

The New Criterion ^{40th} anniversary

December 2021

A monthly review *edited by Roger Kimball*

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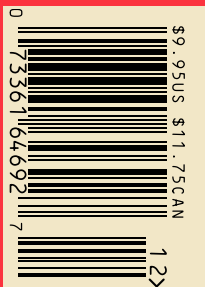
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Notes & Comments: December 2021

Mostly about pronouns

The pronoun wars have been raging around us for at least five or six years now. Like so many toxic developments, this sickness was incubated in the university. We began to take notice when the celebrated Canadian psychologist Jordan Peterson fell afoul of the pronoun police at his own institution. He became a public pariah and was almost ejected from the school, but was in effect rescued by the extraordinary success of his self-help book *Twelve Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos*.

The malady quickly spread, however. Back in 2018, we had occasion to note how the pronoun war had infected Williams College, always a reliable litmus paper for academic fatuousness, and since then the practice of people “declaring” their pronouns and making up ever more extravagant alternatives for the usual vocables (he, his, she, hers, etc.) has spread far and wide. A couple years ago, the metastasis looked complete, with employees at many businesses—especially “soft” ones like publishing and anything to do with the arts, media, or education—routinely including their “preferred” pronouns in the signature block of their correspondence. The nadir came when the Biden administration added a menu of pronoun choices to the White House website and announced that government employees would be encouraged to pick their own pronouns. Earlier this autumn, the State Department issued an enthusiastic tweet about a glorious new holiday: “International Pronouns Day.”

So it was really only business as usual to discover that Columbia University has issued an instructional video called “Why Pronouns Matter.” It is very brief, but also very, if unintentionally, funny. In some accompanying text, the magi at Columbia inform their readers that “Asking for and using correct pronouns is a way to respect those around you.”

We agree with that. Using correct grammar in general is a way of showing respect, for oneself as well as for those around you. With that in mind, we propose to offer a brief lesson in grammar. We turn first to the rest of that sentence. In addition to “showing respect,” we read that using the correct pronouns is a way to “create an inclusive environment for people of all genders and gender expressions.”

There are several things wrong with this clause. We can leave the psychobabble about creating an “inclusive environment” to one side. The real problem involves what your grammar teacher called “number.” When we are talking about the sexes (what this text calls “genders”) there are only two, male and female. Therefore, that part of the clause should read “both genders.”

Again, we are all for using the “correct pronouns.” It is actually pretty straightforward. A pronoun is a substitute for a noun or noun phrase. In English, pronouns have number and gender. Agreement in number and gender is essential if one wants to be correct, as the Columbia primer suggests that it does. “James has *his* own ticket” and “Mary has *hers*.” “All men love

their own children” but “Everyone has *his* own ideas” (not “their,” it should go without saying, because “everyone” is singular and in standard, i.e., correct, English, the masculine singular is preferred in such cases). You see how it works.

What about “ze/zir/zirs,” “zhe/zher/zhers,” and all the other exotic graphemes that have been put forward as possible pronouns? That’s an easy one. The Columbia primer offers to instruct us about using the “correct pronouns”—to which we say that “ze,” “zir,” and the rest are not correct, or even pronouns. How about this line from the video? “I’m Sen, and I use all pronouns.” Let us draw a veil.

Of course, the real prize in the pronoun wars is not correct grammar but the display of power and exertion of control. Lewis Carroll’s character Humpty Dumpty demonstrated what was at stake in his famous exchange with Alice:

“I don’t know what you mean by ‘glory,’” Alice said.

Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. “Of course you don’t—till I tell you. I meant ‘there’s a nice knock-down argument for you!’”

“But ‘glory’ doesn’t mean ‘a nice knock-down argument,’” Alice objected.

“When *I* use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, “it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.”

“The question is,” said Alice, “whether you *can* make words mean so many different things?”

“The question is,” said Humpty Dumpty, “which is to be master—that’s all.”

Our pronoun warriors, and their enablers in the ambient bureaucracy, are a lot like Humpty Dumpty. Not only are they habitually contemptuous of those around them, they are also willfully perverse in their arrogant repudiation of reality. Moreover, alas, they are destined to come a cropper on the heels of their own arrogance. We predict that the fatal fall will happen soon and, as in the original story, will present “all the king’s horses and all the king’s men” with an unsalvageable mess. That is OK, though, because it is time that those calling for the “reform” or “revitalization” of the university face up to the fact that higher education cannot be reformed. It must be re-

placed, the fragments of the old dispensation merely tided up and secured in some safe spot for the transition.

The new order

There are a handful of institutions that have not succumbed to the various madnesses affecting the culture of higher education—Hillsdale College, Grove City, St. Thomas Aquinas, and sundry others. But we desperately need new institutions to replace the ones shattered on the shoals of political correctness. We are pleased to report, therefore, on the advent of the University of Austin, a new liberal arts college dedicated to the “fearless pursuit of truth.”

That’s easy to say. Harvard’s motto, after all, is *Veritas*—stop sniggering—and Yale’s is *Lux et veritas*. Does anyone believe it any longer? Those words are empty at most colleges and universities because the institutions have bartered truth for “wokeness” and the imperatives of identity politics. So, skepticism is justified. On its website, uaustin.org, the University of Austin has a list of frequently asked questions. One in particular caught our notice. “Nearly every university says it stands for freedom of inquiry. What’s different about your university?” Answer: “We mean it.” They continue: “We are alarmed by the illiberalism and censoriousness prevalent in America’s most prestigious universities and what it augurs for the country. But we know that there are enough of us who still believe in the core purpose of higher education, the pursuit of truth.”

What imparts confidence in this declaration are the people behind it. The president is Pano Kanelos, formerly the president of St. John’s College in Annapolis. On its board of advisors is a robust group of scholars and public intellectuals including the historian Niall Ferguson, the journalist Bari Weiss, the evolutionary psychologist Steven Pinker, the mathematician and former president of the University of Chicago Robert Zimmer, the historian Wilfred M. McClay, the classicist Joshua T. Katz, and oth-

ers of similar distinction. The university will open its doors this coming summer with a program for “top students from other universities” to embark on a “spirited discussion about the most provocative questions that often lead to censorship or self-censorship in many universities.” In the fall of 2022, the university will begin offering several MA programs. In the fall of 2024, Kanelos hopes to launch the university’s undergraduate college.

This is a bold and indeed a risky undertaking, but one that we wholeheartedly support. The educational establishment in this country is worse than moribund. It is a disaster—and not (to adapt an image from the philosopher David Stove) a static disaster like a bombed-out building. No, it is the active, contagious kind, like a badly leaking nuclear reactor or an outbreak of foot and mouth disease. The time for remedial tinkering is over. New institutions are needed if we are to keep that old flame of free inquiry alive. We welcome the University of Austin to the fray.

Gerald J. Russello, 1971–2021

It is with great sadness that we mark the passing of Gerald Russello, who died at the shockingly young age of fifty last month after a yearlong illness. Gerald was a lawyer, and a distinguished one: he clerked for Justice Daniel J. O’Hern of the New Jersey Supreme Court and Judge Leonard I. Garth of the United States Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit. But to note that professional affiliation is a bit like saying that Wallace Stevens was an insurance man. Like Stevens’s, Gerald’s professional career functioned as the enabler of what we like to think of as his real career as a writer, thinker, and editor.

Gerald wrote for many publications here and in England, including *First Things*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Literary Review*, *Modern Age*, and *The Review of Politics*. He wrote nearly twenty pieces for *The New Criterion*, beginning in 1999 with a review of essays by John Jay Chapman (1862–1933), the great American

man of letters, and ending just last June with a piece on that most urbane of contemporary novelists, Louis Auchincloss (1917–2010).

Those literary bookends indicate a real but ultimately subordinate aspect of Gerald’s intellectual interests. Closer to the center were figures like Edmund Burke. Above all, Gerald was occupied with religious/literary thinkers like G. K. Chesterton (he was a member of the Chesterton Society), the artist-poet David Jones, and Russell Kirk. Gerald was a prominent part of the Russell Kirk Center for Cultural Renewal, serving as editor of *The University Bookman*—the publication that Kirk started in 1960—from 2005 until his death. Gerald also found time to write or edit five books, including *The Postmodern Imagination of Russell Kirk* (2007).

In “The unwritten constitution,” his contribution to our symposium commemorating the centenary of Russell Kirk’s birth in 2018, Gerald honed in on a debate about the ultimate foundations of the law that continues to be very much alive:

Kirk in his writings on the law understood that if the customs of a people change, then the law changes as well, even if written texts remain the same. So it was important for citizens to be mindful of and preserve those traditions that supported local government and established practices and understandings. . . .

Without those attachments, self-government suffers. And those attachments are only partially attributable to reasoning from abstract rights. We have become too Lockean. We understand ourselves as rights-bearing, autonomous individuals entering the public square to which we give our contingent consent. It is unclear whether our constitutional structure can survive on such a thin basis, especially when our notion of the rights that an individual bears expands endlessly.

That last bit might have been torn from the front page of today’s newspaper, while the comment on Locke zeroes in on a lively scholarly debate. Gerald Russello was the most modest and decorous of men, but his intellect was bold, tenacious, and penetrating. *RIP.*

Unprecedented

by Michael Anton

The theme is “Western civilization at the crossroads.” Far be it from me to doubt that the West is on the precipice of something enormous. But “crossroads” implies a map. Do we have one? Is a piece of paper showing the way forward—whether predictive or hopeful—even possible?

I’ve noticed that a lot of people more or less “on my side,” or who see things basically as I do, are extremely confident that they know what is going to happen next. Their certainty is entirely independent of what they think they know.

Some believe that the end—the collapse of present ruling arrangements—is imminent, if not tomorrow or next week, then soon, within a year or five. Others assert that the present regime is stable and not only can but will last for decades or even centuries. Some insist that the regime will fall of its own incompetence, others that its end will require an external push—which some are certain will come, and others are equally sure will not.

When I have thought about this, I have been in some part inclined to the opinion that present arrangements are unstable and may be approaching their end. Yet in thinking it through further, I am forced to admit that our times are marked by so many unprecedented trends and events that making predictions seems foolhardy.

But before going into those differences, let’s first consider the one historical parallel that all sides of this debate draw on for precedent: the rise, peak, decline, and fall of Rome. At first glance, the two cases seem to have a lot in common. Not only was the United States founded

by men educated in the classics who took Roman pseudonyms and named the government’s top legislative body after Rome’s, and not only did those founders revive republicanism after centuries of abeyance following the transformation of the Roman republic into an empire, but our country’s history itself seems to have tracked Rome’s, if not precisely then certainly thematically.

Both Rome and America were founded by kings—or, in our case, under the auspices of a king. In both instances, the descendants of those kings ruled in ways their subjects found intolerable and were overthrown. Both peoples then established a mixed-republican form of government, with monarchical, aristocratic, and popular elements. Both of those governments were, at first, weighted toward their aristocratic elements but gradually—owing in part to popular discontent and strife—became more balanced and eventually biased toward the popular element. Both societies fought constant wars, self-justified as “defensive” but more often than not expansionist. Both rapidly conquered what we might call their immediate “neighborhoods”—the Italian peninsula and major Mediterranean islands, the North American continent, respectively—and then went on to win major wars against competing “superpowers,” in the process becoming world-bestrident hegemon. Indeed, we may say that no other power in history, save for perhaps the British Empire, acquired such extensive spheres of influence and so dominated their respective eras for so long. If other empires held more territory, or perhaps technically lasted

longer, none exerted nearly as much enduring influence on the rest of the world.

The Roman case

In Rome's case, its government formally made the transition from republic to empire after a long expansion that bloated the treasury, increased the size and power of the military, concentrated wealth in the hands of a few who controlled not just the economy but the government, and impoverished ordinary citizens. While much of that may sound familiar, much is different, making the analogy (like all such historical comparisons) inexact. Rome conquered and directly administered territory throughout the entire Mediterranean basin and over most of the (then-) known world. America's "empire," by contrast, is quasi-metaphoric or at the very least indirect; the only external territories of any consequence it controls are Puerto Rico and Guam. Then there are all the differences in religion, philosophy, society, economics, technology, and so on, far too numerous to list. (One might also ask: where's *our* bloated treasury?)

