theoretical role of the library in the lives of ordinary citizens. It is a question that does not really arise between the fall of Rome and the invention of the printing press, when literacy rates began rapidly to rise:

> What was a library: were books for display or working tools? . . . What, crucially, was the public for a public library? Was the key motivation for building a library accessibility, or the demonstration of elite power? Should the library be a place of sociability or silence, a meeting place or a place of study?

Such questions became more urgent in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as people of the lower orders, and women, became readers.

The Library: A Fragile History is a story with heroes, a few visionary individuals who greatly expanded readership and shifted the function of the library from serving as the peacock display of a great prince or magnate to being a resource for a larger public. Sir Thomas Bodley, for instance, who over the course of fifteen years (1598–1613) managed "the transformation of Oxford's library from [an] empty shell to the finest institutional library in Europe," decreed that it should be open six hours per day instead of four per week, created the first comprehensive catalogues, and imposed the unprecedented rule of silence. Or James Kirkwood and Thomas Bray, who conceived in 1690s the first national network of public libraries. ("[T]hough we be not a great or a rich people," Kirkwood mused of his native Scotland, "yet we may be a wise and a learned people.") Or Benjamin Franklin, a leader in this field as in so many others: in 1727, he and some Philadelphia associates founded the world's first subscription library. Or Sir Hans Sloane, who at his death in 1753 offered the British nation the opportunity to purchase at bargain-basement prices his library of forty thousand printed books and 3,500 manuscripts; this became the nucleus first of the British Museum and later of the British Library:

> It was the first collection of its sort to be conceived as a national resource, and one that was regarded by its readers and visitors as the embodiment of the confidence, prestige and ambition of the British people. Libraries had long been seen as symbols of cultural distinction, but that this concept could be tied directly to the nation state was a particular nineteenth-century development.

And of course there was Andrew Carnegie, probably the greatest benefactor the common reader has ever had, and, more recently, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, which has pumped billions of dollars into libraries.

One of the most interesting themes of the book is the perpetual uncertainty on the part of librarians and patrons as to just what their role vis-à-vis the general reader might be. Are libraries there to educate and shape taste, or are they there to reflect tastes already formed? Bodley specified that there be in his library no "idle books and riffe raffes," by which he meant books in English—at that time only Latin was intellectually respectable. "How far the public should be indulged in their pleasures, rather than be given what was good for them, was the subject of tortured debate throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries," the authors write. Fiction, throughout this period, was looked on as unwholesome and a waste of the reader's time, and librarians tried techniques like putting novels in closed stacks or mixing them confusingly with nonfiction to keep readers from subsisting exclusively on a diet of unreality. The American Library Association tried to guide public taste by providing a list of recommended titles (mostly improving nonfiction) and removed authors they found morally questionable—a list that included Thomas Hardy, Émile Zola, even Henry James!—from their guides. In the meantime, the commercial circulating libraries, run by booksellers (most notably Mudie's, in Britain) were giving readers what they craved: lightweight fiction, and plenty of it. We learn that

> It was only after the First World War that the library shed its nineteenth-century identity as an instrument of social reform, and tentatively embraced its new role as much a part of the entertainment industry as it was a source of enlightenment, improvement and redemption. . . . As the twentieth century wore on, it gradually became clear that fiction was in fact the libraries' main defense against obsolescence.

What is its defense against obsolescence today, or does it even have one? New technology has not killed off the book, surprisingly enough, but books no longer attract many people to libraries, and this situation is intensifying daily: the authors quote a study predicting that within the next five years the average person will interact with connected devices every eighteen seconds. And then there are changing social mores: the rule of silence has already gone by the wayside, and countless librarians are under pressure to turn their domains into "community hubs" where

people interact and collaborate rather than sit in peaceful contemplation.

There is a tremendous amount of information in this volume. What does one take away from it? Most of all, the fact that libraries—their shape, form, purpose, patrons, clientele, whatever—are constantly changing. The squat, comforting, functional Carnegie libraries of New York that have survived for a century or more will not survive much longer; many of them have already been repurposed. Forward-thinking planners find it hard to resist the opportunity "to present a new concept of information technology, ideally with a shiny new building attached." (The authors relate a dreadful tale, that of the new San Francisco Public Library, a building that was designed with "all the computer terminals, meeting spaces and breakout rooms one could ever want" but no room for the library's three million books.)