America has yet formally to transform (if it ever will) from republic to empire. Yet in all important respects, our country is no longer a republic, much less a democracy, but rather a kind of hybrid corporate-administrative oligarchy. This lack of formal transition causes some to speculate that America is in the "late republican" stage, with the republic (it is alleged, or hoped) soon to fall to a "Caesar." Those who assert that the transition, however informal its appearance, has already happened are more likely to place America in the "late imperial" stage, i.e., much closer to total collapse and replacement by an entirely new order.

All such speculations presuppose the truth of the classical theory known as the "cycle of regimes." Just as Rome was born, grew, matured, peaked, declined, and eventually fell, so will—and must—America. Cycle theory predicts that every more or less good regime—whether monarchy, aristocracy, or democracy—falls when it inevitably becomes overbearing and odious. Thus do monarchies degenerate into tyrannies, which are replaced by aristocracies

that decay into oligarchies, which are overthrown by democracies that descend into mob-rule or even anarchy. In that case, we should expect our present oligarchy, sooner or later, to give way to democracy.

While that possibility cannot be dismissed out of hand, the prospect seems laughable. If there is to be, as cycle theory predicts, a popular revolt against our corrupt oligarchy, it would seem much more likely to be led by a charismatic, centralizing figure who ascends to the leadership of the popular party and then installs himself as the head of government—in other words, Caesarism. And even that would depend on a Caesar of sufficient talent and institutional support, as well as a sufficient level of spirit and virtue in the people (and on much else besides).

More fundamentally, classic cycle theory presupposes an ethnically, linguistically, and religiously unified people. Indeed, in his *Politics*, Aristotle says that "dissimilarity of stock is conducive to factional conflict," i.e., ethnic differences in and of themselves, irrespective of disagreements over regime form (typically few versus many), can drive revolution. Aristotle seems to admit the possibility of assimilation: dissimilarity, he says, leads to conflict "until a cooperative spirit develops." But he cites no examples, forcing one to wonder how likely it is for this theoretical possibility to be actualized in the real world. It seems, instead, that the fundamental conflict between the few and the many emerges only where the more fundamental conflict between differing peoples is absent. Where it is not, the few and the many alike rally to their fellow ethnics; ethnicity itself, rather than "class," is their prime motivator.

Multi-ethnic polities are hardly unknown to history. Of these, Aristotle gives several examples—all of which ended up fighting civil wars along ethnic lines.

The most common (one may say only) way that multi-ethnic societies have been successfully governed is centrally, from the top, by some form of one-man rule, whether monarchical, Caesarist, or tyrannical. This, ultimately, is how Rome "solved" the problem of admitting so many foreigners to citizenship, to say nothing of its far-flung conquest of peoples whom it never made citizens. In more recent

times, one may think of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and Tito's Yugoslavia.

America today

Consider, now, the contemporary United States of America. At first glance, it seems to belie Aristotle's implied assertion that regime-ending ethnic conflict is unavoidable wherever more than one group lives under the same government. Americans pride themselves, and their country, on their exceptional track record of assimilating peoples from all over the world.

Yet before we congratulate ourselves overmuch, let us reflect, first, on the fact that the United States has not merely abandoned but utterly repudiated the traditional understanding of assimilation, which is now denounced by all elite opinion as "racist" and evil. Not only does no American institution encourage (much less demand) assimilation, they all foment the opposite. Immigrants to America are exhorted to embrace their native cultures and taught that the country to which they've chosen to immigrate is the worst in world history, whose people and institutions are intent on harming them, and that their own cultures are infinitely superior. In this respect, one supposes, immigrants *are* encouraged to "assimilate"—to the anti-Americanism of the average Oberlin professor.

Be that as it may, no nation in recorded history has ever willingly opened its doors to millions of immigrants only to insist that they must never adapt to the traditional ways of their new country—indeed, insisting that they forever remain as foreign as the day they arrived. Similarly, no country in recorded history has ever welcomed millions with the message that their new country, along with its existing citizens, are inherently evil and out to get them.

Second, assimilation works best among peoples with some common underlying similarity, whether political, linguistic, ethnic, religious, or cultural (preferably a combination of all these). Its effectiveness declines as the differences among the disparate peoples increase. Historically, the closer in the above categories an immigrant group was to founding-stock Americans, the more quickly and smoothly its

members assimilated. American immigration policy and practice has drifted steadily away from prioritizing this practice. In particular, since the passage of the 1965 Immigration Act and the de facto (since the 1970s at least) non-enforcement of America's borders and immigration laws, newcomers to America have become more and more distant—not just from existing Americans but from one another. America now takes in, and has been importing for more than fifty years, people from every part of the globe, of every faith, speaking every language. This, too, has never before happened in world history.

Third is the size of the wave. Precise numbers are hard to come by, but if we count immigrants legal and illegal plus all their direct descendants, then something like a hundred million newcomers have arrived in America since 1965. Only fourteen countries today have total populations exceeding that figure. In 1965, there were just under two hundred million Americans. Today it is estimated that 333 million live within our borders. At least two-thirds of that growth has been immigrant-driven. This large a migration wave, in so short a time, to one country, from so many different sources, has also never happened before in human history. Need a "respectable" source to vouch for that? Here's Bill Clinton in 1998:

But now we are being tested again—by a new wave of immigration larger than any in a century, far more diverse than any in our history. Each year, nearly a million people come legally to America. Today, nearly one in ten people in America was born in another country; one in five schoolchildren are from immigrant families. Today, largely because of immigration, there is no majority race in Hawaii or Houston or New York City. Within five years there will be no majority race in our largest state, California. In a little more than fifty years, there will be no majority race in the United States [applause]. No other nation in history has gone through demographic change of this magnitude in so short a time.

Note the applause. The venue of the above speech was a university commencement: a sitting president addressing freshly minted college graduates and their parents, i.e., the elite speak-

ing to the elite. Demographic decline was literally applauded. And this is only one example. Mere months ago, when the Census announced that, for the first time in American history, the white population had declined in absolute numbers, *The Tonight Show's* audience cheered. No native-born population of any country has ever literally cheered its own dispossession.

That which cannot be said

The “Great Replacement” is happening, not just in America but throughout the West. Elites both deny and affirm it. When they write op-eds in *The New York Times* entitled “We Can Replace Them,” that’s a good thing and the phenomenon under discussion is absolutely right and just. When you notice and express the mildest wish not to be replaced, it’s a racist conspiracy theory that you are evil for even mentioning—your evil being further proof that you deserve to be replaced. They get to say it; you’re required not merely to pretend that you didn’t hear it but also to insist that they never said it. No majority stock in any nation has ever deliberately sought its own replacement, much less insisted that those who might have misgivings lie to themselves that it’s not happening.

The “Great Replacement” is not just happening; under the Biden-Harris regime, it is accelerating. Among the few promises Biden has kept are those not to build a single new inch of the border wall or to enforce immigration laws. As a result, illegal migrants are pouring across the southern border at an unprecedented rate. The ridiculous former practice of “catch-and-release”—catch an illegal immigrant, release him on American soil—has been replaced by “catch-and-bus” or even “catch-and-airlift.” The U.S. government places illegal border-crossers on buses and planes and distributes them throughout the heartland, unannounced, often followed by official denials. Naturally, none of these people is vetted in any way—not for COVID, which has the rest of us in semi-permanent lockdown, nor for criminal records or anything else. Couple this with the regime’s policy to settle throughout middle America as many unvetted Afghans as possible—some of whom are likely

terrorists, several of whom have already committed sex crimes—and it is fair to describe current practice as demographic warfare. The concept is not exactly new; tyrants have been known from time immemorial to move populations around so as to hold conquests more securely. What’s unprecedented is a regime importing foreigners to harm its own people.

The question of immigration is inseparable from that of race. “Critical Race Theory,” much in the news lately, is but the latest iteration of intellectual and academic anti-whiteness that has been central to leftist ideology since the mid-1960s. The ur-specimen is Susan Sontag’s 1967 belch that “the white race is the cancer of human history.” Examples are so numerous today that cataloguing them all would be a full-time job for an entire think tank—but a pointless one, since the Left will in the same breath deny and affirm their own words quoted back to them: “We didn’t say that, and it’s good that we did.” Many whites, apparently, believe they *deserve* to be replaced because their race makes them uniquely, and irredeemably, evil. While cultural self-loathing is hardly unknown to history, I know of none so explicitly race-based or widespread—or so eager to pursue self-abnegation all the way to the end.

This hatred of the core stock of the nation, by other members of that same stock, also appears to be unprecedented. Examples can be found of a new elite rising to preeminence above an older one, which it then displaces with prejudice. But of a ruling class coming to despise its own (broadly speaking) ethnic group and seeking ways to rob their fellow co-ethnics of power, standing, and influence? I can’t think of any other such cases.

The matter becomes even more complicated when one reflects that this is mostly an intra-white civil war. One group of whites pronounces the entire white race evil, seeks policies to hurt it, but somehow exempts itself. So far, these upper-caste whites have found ways to protect their own privilege but haven’t developed consistent rhetoric to defend that privilege. They appear to believe that no matter how much anti-white poison they vomit or how many destructive policies they enact, none will ever blow back on them. In particular, they seem to believe

that the “allies” in whom they stir up anti-white hatred will never turn and bite them; at least, they appear not to have seriously considered the possibility. This situation, too, is unprecedented.

Tyranny old & new

Tyrants or ruling classes that despoil their countries for personal gain are nothing new. If that were all we had today, our situation would be much more understandable. And we do, in part, have that. Our ruling class is rich and rapacious—rich *because* rapacious, and eager to be richer still by taking what little you have left.

Yet elite enthusiasms extend well beyond mere greed. There is a malice in them atypical to the native despot, one found historically only or largely among the most punitive conquerors. A tyrant fears a healthy population, to be sure, because such is always a threat to his power. This fear typically inspires little beyond efforts to ensure that the population is dependent and unarmed—two aims of our overlords, it need hardly be added.

But our elites also go much further. They seem determined to make the American population fat, weak, ugly, lethargic, drug-addled, screen-addicted, and hyper-sexualized, the men effeminate and the women masculine. Those last two actually barely scratch the surface of the agenda, which includes turning males into “females” and vice versa—or into any one of a potentially infinite number of “genders.” (The number varies depending on which source you check; sixty-three is the highest I could find. Needless to say, no establishment source stops at “two.”)

The regime promotes every imaginable historic form of degeneracy—and then invents new ones undreamt of by Caligula, the Borgias, or Catherine the Great. All these it pushes through every available media channel, social and legacy, in programming and advertising alike, even in books stocked in elementary-school libraries. As I write, the Virginia governor’s race is being roiled by the presence in said libraries of *Gender Queer: A Memoir*, an illustrated “children’s” book as sexually explicit as 1970s hardcore pornography—and arguably illegal to boot,

since it depicts minors. One candidate for governor and his supporters indignantly insist that this kind of material *must* be forced on your kids at public expense and that only Nazis object. Degeneracy in tyrants is of course as old as the hills, but prior despots had the “decency,” if one could call it that, to restrict their perversions to the satisfaction of their own private pleasures. To force degeneracy on the whole of society, with the explicit intent of bringing the rest us to our knees, literally and figuratively—that, I think, has never happened before.

An odd feature of our time is the coupling of mass hyper-sexualization with mass barrenness. Some argue, plausibly, that the link is direct: hyper-sexualization disconnected from procreation inevitably leads to fewer babies. The degree to which crashing fertility is simply an effect of modernity versus a deliberate plan by our rulers is an open question. It is certainly true that every economically and technologically developed society, regardless of region, culture, race, or religion, suffers from cratering birthrates.