So, those of us who'd walk a mile to avoid a "community hub" had better enjoy our cozy Carnegie libraries while we still can, which might not be for very long. If we're lucky enough to frequent a library that still adheres to the rule of silence, so much the better. I pay a hefty yearly fee to a circulating library so as to ensure silence, comfort, card catalogues (an almost extinct species), and knowledgeable, well-trained librarians (ditto). I had long thought that any public library should be able to provide these things. Now, having discovered how recent, how tenuous, and how fragile an institution the public library really is, I take nothing for granted.

Mad about George

Andrew Roberts
The Last King of America:
The Misunderstood Reign of George III.
Viking, 784 pages, $40

reviewed by Simon Heffer

Andrew Roberts admires George III (1738–1820), and he is right to do so. The historical image of the king as a tyrant and a lunatic is not remotely true in the first case (a contention Roberts provides much evidence to substantiate) and true only for part of his reign in the second. The king's reign, from 1760 to 1820, is the third longest in British history, after Queen Victoria's and the present queen's. It covered a period in the nation's story that was simultaneously catastrophic and glorious, and one whose mark remains very much upon the world today. In Britain, the legacy is largely metaphysical: a people with the baggage of empire and the industrial revolution, and with an evolved constitutional settlement rooted in the stability of the Crown. But there is also a massive physical and cultural legacy to George III's reign. Not only is the architectural evidence of Georgianism visible in most of Britain's major towns (and, indeed, spectacularly in Ireland, notably Dublin) and in so many of the nation's great stately homes, but much of what we think of as Georgian was created in the third George's reign. His era embraced, at its beginnings, Smollett and Sterne, Arne and Boyce, Gainsborough and Reynolds, and at its end Coleridge, Wordsworth, Keats, Shelley, and Constable. The king, as an aesthete himself, set the tone of a society that valued enlightened artistic endeavor, and there are few ages in British culture to compare with his period on the throne. George III also reigned over the beginnings of the industrial revolution, which not only shifted his country's economy from the field to the city, but also, for most of the century after the king's death, made Britain the world's most economically powerful nation.

It was that economic strength that allowed Britain to recover from the great disaster of George III's reign: the loss of the American colonies after the expensive and bloody war that ended in 1783. Roberts's book, titled *The Last King of America*, concentrates in great detail on this war, as it must, because of the king's direct involvement in the politics of that time and his influence over Lord North and the other ministers who first prosecuted, and then abandoned, that struggle. North tried for years to resign but never managed it until the American war was lost. As Roberts says,

North didn't need the monarch's permission to resign but pretended that he did. Power and its exercise were amusing hobbies for the eighteenth-century nobility, but the king and North seem to have had a sort of mutual Stockholm syndrome. Would another prime minister have fared any better in securing the colonies? Almost certainly not, for financial and logistical reasons.

Roberts also alludes to the growing power of the British East India Company, which (not least thanks to the continued prosperity of the United Kingdom in the nineteenth century) later led to the creation of a second British Empire, based on India, to replace the American one that was lost. The extent of the American empire, and the caliber of the people who sought to assert its independence, in fact meant that Britain came, in the long run, to be better off without it. All empires fail, and the first British one would have been no exception. And the longer it might have taken to do so, the messier, more expensive, and more debilitating for the defeated party it would have been. As it was, King George III greeted John Adams, America's first ambassador to London, with cordiality and respect—which Adams more than reciprocated. Roberts rather mischievously suggests at the conclusion of his monumental book that had Britain and America not separated, the time would have come later in the nineteenth century when Britain would have sought to secede from an empire dominated by America and its methods.

The problem with writing about an English (or, after 1603, British) monarch is that, depending on the period, one either ends up writing a solid political history—because for centuries the monarch took an active role art the forefront of politics—or writing an often tedious account of a constitutional monarch's mainly private life, with such politics as the monarch has been allowed to dabble in. Roberts's life of King George III is very much in the former camp, inevitably and profitably.

George came to the throne seventy-two years after the Glorious Revolution that supposedly recalibrated the relations between the monarch, his Parliament, and his people. George III, like his Hanoverian grandfather and great-grandfather (his father, poor old Prince Fred, died before succeeding), allegedly modeled himself on William of Orange in avoiding excesses of monarchical power and lapses into Stuart tyranny. In the wonderful British way, however, with the country's unwritten constitution, the mode of governing the country continued to evolve after William had gone, and also throughout the reigns of the first two Georges. It was partly because the first George—our hero's great-grandfather—spoke barely a word of English when he turned up in 1714 to succeed his second cousin Queen Anne. His ministers became used to governing with limited reference to him, and from 1721 the office of prime minister (not that it was known as that) developed. George III spoke English properly, albeit, apparently, with a German accent, and much of his reign was devoted, at least in the earlier decades, to asserting (in order to protect them) the powers William III had bequeathed to his successors with Parliament's agreement. This constant attempt to hold on to prerogatives, especially when discharged with the inexperience and hotheadedness of youth, caused much discontent with various unfortunates, especially when George contrived to sack his ministers or to force them to resign. That particular prerogative evaporated after the next generation: William IV exercised it, but attempts by Queen Victoria to do so came to nothing. As George III himself learned, once you gave the political class an inch, they ended up taking a mile.

Although Roberts well makes the case that the king was not a tyrant but instead a man with respect for those who disagreed with him, George III also presided over a country where freedom of speech was far from taken for granted. That concept, so dear to us now, was, however, greatly advanced in his time: John Wilkes defeated the attempts of the authorities to silence him, and Thomas Paine (whom Roberts nicely exposes as a hypocrite) was safely abroad when delivering his broadsides. To the vexation of the king, first Edmund Burke (who later recanted) and then—almost incontinently—Charles Fox sav-

aged the monarch and the friends whom he enlisted to govern. When the colonies were lost, Fox and his cronies almost had not just the king, but the idea of monarchy, in their sights. As it turned out, the king was saved by William Pitt the Younger, a justification of the king's preference for Tories over Whigs. Pitt ran a stable ministry, one that ended up winning important victories over the French in the Napoleonic Wars and, with some help from the reformed Burke, secured the affections of the British people for the monarchical system just as that system was being threatened and rejected by a revolution in France.

Yet all through George's reign after 1765 there were whispers of what was called "the king's malady." Roberts, like Jeremy Black, another distinguished biographer of the king, dismisses the notion that the king suffered from porphyria but admits that he must have suffered from manic depression or, as the condition is now known, bipolar disorder. The first eruption of this was when he was just twenty-seven; another grim one seized him in the winter of 1788–89, from which the myth arose that he shook hands and started a conversation with an oak tree in Windsor Great Park. Finally, after about 1809, the king sank into some form of long-term madness, which could well have been a form of senile dementia: he was over seventy at the time. His gluttonous, much-loathed, and spendthrift son, the Prince of Wales, became Britain's only Prince Regent so far.

For a decent, enlightened, and generally kind man whose faults were far fewer than his merits, the king had a dismal last decade. Having been the only happily married Hanoverian king, he and Queen Charlotte separated after almost fifty years' marriage. She at least visited him in his senescence, which is more than their surviving children did. He went blind (denying him the pleasure of reading the contents of the vast library he had accumulated) and miraculously survived the frequent cruel and useless treatments his doctors gave him as they tried and failed to cure him. He grew a long white beard and talked to Lord North, who by then was long dead. It was no way for anyone's life to end, least of all a king's.

Roberts has written a handsome and thorough biography that focuses on the political and domestic sides of the king's life; he speaks of the king's cultural interests, and it would have been nice to have had this important aspect of his character and his effect on taste in a little more detail. But above all Roberts has written a superlative political history of the period between 1760 and 1809, when the king was forced to withdraw from public life. With Roberts's understanding of the period, he ought to go on to write a study of the political life of George III's loathsome son, who became George IV: it is, in many respects, an even better story, and certainly one that reminds us, as George III's does, of just what an unruly and turbulent people the British were until the calming influence of Victorianism.