But it’s also true that our rulers advocate and celebrate careerism, consumerism, self-centeredness, casual sex, delayed marriage, (let us say) “non-fecund” couplings, and, where and if all that fails, small families—“for the environment,” you understand. In other words, when and where the (allegedly) inexorable process of modernity is overcome by the innate human desire for love and family, the regime eagerly steps in with propaganda to bully men and women out of such longings. I suppose there is a near-historical precedent for this, namely China’s one-child policy, in effect from 1980 to 2015. But that was implemented to relieve (it was thought) a looming Malthusian crisis, a fear that cannot reasonably apply to contemporary America, whose birthrate is 1.64 and falling like a stone. China itself, whose leaders want its people to live on, abandoned the policy. Meanwhile, America unofficially does everything it can to suppress native births. Has this ever happened before in a country not even plausibly facing a “population crisis”?

The promotion of ugliness deserves special attention. The autocrats of old wanted to be known for their patronage of beauty, the arts,

and great works. This is one meaning of Shelley's "Ozymandias," and also of Augustus's boast that he found Rome a city of brick and left it a city of marble (to say nothing of having commissioned the *Aeneid*). A stroll through any city in Europe, and in most of the Americas, finds the same sentiment everywhere—until about the middle of the twentieth century, when suddenly everything turned brutalist, and brutally ugly, and not just the buildings, but the art, the literature, the music, almost everything.

One attempts to state the following as delicately as possible, even though regime propaganda on this score is anything but delicate, but today the ugliness extends to people. One hesitates also to say anything that could be interpreted as praise of underwear ads, but, within living memory, the sirens of Times Square billboards were lithe and lovely; today they are, quite deliberately, obese and angry. That is, when they're not cross-dressers or pierced like an East Village junkie and tattooed like a C-list porn star. All this, we are commanded to believe, is "beautiful," though no healthy person does. The point seems to be humiliation: forcing us little people to say "the thing which is not." That trick is also as old as the hills, but the deliberate promotion of ugliness seems to be a new way to play it. Antiquity abounded in wicked tyrants, yet try to find an ancient statue anywhere near as hideous as a modern lingerie model.

But in terms of what we choose to elevate, nothing illustrates the perversity of present America more than the deification of George Floyd. There are now monuments to him all over the country that are treated as sacred. In a rare instance when one is defaced, the resultant outcry resembles the Athenian people's reaction to the desecration of the Hermai. One may insist that George Floyd did not deserve to die the way he did and still see that neither did he live his life so as to make the possibility remote. He was convicted of eight crimes and charged with or detained for at least nineteen (though one must here concede the difficulty of finding reliable relevant information, since unflattering facts about Floyd's life are effectively suppressed and are taboo to discuss). The worst of his crimes was an armed robbery in which he pointed a gun at the belly of a woman who may (or may

not) have been pregnant. Floyd's admirers insist she wasn't, but more careful sources assert only that no one has ever definitively proved she was. Floyd was the father of five children, from whose lives he was by all accounts absent, and none of whose mothers he ever married. At the time of his death, Floyd was in the process of being arrested for yet another crime and was not cooperating with the arresting officers. A serial drug abuser, he had in his system not just methamphetamine but a potentially lethal dose of fentanyl—an extremely dangerous synthetic opioid—which may well have contributed to his death. Even if one fully accepts the trial court's finding that the drugs played no role, one must still admit that had Floyd only gotten into the back of the police vehicle as officers instructed, he could not have died in the way prosecutors (and the media) alleged. Above all, we must confront the painful fact that Floyd did not, according to moral standards that for centuries were taken for granted, live a life worthy of admiration, much less of veneration. Yet our society treats him as a saint, if not something higher. The pagan gods were not always well-behaved, to say the least. But has any people ever chosen such an undeserving object of worship?

Bad education

We may tie these points together under the broad rubric of "education," though that word is risibly inapt to what is "taught" today. The word's root is Latin and means "to lead forth"—that is, to coax out of imperfect but improvable human nature that which makes each human being better. Or, as the classics understood it, not merely to impart knowledge but also to form character.

In both respects, our system does the opposite. It teaches lies, attacks and suppresses truth, and encourages people to behave worse. It tells children to hate themselves (or their classmates) because of their race and to hate their country. It encourages boys to declare themselves girls, and vice versa. It badgers kids into professing themselves attracted to members of the same sex, or of all sixty-three sexes, regardless of, or despite, their natural inclination. It firehoses

them with sexualized messaging and imagery, always taking care to decouple orgasmic self-indulgence from love and family.

The people who run the system, or many of them, can only be described as sadists. How sick does one's mind have to be to think it a good idea to teach a black kindergartner (through the taxpayer-financed public education system, no less) to hate his white classmates, or those white classmates to hate themselves? A sane society would call this child abuse.

The system now protects predators at the expense of the vulnerable and attacks parents who object. In Virginia, a boy in a skirt entered a girls' bathroom and raped a student. The school and the district hushed it up and transferred him to another school—where he did it again. When one victim's father complained at a school-board meeting, cops roughed him up and arrested him. The superintendent, principal, and all others in authority furiously denied that any assault had ever taken place—that is, except for the father's impassioned plea, which the school board referred to the Attorney General of the United States, who then ordered the FBI and U.S. attorneys to investigate outspoken parents as “domestic terrorists.” This is not merely insane but deliberately evil. The Carthaginians cast living children into furnaces to satiate their (false) god Baal; we sacrifice our children's mental health and adult futures to appease our false god Woki. *Plus ça change?*

(We may note in passing that when similar atrocities occurred in the pre-woke Catholic Church, an institution the ruling class feared and despised, demands for “accountability” were deafening. Today, the only sounds one hears are from establishmentarians and their Conservatism, Inc., enablers: this isn't happening, it's a “culture-war trope” ginned up by MAGA “racists,” and anyway it's no big deal so lighten up.)

The most prevalent failures of education in history, it is widely accepted, have stemmed from a lack of it: failing to teach the poor basic skills such as reading and writing, or even deliberately depriving them of such learning. Now we have come full circle, but worse. We barely teach kids to read, write, or add anymore—indeed, the most “progressive” corners of the education system denounce such emphasis on standards and

core knowledge as “white-supremacist.” There's ample historical precedent for widespread illiteracy. But for teaching one's own citizens self-hatred, degeneracy, and despondency—without teaching them to read and write?

Barbarians at the gates

The typical tyrant enjoys wealth and power, which are easier to extract from a productive populace than from zombies. He therefore, typically, does not prioritize degrading his population beyond measures necessary to produce obedience. The serial humiliations inflicted on our people by its ruling class—not all of which, to say the least, generate profits—appear to be another element of contemporary life without historical precedent.

Crime is a case in point. No society, whether free or despotic, benefits from crime, all else being equal—though it's certainly true that a tyrant can find it useful to exempt his own partisans from criminal enforcement, and even to encourage them to terrorize his enemies. Criminals being criminals, this is a hard dynamic to keep from spinning out of control. In 2020, for instance, the ruling class unleashed BLM hordes and Antifa predators, plus assorted rioters and looters, to despoil and burn some 220 American cities.

Sacking was not uncommon in the ancient world. Rome was sacked many times, but always by foreigners and never at the instigation of her leading citizens: the senate never riled up the plebs to scorch the Capitoline. Yet in the summer of 2020, our ruling class actively encouraged, through state-aligned media, the repeated sacking of Manhattan, the very beating heart of the Davos Archipelago, where our richest and most powerful overlords live and work. They fired up mobs to trash huge swaths of Washington, D.C., their cherished imperial capital, which to this day has yet to recover. Why did they do that? Was there some nefarious plan to derive benefit that I don't understand? Or was this an instance of losing control of the shock troops? Either way, the events were unprecedented.

Then there are the related issues of technology and our fake economy. These subjects are

far too large to explore here and so must be treated cursorily. Let us merely say that modern digital technology is unlike any previous “advance” in human history. It threatens not only to become man’s master and destroyer (other technologies have also threatened that) but also to remake his very soul—or kill it.

The modern economy that technology enables is similarly anti-human. It deprives billions of the dignity of meaningful work at fair remuneration while it enriches a tiny minority adept at manipulating bits and bytes to no discernible purpose or benefit. The world has had to endure oligarchs for millennia. But our empty plutocrats create nothing but new ways to waste time and enervate the spirit. They are, like the technologies that make them rich and powerful, an entirely new phenomenon.

Finally, there is the endless insistence that every new dawn must begin a fresh Year Zero; we must start continually anew. What was acceptable yesterday is anathema today and will be more so tomorrow. All that came before must be swept aside and destroyed with extreme prejudice, on a rolling basis.

The most ferocious revolutionaries of yesterday didn’t do this. The Jacobins changed the calendar and guillotined a lot of nobles but otherwise allowed France to remain French. The Bolsheviks did not touch the Russian literary or concert canons; to the contrary, they celebrated both. Mao made an attempt to start over—until the more sensible Party bosses realized that the old man (and especially his wife) had lost their minds and were destroying China, sidelined him, and quietly put an end to the Cultural Revolution four years before formally declaring mission accomplished. The Ayatollah did not ban Nowruz or other cornerstones of Persian tradition beloved by the Iranian people, but which predated his puritanical version of Islam.

Our overlords, by contrast, insist on changing everything and will not stop until everything familiar is gone. When this is pointed out, they smirk about the “slippery-slope fallacy” and gleefully lie. That will never happen, they say, until they insist on it, and, once accomplished, move on to the next target. They are cultural locusts devouring everything in their path. If the internal “logic” (if one may use that word

in this context) of their passionate hatred is allowed to play out, no statue can be left standing, no traditional holiday observed, no name unchanged. If that outcome does not come to pass, it will not be because those driving toward it have a change of heart, nor is it likely to be because the Right suddenly becomes effective in opposition. It will rather be because the locusts destroy too many of the country’s remaining functioning parts too soon, causing the system to collapse before their program is complete, thereby making further “progress” impossible.

Any one of the above elements would appear to be unprecedented; just a few of them in combination surely are. All of them together?

How, therefore, can anyone be confident that he “knows” what is going to happen—whether imminent collapse, drawn-out decline, or centuries of tyranny?

The end?

If forced to bet, I would have to place my chips somewhere between imminent collapse and drawn-out decline. I occasionally read theories of triple bank-shots and four-dimensional chess—they really know what they’re doing!—only to marvel. Our regime cannot, at present, unload a cargo ship, stock a store shelf, run a clean election, handle parental complaints at a school board meeting, pass a budget bill, treat a cold variant, keep order in the streets, defeat a third world country, or even evacuate said country cleanly. And that’s to say nothing of all the things it *should* be doing, that all non-joke countries do, that it refuses to do. If our ruling class has a plan, it would seem to be to destroy the society and institutions from which they, at present, are the largest—one is tempted to say only—beneficiaries. Do they think they can benefit more from the wreckage? Or are they driven by hatreds that blind them to self-interest? Perhaps they’re simply insane?

Whatever the case, couple all this unprecedentedness with all this incompetence, and going long on Wokamerica seems a sucker bet. But, to end where we began, the very unprecedentedness of our situation means that all bets are off.

Between art & revolution

by James Panero

Just off the rue Bonaparte, in the Saint-Germain-des-Prés district of Paris, in the courtyard of what is now the École des Beaux-Arts, is a fragment of a fragment. Here on a sliver of wall is a historical remnant that might be easily overlooked: a Renaissance façade attached to what is now known as the chapel building. The wall did not originate here. What we see instead—rather surprisingly—is a slice of the Château d’Anet, Philibert de l’Orme’s sixteenth-century castle built for Diane de Poitiers, the mistress of Henry II. Over two centuries ago, this façade was brought by boat from the Loire Valley to this corner of the Left Bank, piece by piece, to save it from destruction. Salvaged and restored, the ornate assembly of columns and statues then served as the entrance to the Musée des Monuments Français—the Museum of French Monuments. Today this façade remains one of the few pieces of evidence of a museum that rescued numerous such objects of French history and defined, in fact, what it means to be a museum. The façade also serves as a tribute to Alexandre Lenoir, the director of this museum who defied the Reign of Terror with his institution. Quite literally at times, Lenoir was all that stood between art and revolution.