Homer's range

James I. Porter
Homer: The Very Idea.
University of Chicago Press,
280 pages, $27.50

reviewed by Daisy Dunn

There was little doubt in antiquity that Homer existed. The author of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, two very different works that, in the words of the Berkeley classicist James I. Porter, "complement each other like a pair of gloves," was considered as real as the next poet. The fact that no one knew for sure who he was or where he came from—or even whether "he" was a he at all—was less an inconvenience than an opportunity.

A great many theories about the poet's identity emerged down the centuries. For some ancient authors it was obvious that Homer was the son of a river god and a nymph. Only someone with divine blood would be capable of producing such masterpieces. Other writers mined the epic poems for clues to his parentage, alighting upon Phemius, the talented court poet of Ithaca in the *Odyssey*, as his potential father and wise, doddering Nestor as

his maternal grandfather. There was, as Porter says in his new book on the poet, *Homer: The Very Idea*, a "long lineup of suspects."

What couldn't be interpolated from the epics was sought in the poet's own name. "Homer" was hardly "John Smith" in ancient Greece. From very early on, it was surmised that it was merely a sobriquet, a nickname, and that it must as such have reflected some attribute of the man himself. The trouble was that the meaning of the word was and remains ambiguous. Two of the most popular renderings, in English, are "hostage" and "blind," each of which conjures a very different image. The possibility that Homer had been blind gained particular traction. He appeared as such in several portraits, including an important fifth-century B.C. bust, only known from a Roman copy now in the Glyptothek in Munich. Demodocus, another court poet in the *Odyssey*, at Phaeacia, was also blind.

If "Homer" was a pseudonym, Meles alone or Meles- prefixing another word was often supposed to have been the poet's real name, a nod to a river—and a river god—in Smyrna (now Izmir in western Turkey). While this is clearly fanciful, Smyrna was among the more credible of the seven main cities to have been claimed to be the poet's birthplace. The nearby island of Chios is another strong contender. The dialect of Homer's poems, though hugely varied, originated principally in this part of the world. And yet there is no firm evidence of where exactly the epics started life. As Porter says, Homer "flashes suddenly into view and then just as suddenly retreats."

Porter's pursuit of the elusive poet is part of a broader quest to explain his enduring and elevated reputation. The *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are approached not as phenomenal works of literature but "as cultural icons, as signifiers of value." Porter questions how it is that a poet no one can accurately pin down has lived on so palpably in the modern imagination. What gave Dante the confidence to brand Homer *poeta sovrano* ("a sovereign poet") before he had so much as picked up his books? Why has Homer maintained an incomparable position in the literary canon—even now that his very existence is open to question?

Although suspicions were occasionally raised in the ancient world, it was only in the eighteenth century that the hypothesis that Homer was less an individual than a group, or a concept, began to gain support. Porter provides an admirably succinct survey of the history of Homeric scholarship, analyzing the work of historians such as Giambattista Vico, who in 1730 defined Homer as *un'idea* cultivated by the Greeks, and Friedrich Albert Wolf, who more famously developed the theory of Homer as a cultural phenomenon.

Modern classicists tend to follow in these scholars' footsteps, employing "Homer" as little more than a shorthand for the two epic poems, their composition, and their ultimately unknowable authorship. A particular debt is owed to Milman Parry, the bright Harvard classicist who tragically died in his early thirties after accidentally letting off his own pistol. It was Parry who unearthed convincing evidence in the Homeric poems of a so-called "oral tradition" through which numerous ancient bards could use repeated descriptive phrases and other motifs to memorize and perform the works, so preserving them before they discovered the art of writing.

What is interesting, however, is that while it is now agreed that the epic poems were composed orally and passed down through many different people and generations who altered and developed them along the way, the idea of a single Homer has never entirely gone away. Romantics like myself sometimes envisage a "Homer" mastermind gathering together all the inherited material to consolidate the poems. Even Wolf, as Porter points out, revived the ghost of Homer when he sought to distinguish parts of the "original" *Iliad* from later additions.

For Porter, the reality (or not) of Homer is inextricably tied up with the reality (or not) of the world his poems evoke. "His allure and his mystique," Porter writes, "are entirely dependent on the imagined, if contested, historicity of Troy." There is support for this view in the work of earlier scholars, including Vico, who denied the existence of the Trojan War. But must the existence of one really depend upon the other?

The Prussian businessman Heinrich Schliemann confidently set off in search of Homer's Troy in the 1870s. Tipped off as to the most likely site—at Hissarlik in what is now northwest Turkey—he oversaw a chaotic, amateurish, and overzealous excavation. The treasures he uncovered, including the exquisite gold jewelry in which he dressed his young wife, proved to be far too early in origin to have come from Homer's Troy. Ten distinct strata have been identified at the archaeological site and several sub-layers within these, the earliest dating back several millennia. Some of the higher strata, within "Troy VI" and "Troy VII," correspond closely in date to the Trojan War of Homer's epics. A series of grand sloping limestone walls and towers has been discovered here, as have arrowheads and evidence of destruction by fire.

The latter excite Porter less than they do those who, like I, believe fervently that Homer's Trojan War had a strong basis in reality. Porter is deeply questioning and, perhaps, less in love with the romance of Troy than are many earlier classicists. As he notes, the Troy Homer evokes is very likely "an amalgam rather than a true-to-life portrait," colored by what remained visible in Homer's time of a more ancient citadel (the war is set some four hundred years before the epics were likely put to papyrus) as well as artistic license. For Porter, "multiplying the Trojan War into many other, similar wars is no more satisfying an answer to the 'Trojan Question' than proliferating Homer into a plurality of Homers is to the Homer Question." For me, the possibility that Homer's Trojan War is built upon a mixture of different phases in history, filtered through memory and invention, only makes it more beguiling.

Porter is, in fact, unromantic about other aspects of Homer as well. "While we might want Homer to be affirming the value of human life, of existence for its own sake, or of the origins of humane feelings," he writes pragmatically, "it may be that all that his poetry points to is the negation of these things in the context of war." If the bloodiness of Homer troubles Porter, the manner in which this bloodiness has been glorified or fudged over by other critics troubles him more. He presents intriguing instances of writers who, in thrall to the beauty of Homer's poetry, either celebrate or deflect from the actual war carnage described therein.

Porter's book provides not only a valuable introduction to the enigma of Homer and the roads taken down the centuries to solve—or at least better understand—that enigma, but also a number of challenging and eye-opening readings of the texts themselves. There is naturally a great deal of subjectivity involved in pinpointing episodes that are "devoid of value" and wrongly exalted by readers. For example, an ancient critic's focus on the personification of a battle "shuddering" in *Iliad* 13 does not, to my mind, detract too heavily from the awfulness of the scene. But I found that reading Homer through Porter's eyes was sometimes most enjoyable precisely when our viewpoints diverged. This, in itself, is a sign of a rich and engaging book.

True & false

Carole Angier
Speak, Silence: In Search of W. G. Sebald.
Bloomsbury, 640 pages, $32

reviewed by Carl Rollyson

"The past is never dead. It's not even past." This famous aphorism from *Requiem for a Nun* could have been written by W. G. Sebald. Like Faulkner, Sebald believed we will never get anywhere until we reckon with where we have been. The German author grew up in Bavaria in a family and community that remained silent about its Nazi past, no matter how much he pressed the issue—especially with his father, a member of the Wehrmacht during World War II, who came home in 1947 as a released prisoner of war and kept quiet about where he had been and what he had done. In the new *Speak, Silence: In Search of W. G. Sebald*, Carole Angier can find no evidence that Sebald's father was guilty of war crimes, but his son never forgave him for not admitting the guilt that post-war Germany ought to have expressed by at least acknowledging its crimes against humanity.

Later, at university, Sebald encountered the same silence about the past, with professors of literature taking refuge in a formalism that repudiated history and biography so as not to confront the moral and ethical implications of the works they taught. Sebald began his academic career with articles and a dissertation attacking German writers who had not confronted the nation's Nazi past or, even worse, had prepared for the advent of Hitler in their writing.