The Louvre Museum, that encyclopedic creation of the French Revolution, founded in 1793 and just a five-minute walk from here across the Seine, has long captured the world’s attention. Yet it was the Museum of French Monuments, officially founded two years later but already in formation at the

height of the Terror thanks to Lenoir’s interventions, that was far more central to the salvation of French history and its artifacts during the most destructive moments of revolutionary fervor.

The relative silence around the story of Lenoir speaks to history’s long valoration of the French Revolution and the suppression of its most disturbing moments. While Lenoir understood the language of the revolution, his museum stood as a last defense against some of its most radical acts of vandalism and desecration. “No account of the dawn of the museum age in France would be complete without it,” Andrew McClellan said of the Museum of French Monuments in his own history of the Louvre. Nevertheless, as Christopher M. Greene noted in his study of Lenoir from 1981, “Lenoir and his museum have received little serious attention from students of history or the arts, though these students have sometimes referred to them in passing, often in tones of disparagement.” A dissertation by Alexandra Stara, published by Routledge in 2013 as *The Museum of French Monuments 1795–1816*, was the first full scholarly treatment of Lenoir since the 1880s. For those who trumpet total revolution, the history of a figure who stood against the Reign of Terror is best left forgotten.

In the summer of 2020, the controversy that can still surround Lenoir was made all too apparent. A year ago in these pages, we had occasion to reflect on the curator Keith Christiansen, then the chairman of European

Paintings at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, who made the mistake of bringing up Lenoir during our own season of vandalism and desecration (see Notes & Comments and “Unmaking the Met,” December 2020). “Alexandre Lenoir battling the revolutionary zealots bent on destroying the royal tombs in Saint Denis,” Christiansen wrote on social media, posting a print of the French curator with arms outstretched against the sledgehammers. In 2020 as in 1789, Lenoir showed how a museum can be a sanctuary for art and artifacts in an age of destruction. “The losses that occur” when major works of art are destroyed by “war, iconoclasm, revolution, and intolerance,” Christiansen explained, are the enemies of art history, diminishing our “fuller understanding of a complicated and sometimes ugly past.” He then wondered: “How many great works of art have been lost to the desire to rid ourselves of a past of which we don’t approve. How grateful we are to people like Lenoir who realized that their value—both artistic and historical—extended beyond a defining moment of social and political upheaval and change.”

How grateful, indeed—and how inappropriate, it was quickly determined by our latter-day tribunes, for this curator to suggest such a connection between that summer’s reign of terror and the Reign of Terror. The uproar over Christiansen’s statements—“shared on Juneteenth,” as *The New York Times* reminded us—made national headlines. Museum leaders had him remove the post and delete his private Instagram account. As he was led up to the social-media guillotine, Christiansen finally recanted: “I will make no excuses except to say that I had in mind one thing and lacked the awareness to self-reflect on how my post could go in a very different direction, on a very important day . . . and would cause further hurt to those experiencing so much pain right now,” he wrote. “I want to be clear on my view that monuments of those who promoted racist ideologies and systems should never be glorified or in a location where they can cause further harm.” Met leaders then apologized for their institution as being “connected with a logic of what is defined as white supremacy”

while announcing plans for Christiansen’s retirement.

Christiansen was right to consider the parallels between the French Revolution and our own Jacobin times, and for this he was denounced, appropriately enough, by our present-day Robespierres. He also did a service by reminding us of Lenoir’s role in countering revolution’s most destructive energies. The best minds of the French Revolution—the ultimate product of the Enlightenment, after all—organized committee after committee and issued decree after decree to control a revolution that proved uncontrollable. Against these many pronouncements, Lenoir understood that the future of France depended on preserving the objects of its past. His institution revealed how the public museum—a new invention—could have a central role not only in collecting works of art but also in preserving the artifacts and monuments of cultural patrimony.

The Museum of French Monuments began its existence as a revolutionary depot for materials seized from the Church and, soon after, the monarchy. On November 2, 1789, the Revolutionary Assembly nationalized Church property. Bronze statues were melted down into guns and cannons. The lead from church roofs was stripped away and turned into bullets. Books and manuscripts were shredded to make cartridges. The revolutionaries seized so much loot that it could not be sold off quickly enough, even as raw materials. On October 15, 1790, the Committee for the Alienation of National Assets decreed that two new depots were to serve as warehouses where cultural detritus could be carted away and centralized. Along with the Hôtel de Nesle, the suppressed convent of the Petits-Augustins, with its campus of courtyards and buildings with canal access to the Seine, was set aside to serve as a convenient warehouse for the revolutionary haul.

Born in Paris in 1761, raised by a clergyman uncle in Alsace outside of the capital’s academic circles, Lenoir was a court painter who found himself at just the right place and right time to stand against the worst insults of the revolutionaries. An apprentice to the

royal artist Gabriel François Doyen, Lenoir stepped into the role of guardian of the Petits-Augustins when Doyen took up an invitation from Catherine the Great and decided, quite wisely, to settle in Saint Petersburg. One of his final acts in France was to recommend his student of fifteen years for the position.

Lenoir proved to be remarkably adept at staying afloat through the rising tides of revolution. He argued, for example, that church statues should be saved for what their garments might teach us about the history of costume. Since the revolutionaries coveted metal for its raw material, and bronze sculpture was particularly vulnerable to seizure and destruction, Lenoir painted over bronzes by Jacques Sarrazin to disguise them as marble. He was also a smart negotiator in an era that could give and take more than just works of art. He once arranged for the return of a bronze from the foundry; the paintings that were seized in exchange were burned on a revolutionary pyre in one of its orgiastic festivals.

The execution of Louis XVI on January 21, 1793, brought about the nationalization of royal property and accelerated the bloodshed of the revolution. On July 4 of that year, the National Convention decreed that the symbols of the ancien régime were to be destroyed within days. It set its sights on the royal tombs in the abbey church of Saint-Denis just north of Paris. In August the Convention organized the ritualistic desecration of the tombs in an event over several days that saw some of the worst vandalism of the revolution. Saint-Denis was renamed Franciade as revolutionaries attack its royal monuments with hammers, using the rubble to create a grotto for a festival in honor of Marat and Le Peletier. They then exhumed the remains from the tombs and began piling the corpses in front of the cathedral. The bodies of some forty-six French kings, along with the remains of over a hundred other nobles, were pulled from their graves.

The Convention called this revolutionary act the “Last Judgment of Kings.” The revolutionaries went for the bones and ash of the oldest kings—the Merovingians, the Carolingians, and the Robertians—and moved on to the newer and more odoriferous remains of the

houses of Valois and Bourbon. As more bodies were exhumed, a black vapor began to envelop and sicken the revolutionaries.

At two hundred years old, the remains of Henry IV, the “good king,” then surprised the mob by the unsullied state of his preservation, which they took as an omen. For a time the revolutionaries propped up his body as an attraction, clipping his hair and beard and pulling his teeth as souvenirs. A woman then came into the cathedral and cursed him before punching his corpse in the face, sending him tumbling to the ground. Like his royal relatives, the good king ended up in a trench covered in lime next to his mother-in-law, Catherine de’ Medici. The status of Henry’s head, however, remains a point of contention. Decapitated like those of the other monarchs, the head recently made headlines, so to speak, when it was discovered in a Parisian attic and forensically linked to *le bon roi*.

An eyewitness to these revolutionary acts, Lenoir took detailed notes of the destruction. Using his artistic skills, he made field sketches of the royal corpses before they were deposited in the communal pits. He successfully thwarted the destruction of the tombs of Francis I, Henry II, Charles VI, and Louis XII, and began transporting the salvaged stones to the Petits-Augustins. He also gathered his own samples of royal remains—the scapula of King Hugh Capet, the femur of Charles V, the tibia of Charles VI, the vertebrae of Charles VII, the ribs of Philip IV and Louis XII, the lower jaw of Catherine de’ Medici, the tibia of Cardinal de Retz—this time not only as revolutionary souvenirs but also as relics to be re-interred on the grounds of his museum. Over two centuries on, a print of Lenoir defending these Saint-Denis tombs is the one that Keith Christiansen was compelled to suppress.

After the execution of Robespierre and the Thermidorian reforms of July 1794, Lenoir, inspired by the tombs he saw at Saint-Denis, set about turning his depot of salvaged works into a museum for the new republic. That same year, Henri Grégoire coined the term “vandalism” to decry the waves of destruction,

aligning the revolutionaries with the tribe of Vandals that sacked Rome and destroyed its monuments in 455 A.D.

Using the language of revolution to stand against revolution, Lenoir wrote to the Committee of Public Instruction and the Temporary Arts Commission. He said he would like the Petits-Augustins to become a permanent repository for the “masterpieces which used to decorate the temples of the fanatics, the palaces of the tyrants and the houses of their affiliates.” On October 21, 1795, the Committee declared the Petits-Augustins to be a permanent space for Lenoir’s exhibition of French monuments.

In addition to the tombs of Saint-Denis, Lenoir had saved such artifacts as the mausoleum of Richelieu from the Sorbonne chapel, Tintoretto’s painting of the Deluge, and monuments from the monasteries of the Célestins, the Grands-Augustins, the Minimes, the Feuillants Saint-Honoré, and the Petits-Pères, as well as fragments from the churches of Saint-Germain-des-Prés, Saint-André-des-Arts, Saint-Étienne-du-Mont, Sainte-Chapelle de Vincennes, Sainte-Geneviève, and Notre-Dame. In some cases he purchased tombs that would have otherwise been sold for the price of their raw materials. In others Lenoir placed himself directly in harm’s way. He was wounded in the hand as he stood against riotous soldiers sacking the chapel of the Sorbonne, saving the monument if not the body of Richelieu himself. While Lenoir managed to get the tomb back to the Petits-Augustins, soldiers decapitated Cardinal Richelieu’s corpse and displayed his severed head on a pike for the amusement of the crowds.

As with Girardon’s marble *Descent from the Cross* from Saint-Landry, which arrived in a hundred pieces, Lenoir then set about the complex process of restoring these many fragments. In some cases he created his own fabrications—*fabriques*—made up of a combination of salvaged artifacts to serve as new monuments and tombs for the cultural remains that came his way. With columns from the church of the Minimes, he crafted a new tomb for Descartes. He also created monuments for the remains of Turenne, Molière, La Fontaine, Pascal, Racine, and Héloïse and Abélard, the

famous twelfth-century lovers. Some of these monuments he placed inside the church and cloisters behind his salvaged façade from the Château d’Anet. For others, he created a new cemetery in the nuns’ garden just behind the former convent buildings, which he called his Elysium. He planted his *jardin Élysée* with pines, cypresses, and poplars and fronted its gate with a freestanding façade saved from the Château de Gaillon.

The Museum of French Monuments was a new museum of singularly old parts. Beyond the Anet gate, a long initial gallery gathered some of the best pieces of the collection together across time and space. This assembly included a Roman altar to Jupiter, which had been found under Notre-Dame, a statue of King Clovis and Queen Clotilde, a tribute to Queen Blanche, and a relief depicting the miracle of Saint Philip. Subsequent rooms then tracked the evolution of French style through the centuries from the thirteenth to the eighteenth.

As he wrote to the Committee of Public Instruction, Lenoir believed this new collection would encourage his visitors to cry out, “How fortunate am I to be born French!” It might have sounded like a hollow wish after such turmoil, but Lenoir saw the nascent spirit of nationalism in his objects of French patrimony. As revolutionary fever gave way to the Napoleonic imperium, his new museum became widely popular in France and an international attraction to visitors up until its shuttering in 1816. In December 1800, Napoleon and Josephine made an approving visit, and Josephine herself became a key supporter of Lenoir.

Sir John Soane and Wilhelm von Humboldt, two early museum founders, both visited and took inspiration. The Humboldtian Royal Museum in Berlin, now the Altes, opened in Berlin in 1830; Sir John Soane’s Museum opened to the public in London in 1837. We can also spot the legacy of Lenoir in New York’s Cloisters, John D. Rockefeller, Jr.’s 1938 composite of religious fragments arranged in ecclesiastical pastiche, again made possible in part through the diaspora of materials from France’s religious buildings.

Lenoir did more than inspire new museums. He gave pride of place to the past when others only looked to the future. At a moment when revolutionaries were desecrating corpses, he found a way to honor the dead in his Elysium. He emphasized the lives of the personalities on display and sought to inspire a “sweet melancholy that would speak to sensitive souls.” Lenoir formed his museum for France’s medieval, Renaissance, and baroque history when neoclassicism was the only order of the day, especially among the revolutionaries. France’s Gothic heritage was so worthless at the time of the revolution that those artifacts unfit for ritual burning or desecration were simply sold off by the pound—or rather, by the kilogram—to be quarried. “Very few men of the time valued the things that he prized,” writes Christopher M. Greene in his study, “and it was one of the main purposes of his museum to educate his contemporaries.”

Lenoir’s role in reviving interest in the Gothic later in the nineteenth century cannot be overstated. Alexandre du Sommerard took direct inspiration from Lenoir for his Musée de Cluny, which opened after his death in 1843. So did Eugène Viollet-le-Duc, whose own Musée national des Monuments Français opened in 1882. Like many observers, the nineteenth-century French historian Jules Michelet recalled his childhood visits “under those somber vaults to contemplate those pale faces, curiously, ardently searching from hall to hall, century to century. What was I seeking? The life of days gone by, no doubt, and the spirit of the ages.”

It might be said that the Museum of French Monuments became a victim of its own success. Following the Hundred Days and the restoration of the Bourbon monarchy, Lenoir’s museum seemed, at least to some, to serve as an unwanted reminder of revolution, even though it did more than any other institution to protect French artifacts against the revolu-

tion. The year 1816 quickly saw the disbursement of Lenoir’s artifacts. Some of Lenoir’s monuments were relocated to the new cemetery of Père Lachaise, which had opened in 1804. The transfer of the famous figures of French literary history, from La Fontaine and Molière to Héloïse and Abélard, gave Père Lachaise its star attractions. Lenoir’s *fabriques* provided the cemetery with its visual appeal and can still be found there today. Meanwhile, eighty-four pieces of Lenoir’s collection went off to create a new Gothic gallery at the Louvre. Other items formed a new national museum at Versailles. Lenoir’s museum was then given over and rebuilt as the new home of the École des Beaux-Arts. Finally, the restored monarchy saw to the restoration of the royal tombs of Saint-Denis. The administrator tapped to oversee their return and preservation in the royal church was Lenoir himself.

Even though his museum came to an end, Lenoir continues to influence our appreciation of history in the modern age. “It seems,” wrote one observer in the journal *Semaines critiques*, that Lenoir’s “powerful hand holds back the centuries on the edge of the abyss, draws them up each in its proper place, and forbids them to expire, in order to display their arts, their great men, their tyrants, and often their ignorance.” Or as the nineteenth-century French historian Baron de Guilhermy wrote, the

aspect of that collection produced a profound effect on artists and the public. People began to deplore the ruin of so many masterpieces, and soon there was a cry of reprobation against the stupid fury of the iconoclasts of 1793. It was certainly from that time that one can date, in our country, the era of the rehabilitation of the art of the middle ages.

In ages of upheaval, the story of Lenoir calls out for its own rehabilitation.

All turned about

by *Anthony Daniels*

The last time I visited Coventry was as a witness in the trial of a man with a tattoo on his neck who had strangled his girlfriend in a fit of jealous rage. Murders are generally sordid, but in my experience as a witness in murder trials, those in Coventry are particularly so.

As for the city itself, it should be declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site of British post-war architectural and city-planning incompetence: it is almost laughably awful. Immediately after the war, perhaps, there was some slight excuse for this aesthetic monstrosity: the city had to be rebuilt quickly after the bombing that destroyed much or most of its ancient fabric. But the more money that was spent on it, the worse it got: you can give a modern British architect money, but you can't get him to design anything other than an eyesore.

It was only appropriate, therefore, that the exhibition of this year's Turner Prize, Britain's most important, or at any rate most highly publicized, annual prize for the visual arts should have been held in Coventry.¹ Why, indeed, should London host all the worst rubbish? Not for nothing does the page for the prize on the Tate's website say only that it is awarded for "an outstanding exhibition or other presentation"—*outstanding* being a weasel word typical of the art establishment and bureaucracy that precludes practically nothing and indeed is an incitement to bizzarerie.

¹ "Turner Prize 2021" opened at the Herbert Art Gallery & Museum, Coventry, on September 29, 2021, and remains on view through January 12, 2022.

The five finalists this year were all "collectives," as if suddenly such "collectives" had produced work that was better in quality than that of any mere individual. One felt almost back in the days of the Cultural Revolution, when the hospital cleaners supposedly knew better than the professor of surgery how to remove a huge abdominal tumor.

For those hoping for an occasion for lamentation or outrage, the Turner Prize exhibition did not disappoint. As one has now come to expect at such exhibitions, one is greeted at the entrance by a cacophony, mostly but not entirely of women with flat voices intoning the platitudes of their current orthodoxy or accounts of past injustice. Contemplation in silence is one of the casualties of publicly funded art or, more accurately, the malversation of funds for para-artistic activity. Throughout the exhibition, I could not help but recall the late Professor Michael Shepherd's short review of a book titled *Annual Progress in Psychiatry*. It should have been titled, he wrote, *Annual Activity in Psychiatry*.

One enters a kind of kindergarten of the indoctrinated, by the indoctrinated, for the indoctrinated. Each of the five galleries is devoted to the work, or the activity, of one of the collectives. Each is provided with a brief summary, which by itself is sufficient to induce a state of boredom. It takes talent of a kind to be both brief and tedious:

Cooking Sections address the environmental impact of intensive food production. . . . Their

work uses food as a lens to observe landscapes in transformation, and as a tool for intervention in those very systems of food production and supply. Using site-responsive installation, performances and film, they explore the overlapping boundaries between art, architecture, ecology and geopolitics.

Black Obsidian Sound System (B.O.S.S.) was established in 2018 to bring together a community of queer, trans and non-binary black people and people of colour involved in art, sound and radical activism. Following the legacies of sound system culture they wanted to learn, build and sustain a resource for collective struggles. [Incidentally, this may be a sly reference to the acronym of the Bureau of State Security—BOSS—under the apartheid regime in South Africa. One can't be sure, though: such is the state of educational presentism that even 1990 now seems in the realm of prehistory.]

Array Collective are a collective of artists rooted in Belfast. They create collaborative actions in response to social issues—for example around language, gender and reproductive rights—affecting themselves, their communities and allies. Array reclaim and question traditional identities associated with Northern Ireland in playful ways that merge performance, protest, ancient mythology, photography, installation and video. . . . Array invite us into a place of contradictions where trauma, dark humour, frustration and release coexist.

Gentle/Radical was established in 2017 as a collaborative cultural project based in Cardiff's Riverside neighbourhood. It composes [*sic*] community activists, conflict resolution trainers, faith ministers, equalities practitioners, youth workers, land workers, writers and artists. They organise community film screenings, grassroots symposia, performative works, talks and gatherings that bring people together. Their aim is to rethink how we live with each other in more equitable ways.

Description of their “work” is not easy. Array Collective, for example, reproduced the inside of a pub in Northern Ireland, which could have

served as a set for an episode in a soap opera. On the wall of the pub—alas all too realistically—was a large flat-screen television relaying the performance of an Irish comedian: “In what are called the Dark Ages,” he said, “the Christians came to fight the fairies, to save us from sodomy. The Christians were defeated.”

This double entendre—on the one hand what the Irish called “the little people” and on the other a formerly popular slang term for homosexuals (for the use of which you might be arrested nowadays in England)—caused hoots of laughter by what sounded like the comedian's juvenile audience. There were five late-middle-aged women in the gallery—a party, I should imagine—who watched with that peculiar solemnity reserved for the perusal of great art; they probably believed that they were *improving* themselves in the way that art is sometimes thought to encourage.

In the gallery in which the “work” of Gentle/Radical was displayed, there was a huge liquid-crystal screen showing members of the collective rocking gently while intoning a chant called “All Singing Together.” What did their activity mean to members of the collective? After reading their explanation, I felt slightly sick:

Anushiye says you cannot have a syllabus of light without a syllabus of darkness; Mary-Anne seeks the whereabouts of the village; Tom tells us the work, underneath it all, is about recovery; Rachel negotiates a balancing act around the un-productivity of grief; Rosanna is drilling down, into layers of care; Tony is seeking different formulations for community; Adeola is slowing down the body, in moments of absent and present freedoms; Isabel wants to dismantle the power inherent in her parenting; Stephen is seeking a consistent labour of the spirit; Rabab is wishing to alchemise the wounds; Ahmad is holding fast to imagination and steady bridges; Samson is exploring the rewriting of homeland; Divya forges new meanings for familial bonds; and Laura is centring moments of prayer.

I need hardly point out that all the care, recovery, alchemizing of the wounds, etc., in the above, strongly resembles the pain as de-

scribed by Mrs. Gradgrind: “I think there is a pain somewhere in the room, but I couldn’t positively say that I have got it.” Members of Gentle/Collective have mastered the art of using words to include nothing and exclude nothing. They have the connotation of wind chimes, the healing chakras of the earth, and infusions of verbena or valerian.

The only one of the five collectives that produced anything resembling art as commonly understood since the dawn of civilization (the indifference of the judges of the Turner Prize to which suggests that we are now approaching the dusk of civilization) was called Project Art Works. This is an initiative to encourage what are now called the “neurodivergent” (a word that has apparently entered common usage, since my word-processing program does not underline it in red as being unknown), that is to say the mentally handicapped in some way. Anyone familiar with what is called “outsider” art will recognize the type of work produced by Project Art Works: work that is often considerably more interesting, beautiful, or moving than anything produced by those whom I suppose I must, in logic, call the “neuroconvergent” (a word not recognized by my word-processing program—no doubt only as yet), at least if the selection of the judges of the Turner Prize were anything to go by.

A project to encourage the mentally handicapped (that is to say, handicapped in one way or another) to draw and paint is socially laudable, a worthy aim: I doubt that many could be found who would disagree. One would not necessarily expect great art to result, even when what is produced is interesting or beautiful, but the important question naturally arises as to why the only work of any aesthetic or artistic value whatever in a prize exhibition to reward the best art produced in the country should have been done by the mentally handicapped. Everything else, indeed, added to the already superabundant ugliness of the man-made world about us.

I think an answer can be given to this question. If we take, for example, the drawings of a man called Neville Jermyn, about whom there was no further information provided,

perhaps on the principle that no interest in his individuality should be expressed to set him apart from other members of the collective, something is obvious: namely that they are an immediate and sincere response to the beauty of the world as instantiated in fauna. The very naivety of his representations suggests a love and respect for animals, and an intense and concentrated interest in them. The coloration and disposition of the drawings on the paper bespeak a natural good taste untouched by theory or fashion. They are childlike but not childish. They are fresh rather than original.

By contrast, all the other exhibits display the pitfalls of intellection without intellect: the unsuccessful straining after significance, depth, and political virtue without any attachment whatever to beauty. The “artists” of the collectives look at the world through the distorting lens of doctrine with the most predictably dispiriting results.

This is not to say that political ideas have no place in art, for there is no subject matter that is *a priori* forbidden to it. To take as an example the “intensive food production” that is Cooking Sections’ subject, a great artist such as Goya or Daumier could easily have made much of it, but only because they were artists. The horrible fate of animals under conditions of mass production would, after all, have suited Goya’s sensibility admirably. No one who has seen his *Perro semibundido* (Half-drowned Dog) could doubt his ability to portray animals in distress, or his *Desastres de la guerra* (Disasters of War) doubt his capacity to portray cruelty on a large scale.