Sebald then turned to what his friend Michael Hamburger called "essayistic semi-fiction": *Vertigo* (1990), *The Emigrants* (1992), *The Rings of Saturn* (1995), and *Austerlitz* (2001)—all steeped in history and morality with photographs and biographies of figures who were born in the real world but whom Sebald rendered in fictional terms as he probed the German past and their varying responses, often as Jews, to the Holocaust. This mix of fiction and fact has attracted many readers and repelled others. What is true? What is not? To Sebald's critics, one might say, "Isn't this exactly how we operate, sorting out everyday fiction from fact, stories that seem likely but that are made up, and stories that turn out to be true even though they seem fantastic?" This is exactly what Angier finds in Sebald's books: they are not about literally replicating the past—although sometimes he does put the facts of life directly on the page—but about creating a sense of the past that is so real we deny it at our peril.

Angier, as a dutiful biographer, makes every effort to sort fact from fiction—in both Sebald's life and the lives of his characters—often emerging triumphantly with the truth but also admitting that sometimes Sebald stumps her from the grave, just as he misled her about certain events and people when she interviewed him years before this biography was written.

Angier's subtitle hints at what kind of biography she has produced: an investigation in which she presents herself as a character attempting to gain the confidence of Sebald's real-life models, some of whom resent his appropriation of their lives even as they understand his desire to make their pasts meaningful in stories available to all of us.

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I certify that the statements made by me above are correct and complete, Roger Kimball, *Editor & Publisher*.

Sebald taught for most of his life in England at the University of East Anglia, and he knew English well enough to speak it daily rather than his native German. He never made the switch as a writer, although he labored meticulously over the English translations of his work. Angier never says exactly why Sebald did not follow the example of Nabokov—a writer he revered—and embrace the language of his new country. My own hunch is that Sebald never wanted to diminish the sense of himself as a displaced person experiencing the melancholy estrangement from the world that affects so many of his characters. In a few cases, he rewrote real-life gentiles as Jews, heightening the separateness he cultivated in himself. He rarely shared his deepest feelings with anyone.

Not anyone? Well, what about with his wife, Ute? I read with growing amazement a biography that only mentions her a few times—mostly to say she did not accompany Sebald to parties and other events. And that is about all, save this, in the acknowledgments: "First, I would like to thank Ute Sebald, who did not wish to speak, but put no obstacles in my way." Now just because Ute Sebald did not want to speak does not mean a biographer—at least a certain kind of biographer—would not have decided to find out what she could about Sebald's wife and her place in his life and career, especially today, when biographers go out of their way not to slight spouses and others who play important roles in their subjects' lives. So what gives? Did Angier, in fact, attempt to construct a portrait of Sebald's wife from the witnesses and other sources she could locate? Or was there some kind of deal, implicit or explicit, between them? (A deal, in other words, that if Angier did not talk with others about Ute, did not pry, as Sebald did, into the lives of others, then Ute would do nothing to hinder the biographer.) Or did Angier decide simply to respect Ute's wishes, thereby avoiding the aggressive tactics biographers so often take, pursuing their questions and making every effort to allay their subjects' concerns?

When do a biographer's good manners and thoughtful silences get in the way of what might have been an even greater story? Why not be as bold as Sebald? For those readers of biography who deplore invasions of privacy and laud biographers who refuse to engage in rude inquiry, Angier's decision will no doubt seem virtuous. But for us biographers who are of the rougher kind, and the readers who appreciate that buccaneering style, Angier's respect for the widow will be regarded as a lost opportunity. Sebald, as Angier shows repeatedly, never regretted using the lives of others as his material. He was ruthless in that regard. Should a biographer do any less?

We mourn the passing of
Carl Menges (1930–2021)
A longtime supporter of The New Criterion

Notebook

Archaeology's burial

by Peter W. Wood

Few scientific disciplines have been as ruinously politicized as archaeology. One might think the ancient past far removed from today's squabbles. Does it matter which long-dead warrior walked these woods, which basket-laden woman once headed up that arroyo? A few people, driven by scientific curiosity, might want to pursue the clues, but the answers are purely "academic" in the sense that they have no obvious direct bearing on the world we live in today. Archaeologists pursue knowledge for knowledge's sake. At least they used to.

Today archaeology meets several crosscurrents. Among them is the effort to pin down the causes of our own cultural collapse. In their analyses, many archaeologists are eager to implicate climate change or the profligate use of resources to score a point against the immoderation of modern capitalist economies. But an even stronger crosscurrent is the eagerness of many archaeologists to side with any purported descendants of ancient peoples and defer to their claims to ancestral property rights without pausing to question those claims.