The problem with the collectives is that they have *only* their ideas to inspire or guide them. Of artistic ability, taste, or discipline they have none; with them, vehemence is a substitute for artistic competence and aesthetic judgment, as if sanctity of sentiment could rescue or overbalance ineptitude of execution. Even if their ideas were other than banal, they could not do it.

Mentally handicapped people, conversely, are free from the temptations of theorization, profound or banal as the case may be. They have no distorting theoretical lens through

which they see the world, and neither are they propagandists.

Their other advantage is that they are not aware of the prestige that attaches, or at any rate once attached, to the status of artist. The members of the other collectives therefore strain after the status of artist as they also strain after depth and significance, but their urge to be artists, or to attain the status of artist, far exceeds their capacity to create anything worthwhile. They are artists in the same sense that young boys playing with toy guns are soldiers. And unlike the mentally handicapped, they subscribe to the romantic cult of originality. In a world with a less corrupted cultural life, their bluff would be called; instead, it is rewarded. Of all this, the mentally handicapped are quite innocent.

It came to me as a relief, but also a sorrow, to go to two small exhibitions in London directly after attending the Turner Prize exhibition, the first being of five views of Königstein painted by Bernardo Bellotto (1722–80) for Frederick Augustus, Elector of Saxony and King of Poland, and the second being thirteen portraits of male subjects by Frans Hals (1582/3–1666).² Only eighteen pictures in all, they were a joy to behold after immersion in the oh-so-earnest frivolity of contemporary British para-artistic activity, but also a painful reminder of the willful disregard of a glorious artistic tradition in favor of the destructive doctrine of originality at all costs.

The shallowness of that doctrine is illustrated by the career of Bellotto, who was Canaletto's nephew. Having shown promise very early, Bellotto was taken by Canaletto into his studio well before he was fourteen, by which age the nephew was an accomplished draftsman. It seems that Canaletto taught him all that he knew and employed him in the production of views of Venice, for which the de-

mand was very great, especially from England. Bellotto traveled throughout Italy, producing townscapes of Florence, Verona, and Rome. In 1744, he and his uncle parted company, uncle going to England and nephew to Dresden, where he was soon appointed court painter to Frederick Augustus.

Anyone who looks at a Bellotto townscape will immediately notice its affinities with the work of his uncle and teacher (indeed, Bellotto was known in Eastern Europe in the eighteenth century as “Canaletto,” having appropriated the name for himself). At the same time, however, his paintings are instantly recognizable as his own: he was a continuator rather than a mere imitator of his uncle. His palette is darker than his uncle's, but not somber. His figures in townscapes are more individual than in Canaletto's *vedute*.

I enter a surmise: that the difference between his work and that of his uncle and teacher (irrespective of their relative value) was not the result of any conscious effort on the part of Bellotto to distinguish himself. Being a different man from his uncle, he saw the world differently from his uncle; his originality was the natural consequence of being human, not that of a conscious effort to distinguish himself from anyone else. Here he painted; he could do no other. Of course, he was ambitious in a worldly way and, until Frederick the Great destroyed Dresden not quite as thoroughly as did the RAF and USAF later (though still a commendable effort for its time), rich. Many of his paintings were intended to flatter the ruler and impress foreign dignitaries with the ruler's magnificence and power; in that sense, they had political content. But insofar as the work had a political purpose, it was not at odds with beauty, rather the contrary. We shall look at Bellotto when Black Obsidian Sound System is but a footnote to the Turner Prize's shameful history.

Of course, artistic judgment is always fallible and subject to fashion. Frans Hals, now acknowledged as one of the great masters of the Dutch Golden Age, was neglected for two centuries after his death until the fourth Marquis of Hertford bought the *Laughing Cavalier* in Paris in 1865 for what then seemed like a fabu-

² “Bellotto: The Königstein Views Reunited” was on view at the National Gallery, London, from July 22 through October 31, 2021.

“Frans Hals: The Male Portrait” opened at the Wallace Collection, London, on September 22, 2021, and remains on view through January 30, 2022.

lous, even absurd, price. When the marquis' illegitimate son, Sir Richard Wallace, moved the marquis' collection from Paris to London, it was first housed in the East End, in Bethnal Green, where it was seen by two million visitors, many of the type who had never seen a picture before. Hals's reputation has remained secure ever since the marquis' purchase.

The catalogue of the exhibition reveals the workings of another fashion. The Director of the Wallace Collection, almost apologizing for his exhibition (of concentrated magnificence), writes in his foreword:

The all-male nature of this exhibition might seem misplaced in today's world, particularly at a time when museums are working hard to diversify their audiences by supporting more inclusive programming. An exhibition about a white, male seventeenth-century painter who focuses his gaze on white, male sitters, who are predominantly very wealthy, is not necessarily a fit with these aims.

This gives one the impression, almost, that one is doing something disreputable by going to the exhibition, like attending a fascist rally or patronizing a sex shop. The director says:

Certain aspects of masculinity and male identity (the brutish, macho, bullish, or arrogant, for example) have had a bad press.

If the exhibition had been that of portraits of women would he dared have written what follows?

Certain aspects of femininity and female identity (the shrewish, trivial, vain, or maliciously backbiting, for example) have had a bad press.

The director doesn't believe a word of it, of course, but feels constrained to say something to appease critics in advance.

Dr. Johnson wrote a graceful epitaph for his friend, Oliver Goldsmith:

Oliver Goldsmith: Poet, Naturalist, and Historian, who left scarcely any style of writing untouched, and touched nothing that he did not adorn.

We might adapt this slightly to

Wokeness: Doctrine, Fanaticism, Monomania, and Distortion, that leaves scarcely any human activity untouched, and touches nothing that it does not besmirch.

The collector

by Marco Grassi

Statisticians have long been telling us how steeply the life-expectancy curve continues to rise. As a result, receiving an invitation to a one-hundredth birthday party, although surprising, is not necessarily shocking. Indeed, it is to just such an event that many in the worlds of finance, politics, and art were recently summoned. The birthday celebration in question was held in Madrid this mid-October and took the form of a symposium honoring Baron Hans Heinrich Thyssen-Bornemisza, who was born exactly a century ago but actually died at age eighty-one in 2002. Centenarian or not, Thyssen was certainly a commanding presence during the second half of the last century. He was a grandson of August Thyssen (1842–1926), the diminutive but hugely assiduous and successful steel and coal entrepreneur. August has often been compared to Andrew Carnegie as a quintessential example of the nineteenth-century empire-building industrialist. Besides the famous name, H. H. (“Heini”) Thyssen also sported the title of baron, by way of his father who had dubiously “inherited” the prefix via his first wife’s Hungarian noble descent. Heini nevertheless maintained a keen sense of humor and occasionally quipped: “my family was in iron and steel—my mother ironed and my father stole.”

Growing up in a post-war Europe that was still beset by deprivation, Heini enjoyed privileges that, at that time, were reserved for the lucky few: private schools, fast cars, and long vacations in St. Moritz and Forte dei Marmi. He spoke fluent German, Italian, French, Eng-

lish, and Dutch, the last because Holland was his earliest home and, later, the center of his business interests. Tall and slender, the young man developed into a supremely elegant and worldly gentleman. Despite this, there was a certain shyness and insecurity in his manner that often complicated communication with others. This, however, never seemed to hinder Heini’s discourse with the opposite sex; he was married five times and sired four children. The man’s immense wealth was surely a factor in this rather confused personal life, but that wealth also contributed mightily to his becoming the most acquisitive, perceptive, and wide-ranging collector of his generation.

The Thyssen family’s interest in art began, somewhat timidly, with August, “the patriarch,” as he was called. Having already lived a long and rigidly philistine life next to his blast furnaces, amassing a sizeable fortune in the process, August decided it was time to broaden his horizons, become a landed gentleman, and dabble in art. In 1903, he purchased the rather forbidding Schloß Landsberg in the town of Kettwig, near Essen, Germany (never too far from the blast furnaces). Having visited the 1899 Paris Exposition Universelle, he remembered how mesmerized he had been by the marbles of Auguste Rodin exhibited there. With the help of Rainer Maria Rilke, Thyssen eventually purchased seven major pieces that were later displayed at Landsberg. They have remained there in what has since become the Thyssen family’s memorial and mausoleum. Of note is the fact that Rodin was that mo-

ment's Jeff Koons, universally famous and wildly expensive.

Of August's three sons, Friedrich "Fritz" Thyssen (1873–1951) was the eldest, eventually inheriting the steel works that comprised the lion's share of the estate. He was to be the first establishment industrialist to support Hitler and his National Socialist movement but was also the first, in 1938, to have second thoughts. Fritz even had the temerity to voice these opinions publicly. This headstrong behavior was characteristic of the man and afforded him the rare distinction of having been put behind bars by both the Nazis *and* the Allies. His only daughter, Anita, immigrated to South America after the war and bequeathed the bulk of her colossal fortune to form the "Thyssen Stiftung," a foundation that has become Germany's largest philanthropic undertaking.

Heinrich Thyssen (1875–1947) was the youngest of August's sons, all of whom grew up detesting each other. Such was the animus that, while Fritz was hobnobbing with Göring, Heinrich, partly to spite his brother, married a Hungarian noblewoman, took on both her title and citizenship, and moved to Lugano, Switzerland. There, in 1931, Heinrich purchased, from the down-at-heel Prince Friedrich Leopold of Prussia, the enchanting Villa Favorita, a lakeside property that extends over a mile and comprises one palatial villa and three only slightly lesser structures. It was a perfect setting in which to indulge the newly minted baron's ambitions of princely splendor. The obvious adjunct to this construct had to be a notable picture collection. In this, Heinrich's timing was impeccable. The early 1930s saw a remarkable quantity of masterworks flow onward to a depressed buyers' market. Aided by the sharp perception of the young German art historian Rudolph Heinemann, Heinrich snapped up in quick succession: the *Family Group in a Landscape* by Frans Hals (1645–48) and Vittore Carpaccio's *Young Knight in a Landscape* (ca. 1505) (both had been owned by Otto Kahn in New York); the *Profile Portrait of Giovanna Tornabuoni* by Ghirlandaio (1489–90, from the Morgan Library, New York); *Christ Among the Doctors* by Albrecht

Dürer (1506) and *St. Catherine of Alexandria* by Caravaggio (ca. 1588–99) (both from the Barberini Collection, Rome)—all acknowledged to be capital works by the artists. Perhaps the most significant acquisition in this charmed moment was the addition to the collection of surely its greatest historical relic, the *Portrait of Henry VIII* by Hans Holbein the Younger (ca. 1537), formerly a star possession of the Earls Spencer (Princess Diana's family) at Althorp House. Of the many similar likenesses of the king, none other than the Thyssen version is unequivocally recognized as the original prototype. Kenneth Clark, England's ultimate art czar, upon a visit to the Villa Favorita, remarked that it was the one painting that should never have been allowed out of the country. These works remain to this day the principal identifying icons of the collection. As a footnote to the history of taste, it is interesting to record that Heinrich Thyssen so vehemently lusted after the Dürer that the dealers involved saw it as an opportunity to "unload" the Caravaggio as part of a two-for-one deal. Neither the market at large, nor Thyssen, cared much for the great Baroque genius—a reflection of the powerful influence "Berensonian" criticism had at the time. In a notorious judgment on Caravaggio's *Martyrdom of St. Peter* (1601, in Rome at Santa Maria del Popolo), the American sage of I Tatti dismissed the masterpiece as simply a study in the lifting of weights.