In the United States, those archaeologists are under the spell of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA), the 1990 federal law which mandates that institutions receiving federal funding return "cultural items" to Indian tribes that are lineal descendants of those responsible for their existence. "Cultural items" includes skeletal remains.

NAGPRA first attracted the notice of many Americans with the discovery in 1996 of a truly ancient skeleton on the banks of the Columbia River in Kennewick, Washington. The bones of the "Kennewick Man" didn't look much like those of other Native Americans, present or past. When radio-carbon dates showed them to be about nine thousand years old, controversy erupted. Citing NAGPRA, the modern-day Umatilla tribe, joined by other Northwest Indian tribes, demanded the bones be turned over for reburial. Despite bitter opposition from archaeologists, that is eventually what happened. There was and still is no strong evidence that Kennewick Man was ancestral to any living people, though there are some faint genetic similarities.

The Kennewick Man saga has been the subject of numerous scientific articles as well as general-interest reports and books. What it most revealed was the power of interest groups to mobilize public sentiment against a scientific investigation. The desire for knowledge of the deep past could not withstand the desires of some Native Americans to make a statement about their collective identity and of many non–Native Americans to display their sympathy for such claims. In April 1998, under the pretext of preventing riverbank erosion, the Army Corps of Engineers "dumped approximately two million tons of rubble and dirt on the site and planted 3,700 willow, dogwood, and cottonwood trees" where the bones were found, according to press reports. This was done after both houses of Congress had passed a bill to protect the site and while the bill awaited President Clinton's signature.

Obliterating archaeological sites is one way to protect the past from prying eyes. A more thorough approach is to intimidate archaeologists or, better yet, to cloud their minds with the narrative that their highest obligation is to "respect marginalized groups" by treating their every claim, no matter how unfounded, as deserving absolute priority. Three examples follow.

On March 20, 2021, an archaeologist, Elizabeth Weiss from San José State University, delivered a paper which criticized parts of NAGPRA at the annual meeting of the Society for American Archaeology (SAA). The paper, co-authored by an attorney trained in archaeology, James Springer, was titled "Has Creationism Crept Back into Archaeology?" The "creationism" they have in mind refers to some Native American myths about the original peopling of North America, myths rejecting the scientific consensus that the original settlers were hunters who crossed over the Aleutian land bridge from Siberia.

Weiss and Springer argued that many contemporary archaeologists cite NAGPRA to justify treating those myths as the final word when it comes to ancient human remains and artifacts. The result of their presentation was a combination of astonishment and chagrin. The journal *Science* reported that the meeting "erupted in controversy . . . . [M]any archaeologists say they were shocked their professional organization gave a platform to what they consider anti-Indigenous views." Kisha Supernant, an archaeologist at the University of Alberta, Edmonton, was one such archaeologist. "There are Indigenous members of the SAA, myself included," she objected, "and there's so little care given to how a paper like that might have harmed us. It was a very difficult experience to sit through that paper . . . when your very humanity and human rights are being questioned." She also explained that repatriation "is about power. It's about who gets to make decisions about what happens to the ancestors." Another archaeologist, less diplomatic, declared the paper "racist, anti-indigenous bullshit with talking points from white supremacy."

Eagerness to de-platform, readiness to resort to ad hominem attack, and refusal to address the substance of an argument: the reaction to Weiss and Springer's paper resembles the form of identity politics that sprang up on college campuses and now operates under Ibram X. Kendi's concept of "anti-racism." Any attempt to reason about the premises of this racialist doctrine is decried as confirmation of the doctrine's own unreasoned postulate. Truth belongs wholly to the "oppressed," and whatever the "oppressed" say must be accepted at face value.

The historical memory of most Native American tribes is, in fact, very shallow. With a few exceptions, disruptions from the colonial era onward—centuries of Christian missionizing, intermarriage, Western education, migration, and other forces of dependency, assimilation, and fragmentation—have left Native Americans with only a thin connection to ancient tribal memory. Human society in general cannot bear such a loss. Culture fills old voids with new mythologies that present themselves as if they were ancient tradition. It is an awkward situation for anthropologists who can see full well that fabrication has displaced folklore. As the newspaper editor Maxwell Scott says at the end of the classic John Ford movie *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, "When the legend becomes fact, print the legend." These days a lot of anthropologists and archaeologists are not only printing the contemporary legends, they are castigating anyone who notices the facts.

A second example: the archaeologist Bruce Bourque recently published a lengthy essay on *Quillette* about his attempts to decipher the genetic identity of an ancient maritime New England tribe (called by archaeologists the "Red Paint People") that lived in the region about four thousand years ago. Present-day Penobscot Indians succeeded in getting the Robert S. Peabody Museum at Phillips Academy Andover to relinquish the skeletal remains of the Red Paint People in their possession. The Penobscot Indians do not have any traceable connection to the Red Paint People; on the testimony of DNA evidence, the two groups are entirely unrelated. It is bad enough that the museum capitulated, but a greater source of disappointment for Bourque

is the bizarre willingness of fellow archaeologists to buy into the ideology of "whatever they say goes." He cites the Brown University anthropologist Robert Preucel, who in 2019 presided over a panel that declared archaeologists should pursue a "commonly agreed set of best practices" with "descendant communities." This commitment apparently holds even when conclusions based on genetics "challenge, or conflict with, community knowledge about the past. Folklore and myths must be taken into account, and we must discourage the idea of science 'controlling the narrative.'" A colleague put it more bluntly when he dismissed Bourque's concerns as "meaningless when compared to the distress caused to Indigenous communities by the historical treatment of their ancestral remains."

A third example: a new study by the population geneticists Lluis Quintana-Murci of the College of France and the Pasteur Institute and Etienne Patin of the Pasteur Institute has illuminated the migrations that ultimately led to the populating of Micronesia and Polynesia. Using the DNA of 317 people from twenty separate Pacific populations, Quintana-Murci and Patin were able to trace a key migration from Taiwan seven thousand years ago that spread across the Pacific over the ensuing thousands of years. It is a magnificent accomplishment of genetic research and widely recognized as such. And the researchers dutifully gained the permission of everyone whose genes they analyzed. What could be wrong? According to *Science*, "Despite those intriguing results, critics say the authors failed to meaningfully involve members of the Indigenous communities who provided DNA for the study." Lisa Matisoo-Smith, an anthropologist at the University of Otago, complained that the paper had no "Indigenous" authors. Getting the indigenous communities involved "makes our research and our interpretations richer." Was she expecting contemporary Hawaiians to remember the day seven thousand years ago when grandfather and grandmother embarked from Taiwan for the South Seas?

Humans are fallible creatures. And cultures are made up of humans. The claims we make about the past are mere assertions until they can be grounded in evidence. Of course, many kinds of evidence exist, and more kinds are being discovered. We no longer have to rely entirely on ancient documents, monuments, carbon-14 dating, and the sequencing of artifacts in subterranean strata. New and powerful forms of genetic analysis have opened up astonishing windows on the past. But at this same moment, many archaeologists are doing their best to shutter those windows. They do so in what they suppose (or pretend) is an ethical deference for living peoples. But these are empty ethics.

Why is this false reckoning happening now, as we move further in time from the historical cultures under discussion? Plainly it is a product of *our* culture: the culture of the community of archaeologists and anthropologists. This culture has been actively fleeing intellectual rigor for several generations. It has embraced identity politics down to the bone and then some. Recognizing that Western colonial ventures often came at a terrible cost to indigenous peoples is not enough. The new expectation is that Western culture itself must be subordinated to the cultures of the supposed descendants of the dispossessed.

What we stand to lose is important but rather hard to pin down. We could live without the knowledge that archaeology and anthropology seek—or used to seek. It won't kill us not to know more about the Kennewick Man and his world, or the Red Paint People, or how the ancient Pacific voyagers mixed with other peoples along the way. We do not literally *need* to know. But in choosing not to ask, or not permitting others to ask, we diminish humanity. We grant to relativism a power of sweeping destruction and believe ourselves somehow more honorable for bowing down to the illusions of others. We betray the pursuit of truth for intellectual frivolity and count ourselves wise in our folly.