It was a remarkable running start for the baron and, as noted by a venerable Italian proverb: "eating only increases one's hunger." Heinrich "ate" with ever-increasing hunger and soon even the spacious Villa Favorita would not do. In 1938, a substantial expansion of the villa was planned. Patterned on Munich's Alte Pinakothek, "the Gallery" was completed in a grand and severe style vaguely reminiscent of Berlin's now-destroyed Reich Chancellery, all marble and granite. To our eyes, it appears pompous and cold, but it was sky-lit and, most importantly, very congenial to the paintings. After entering an older structure, visitors arrive at a grand staircase leading up to a long series of large enfilade halls with more intimate adjoining spaces at the sides. Now the baron was able to indulge his hunger by

continually enriching the collection, adding choice works of every European school and period, from Italian so-called “primitives” through the French eighteenth century, for a total of more than two hundred items. A Teutonic touch, perhaps, is that not a single English artist was represented. By the time he died in 1947, Baron Heinrich had amassed a collection that was already, by far, the most important private gathering of European Old Master paintings in the world—a statement inevitably followed by the conditional “after the Queen of England’s.” The informal “curator” continued to be Rudolph Heinemann, except during the war years when he prudently retreated to New York. Conservation work was usually performed by William Suhr of the Frick Collection before the paintings were sold. Criticism is still heard occasionally about Suhr’s overly “energetic” interventions. No professional conservator had ever worked on-site until 1964, when this writer was appointed on a part-time basis. There was never a question about the role of “Chief Curator”; that function was always reserved for the Thyssens themselves—the father, Heinrich, and then, after his death in 1947, his son “Heini.”

Heinrich remained always fanatically protective of his, and his collection’s, privacy. Access to the Villa Favorita was accorded with the greatest reluctance. In the late 1930s, Germany’s foreign minister Joachim von Ribbentrop happened to be visiting Lugano. As was the custom at the time, he sent his calling card to the villa expecting a gracious invitation to visit the storied precincts of the famed collection. The baron instructed his butler to reply that he didn’t need any more champagne, a sly rebuff playing off the fact that, prior to Ribbentrop becoming a Nazi bigwig, he had worked as a traveling salesman for Henkell Sektkellerei (Germany’s down-market version of French bubbly). Private and decidedly strait-laced, Baron Heinrich was only tainted by scandal once, when his second wife Maud, a beautiful and frenetic socialite, was involved in a car crash while playing hooky in Spain with her lover, the Georgian “Prince” Alexis Mdivani. The Isotta Fraschini convertible was totaled, the “prince”

perished, and the baroness’s priceless pearls disappeared from her luggage. Thereafter, Maud’s title lasted only until divorce papers could be filed. It was also a sad end to one of the glamorous Mdivani brothers, dubbed “the marrying Mdivanis” by the press. Once, an enterprising reporter sought out the young men’s father in Bucharest. To a question about the family, the old man replied: “I am the only father who inherited a title from his sons.”

After Heinrich’s death, his son Heini was faced with significant issues relating to the family business. Although he had already been appointed as principal heir to the estate, including the Villa Favorita and the collection, there were lingering “denazification” questions about interlocking interests with Uncle Fritz’s more suspect holdings. It took several years and endless lawyering to resolve these. Perhaps as a gesture of goodwill, Heini decided to make the collection available to visitors on weekends (for five Swiss francs), a move that father Heinrich would surely not have condoned. Still, the collection remained for years a rather esoteric destination for a smattering of connoisseurs and academics; there was no permanent on-site staff except for a fiercely loyal but unschooled caretaker who had previously served as a stable hand on the Bornemisza estate in Hungary. Then, in 1978, everything changed.

Entirely by chance and through mutual acquaintances, Heini was introduced to a sixty-something lady named Annemarie Pope. Born in Germany and the widow of John Alexander Pope, formerly the director of Washington’s Freer Gallery, she was a relentless and obsessive striver who had gained a prominent niche in the capital’s social and arts milieu. Mrs. Pope’s proudest achievement was the creation of “The International Exhibitions Foundation,” an undertaking that she not only invented but also promoted with unflagging energy. Her D.C. connections proved essential in obtaining government-backed insurance indemnity, a must for traveling exhibitions. It helped to have the friendship and trust of Carter Brown, the director of the National Gallery; this opened endless doors—among others, those to the

drawing collections of the Duke of Devonshire and of Vienna's Albertina—and led to two (among a hundred fifty other) epochal shows that toured numerous major museums in America in the 1960s and '70s.

Having met Thyssen, the redoubtable Mrs. Pope would not give up until she secured his promise of a U.S. loan. Heini finally surrendered to the lady's blandishments and even consented to part temporarily with a number of his most precious possessions—among them, the Van Eyck *Annunciation Diptych* (ca. 1433–35) and the double-sided *Portrait of a Young Man Praying* by Hans Memling (ca. 1485). Of course, it wasn't the first time that these treasures had left their home. A similar selection of masterworks had been shown at the National Gallery in London in 1961. Heini's third wife, the Scottish beauty Fiona Campbell Walter, may have played a part in that decision. Presumably, feminine attraction was not a factor in his agreeing to Mrs. Pope's 1978 initiative. The American exhibition was accompanied by a handsome catalogue written by the Princeton scholar Allen Rosenbaum on the suggestion of Sir John Pope-Hennessy. Needless to say, the exhibition caused considerable commotion in its three destinations—Washington, Detroit, and Los Angeles. Heini and his wife at the time, Denise, graciously played “host” at the openings. It was too good to be true for the locals: rarely seen great art and a chance to patter with glamorous and titled international celebrities. What could be better?

Surprisingly, the normally shy and somewhat introverted baron enjoyed every minute of the spotlight. He happily posed for photographs, gave interviews, and delivered amusing remarks at the inaugural dinners. It was all a resounding success while, at the same time, revealing the necessity for more dedicated and professional stewardship of what had now become a quite public institution. A friend of the baron suggested that he meet Simon de Pury, a young assistant in Sotheby's Geneva office. Simon fit the task to a T: he was smart, worldly, and ambitious and took to the job with gusto. The timing was also propitious. Heini's business interests had begun to focus on the Soviet Union. On one

of his visits to Leningrad, he had met Boris Piotrovsky, the director of the State Hermitage Museum. Eager for better liaisons in the West, the enterprising Piotrovsky suggested a loan exhibition at the Villa Favorita. It was an ideal venue in politically neutral Switzerland, even though the correspondent would be Thyssen, the quintessential capitalist. Simon quickly got into high gear a project for a selection of Impressionist and Post-Impressionist works to travel to Lugano. It was 1983 and the impact of the event was far beyond what even Mrs. Pope could have ever imagined. Not only had the paintings never been seen in Europe, they had also been locked in an upstairs no-go zone at the Hermitage since the early 1920s. When the stupendous trove of masterworks by Matisse, Gauguin, Van Gogh, Renoir, and Bonnard arrived, the Villa Favorita became, overnight, the center of the art world. There were breathless reviews in every paper and periodical, and visitors lined up for hours in queues stretching back to the town. The unprecedented blowout was followed by further exchanges and attendant accolades.

The “Russian shows” blew winds from new and different directions across the lake of Lugano. They may have encouraged Heini to look beyond the European Old Masters towards the German Expressionists, the Russian avant-garde, even the American nineteenth- and twentieth-century masters. Again, it was just in the nick of time, for he had understood that most notable French Impressionist works had already found permanent homes. No matter; with the help of Antonina Gmurzynska of Cologne, Heini procured, among others, works by Kasimir Malevich and László Moholy-Nagy. From Norbert Ketterer in nearby Campione came the stunning Max Beckmann portrait of his wife, *Quappi in Pink Jumper* (1932–34), and a number of early Lyonel Feiningers as well as works by Emil Nolde and Oskar Kokoschka. In New York, the notorious dealer Andrew Crispo, despite his other rather sinister pursuits, was a very knowledgeable and effective source of important examples of American art. By far the most memorable of these is the *Signal of Distress* by Winslow Homer (1890–96), com-

parable if not superior to the Metropolitan's celebrated *Gulf Stream* (1899). It is still astonishing to consider the breadth and diversity of these purchases—by a collector weaned on the European “classics,” a collector who could, when the occasion arose, also turn on a dime *back* to his first love. That occasion presented itself dramatically when Silvano Lodi, an astute dealer, set up shop in a charming lake-front house, also in Campione. Silvano soon became a magnet for Italian “runners” who would bring him first-rate material, knowing that (unlike his colleagues in Italy) he would instantly pay top price, in cash and tax-free. Two of Heini's several purchases from Silvano are worthy of note for their exceptional rarity and impeccable conservation: a tondo on panel of the *Virgin and Child with the Infant St. John and St. Jerome* by the Sienese Mannerist master Domenico Beccafumi (ca. 1523–25), and the ineffably sexy *Venus and Mars* (ca. 1600), a tiny jewel of a painting by Carlo Saraceni. Doubtless the unabashed erotic depiction of the amorous couple got Heini's motor running.

By the later 1980s, Heini was well into his sixth decade and, understandably, thinking about the disposition of his legacy. Having turned over the bulk of his business interests to his eldest son, Georg Heinrich, he was now focused primarily on the collection and its future. It represented an estimated \$600-plus million invested in enlarging and diversifying what he had inherited from his father. Throughout his adult life, Heini remained steadfast in an abiding intention that this cultural patrimony should never be dispersed. He teased the Swiss government and the Ticino canton with the prospect of a much-expanded new museum that would be large enough to contain the entirety of Thyssen's vast holdings. A design competition for the new building was announced, and maquettes by the likes of Norman Foster, Santiago Calatrava, and Lugano's own Mario Botta were unveiled. The unspoken understanding was that, while the project would be underwritten with public funds, the collection would be deeded to a public foundation that would maintain it. There remained, however, an insurmountable

problem: the collection now counted as the principal asset of Heini's eventual estate, and therefore one that would risk being dismembered in litigation among the offspring of four different marriages. The legal landscape to be traversed was decidedly arduous. It appeared to be made even more difficult when, in 1985, Heini married his fifth wife, Carmen “Tita” Cervera, and legally adopted her son from a previous relationship. Whatever his children might have thought of this event, it actually proved to be the first step in the successful path toward a solution.

The new baroness happened to have excellent connections in Spain, just as that country was entering a period of spectacular economic expansion and prosperity. It was termed “el milagro Ibérico” and lasted just long enough for negotiations to be completed for a “deal” that would provide not only for the lasting integrity of the collection, but also for its display in a grandly refurbished Madrid palace, with Thyssen's name on the door. Integral to the agreement was the payment of several hundred million dollars to the presumptive heirs who would then sign off, giving their consent. It was a brilliant solution and wholly without precedent in the history of collecting and museum governance. The only distant and not wholly comparable example is the late-nineteenth-century accession by the Yale University Art Gallery of the Jarves Collection of Early Italian paintings, which was a case of a willing seller/benefactor and a very reluctant buyer.

The Thyssen Collection actually does not hang in its entirety in Madrid. For political reasons, a number of first-rate pictures, including the incomparable *Madonna of Humility* by Fra Angelico (1433–35), were dispatched with other lesser works to Barcelona as a token of Catalan “independence.” If there is a problem, it resides in the word “entirety.” It must be remembered that the Thyssen Collection is the result of the tastes, passions, and ambitions of two quite different individuals. Heinrich, the father, acquired art in a very favorable moment, adhering as much as possible to the highest standards of quality, historical significance, and conservation. There

was much material available, and he tried to choose the best with the best advice. Heinrich must have tried very hard to avoid embarrassing mistakes. By and large he was successful, though there are some misses. Heini loved the *process* of buying; he enjoyed the chase, and, more often than not, came to decisions rapidly and instinctively. Given the choice between two similar items, his instinct generally guided him in the right direction. If he had an issue, it was his seemingly insatiable appetite. There are five landscapes by Jacob van Ruisdael in the collection, only one of which is truly first-rate. Bronzino is represented twice: *Cosimo de Medici in Armor* (ca. 1545) is decidedly not worthy of the collection, while the *Portrait of a Young Man as St. Sebastian* (ca. 1533) is one of the artist's best early works while still under the spell of his master, Pontormo. When the mediocre pictures were at the Villa Favorita, they were, essentially, in a private setting—as if they were hanging in one's home, immune to critical judgment. The rigorous context of a museum demands more fastidious criteria of quality and conservation. No doubt the professionals responsible for the Madrid display were aware of such shortcomings, of which there were more than a few. Yet, how

else to justify the public expenditure of such an eye-popping amount (though only a third of the full, fair-market-value appraisal), if not by hanging as much material as possible on view? The puckish subtext is that not one in a thousand visitors will distinguish varsity from JV when four similarly labeled paintings hang together in a museum.

These minor details, and a possible objection to the color scheme of the setting, are insignificant quibbles when compared to the greatness of the achievement: an awe-inspiring compendium of the visual arts, spanning many centuries and cultures, housed in a rigorously designed contemporary setting in one of Europe's principal cities—it is Heini Thyssen's legacy writ large. In this hundredth-anniversary event, there was much to remember and to celebrate. The twenty-eight contributors to the symposium appropriately honored the museum's founder with a wide range of revealing insights, anecdotes, and critical analyses. Heini Thyssen would approve and be grateful of the way the institution that bears his name tipped its hat to him. In time, perhaps, the museum will see fit to publish the symposium's proceedings, ensuring access to the material in the future.

Face-to-face with Matisse’s “Backs”

by Eric Gibson

On any given day in MOMA’s Sculpture Garden, the four individuals standing off to one side attract scant notice. Turned away from the milling crowds, their poses suggest a studied aloofness or even, since each buries her face in the crook of an upraised arm, a need to shut out the world entirely. I am referring, of course, to the *Backs*, four bronze reliefs of a life-sized female nude seen from behind made by Henri Matisse (1869–1954) between 1908 and about 1931. They are arrayed along the Garden’s north wall, where they have often been seen since the mid-1950s.

The *Backs* are the great mystery of Matisse’s art. Nobody really knows why he made them. Only two things are known with any certainty: that Matisse made sculpture to solve problems encountered in his painting, and that each relief coincides with his work on a large-scale figure painting: the Russian collector Sergei Shchukin’s *The Dance* (1910) in the case of the first, *Bathers by a River* (1916–17) for the second and third, and the Barnes Foundation’s mural *The Dance* (1932–33) for the fourth. Exactly how a sculptural study of a back-turned figure could be of use to Matisse when painting people in motion, some seen from the front, is a question that remains.

Though the *Backs* have generally been considered in isolation, a motive emerges if we widen our perspective and place them in the context of Matisse’s oeuvre. For all that he is known for what he called his “decorations,” a recurring theme of Matisse’s writings and statements is the need to find a way to express bodily

structure, to absorb what he called the figure’s “general architecture” into his art as a way, no doubt, of keeping it more securely tethered to nature. The *Backs* were the means to that end.

The *Backs* occupy a curious place in Matisse’s art. For one thing, they are unlike anything else he ever did. His nudes are normally seen from the front, radiating psychological and sexual accessibility. Yet, literally and figuratively, these four turn their backs on us. All of Matisse’s other sculptures are table-top in scale; these are monumental. They read as a series, yet they were not conceived as such. The dates have been repeatedly adjusted. Most of Matisse’s sculptures appeal to our sense of touch; the *Backs*, by contrast, are a full-body experience. They rise up before us, fill our field of vision, and match us one-to-one in scale and stance. Where the paintings invite us into a world of color, light, and hedonism, the projecting forms of the *Backs* push us away like a hand.

Yet for an artist of Matisse’s inclinations, the back was a natural subject. It is a broadly planar surface interrupted by shallow projections and recessions. This made it, for him, analogous to a flat, two-dimensional painting support. We see this in the National Gallery of Art’s *La Coiffure* (1901). It shows a seated semi-nude figure from behind, the model’s exposed back filling much of the field and coincident with the canvas surface. In later graphic works the figure is rendered in outline, with the result that the white of the sheet *is* her back. At the same time, in its shallow topography the anatomical back itself parallels

relief sculpture, making the *Backs*, in a sense, reliefs of a relief. Most importantly, the back renders the body's architecture transparent: the vertical of the spine; the horizontal of the shoulders; the "keystone" of head and neck; the legs supporting the upper works. The back was, therefore, a logical, even necessary subject for Matisse in his *recherches*.

Matisse's concern with anatomical structure appears early, in the first decade of the new century. At that time he was deeply involved with Cézanne, particularly that artist's *Bathers* paintings with their monumental, architectonic women, one of which Matisse acquired in 1899. And as the decade progressed he became aware that, as he later put it, Fauvism's emphasis on expressive line and color had caused him to sacrifice corporeality.

The notes taken by Sarah Stein while a student in Matisse's Académie and published in 1908 reflect this concern, for he discusses the human figure almost exclusively in terms of architecture and engineering: the foot "is a bridge"; "[f]it your parts into one another and build up your figure as a carpenter does a house"; the free leg in a contrapposto stance curves "like a flying buttress of a cathedral and does similar work." The word "cathedral," in fact, appears three times in connection with the figure, "construction" and its cognates eight times. Most striking of all, the notes uncannily foretell the *Backs*. When Matisse says, "To feel a central line in the direction of the general movement of the body and build about that is a great aid," he could be describing what he did in all four. His injunction to view the model as "a lobster, because of the shell-like, tense muscular parts," prefigures the shoulders and upper torso of *Back II*. The instruction to "fit your parts into one another" describes the appearance of *Backs II* and *III*.

In addition, we see Matisse wrestling with the issue of anatomical structure in three early paintings. In the Tate's *Nude Study in Blue* (ca. 1899–1900), the figure is rendered in non-local color and seen through a veil of light and atmosphere. Next, in MOMA's *Male Model* (ca. 1900) he turns to Cézanne, constructing the body with distinct planes

that simultaneously assert the flatness of the canvas support. From this Matisse must have concluded that Cézanne could offer only pictorial, not anatomical, structure, because he kept moving. In the Tate's African-art-influenced *Standing Nude* (1907), heavy dark outlines and high-contrast chiaroscuro modeling delineate the figure's individual volumes. She is no longer static but bends and flexes. This is figure as articulated structure. Stylistic differences aside, what unites the three is the gradual flattening of interior space and the figure's steady advance toward the picture plane. By the time of *Standing Nude*, head and feet press against the canvas edges, and space has been reduced to three flat rectangles parallel to the picture plane that push the figure so far forward she seems to be partway into our own space—the flexed right elbow juts out like a pointing finger. The next stage seems almost inevitable: were the model to drop the towel, straighten up, swivel ninety degrees inward, and raise her left arm, we would have *Back I*.

What is now known as *Back o* (1908) came first. It exists only in photographic form, having been refashioned into *Back I* (1909). The rear-view pose is derived from Cézanne's *Bathers*, but the figures' fullness and fleshiness evoke Renoir and Courbet. The pose in both is contrapposto with the left leg bearing the weight, a fact Matisse emphasizes in *Back I* by making it artificially columnar. In *Back I* the spine forms part of a long, sinuous arabesque that starts at the upraised left arm and terminates in the fingers of the right hand.

Matisse's life classes had involved only stationary figures, so when it came to portraying moving ones, he had to forge his own path. The differences between *Back o* and *Back I* answer the question of how these sculptures could help his painting. *Back o* is entirely naturalistic, *Back I* slightly less so. Developing the idea of the figure as articulated structure we saw in *Standing Nude*, Matisse further subdivides it, this time into over a dozen segments that take the form of largish masses, each defined by a few broad planes. These generally conform to the figure in nature, but not always. Take the back itself, where it's impossible to make a one-to-one corre-

lation between the individual segments and the body's musculature. In his 1899–1901 copy of Antoine-Louis Barye's *Jaguar Devouring a Hare* (1850), Matisse had sought to capture the way the predator's anatomical structure was reflected in its movements, to which end he famously studied a dissected cat. If we compare the two versions of the Shchukin commission, we can see how Matisse's free adaptation of human anatomy in *Back I* gave him what he needed to express the relationship between anatomy and movement in the human figure. In MOMA's *Dance I* (1909), the figures lack any sense of corporeality. Motion is expressed graphically by the whiplash outer contour of the left figure, which propels the painting's circular motion, and by the undulating round of linked arms. In the Hermitage's *Dance II*, the final version, Matisse has imported the segmented figure of *Back I* in the person of the facing figure second from left, its multiple articulations now allowing it to leap, bend, and flex. As a result, the action is dramatically physical, the disposition of the body parts seemingly driven by inner impulse rather than, as in *Dance I*, the artist's design.

Another sculpture, *Study of a Foot* (1908), was crucial to this effort. If, as Matisse declared, the foot is a bridge, what is it a bridge between? Surely figure and floor, stasis and motion. So where Rodin and others kept the foot flat, Matisse stands his on tiptoe. This flexed foot appears in both versions of the Shchukin commission, but in MOMA's *Dance I* its actions affirm the stretching figure's bond with the earth, the right member serving as anchor and pivot, the left as rear stabilizer. In the Moscow version, the flexed foot, attached to our frontal dancer, functions dually as launch mechanism for the figure's liberation from gravity and spring-loaded support to absorb the impact upon landing. Its flaccid counterpart in *Dance I* suggests no such possibilities. *Foot* is thus to the Shchukin commission what the dissected cat was to the Barye copy: a route to anatomical understanding.

In *Back I*, Matisse may be acting like a sculptor, but he's thinking like a painter, in his treatment of the relief plane. Reinforcing the view that the figure is cut off at the ankles because

she is standing in water, the area below her waist is broadly tooled with little surface incident. Above the waist it becomes increasingly worked, with tool marks both more numerous and smaller the higher you go. This creates the illusion of a natural setting: the lower half suggesting a flat surface of a body of water in the foreground, the upper one light-dappled vegetation in the distance. So we need a different explanation for the visible left breast besides the standard one that posits that it is splayed because the figure is pressing against some hard, flat surface. There is one.

In her memoir *Matisse and Picasso: A Friendship in Art* (1990), Françoise Gilot writes that Matisse said he admired Picasso's ability to simultaneously show the front and back of the figure, something he claimed he "had never really mastered." It's a curious admission, because, after his fashion, he did master it. In both Boston's *Carmelina* (1903) and *La Coiffure*, a mirror in the background reflects the side of the model turned away from the viewer. In the sculpture *Two Negresses* (1908), we see front and back of the two facing figures at the same time—twice, if we walk around it. Indeed, there's a sense in which, for Matisse, notions of front and back are fluid, even interchangeable. In *Small Crouching Torso* (1908), the only body part of the folded-over figure we really see is the back, making it, in effect, its "face," the principal aspect through which figure reveals itself to the world and interacts with the viewer. The same is true of *La Coiffure* and the *Backs*. In *Forms*, Plate IX of *Jazz*, for example, and in cutouts like the Met's *Standing Blue Nude* (1952), Matisse reduces the figure to an iconic silhouette and suppresses anatomical detail to conflate front and back so that recto-verso orientation is no longer a question of either-or but of both-and. The splayed breast in *Back I*, then, like the figure's columnar left leg, is a deliberately anti-naturalistic device, here used to direct our thoughts to the figure's invisible front, allowing us to "see" both sides at once.

Back II (1913) and *Back III* (1913–16) coincide with Matisse's intense engagement with Cubism. Along with the splayed breast, *Back II*

carries over the arabesque from *Back I*. But all similarities end there. For one thing, Matisse banishes implied narrative. The bevy of uniform, parallel scrapes surrounding the head like a halo pointedly assert the flatness of the relief plane; there is no hint of a fictive space. The task facing Matisse here was the same as that faced at various times by Picasso, Brancusi, and others: how to adapt Cubism's language of fragmented forms and opened-up volumes to the carved and modeled monolith. In pursuit of this goal Matisse preserves the overall mass of the figure while simplifying it into four basic units: head, neck, left arm, and upper back; left buttock and leg; right lower back, buttock, and leg; the right arm. The figure appears less as an organic unity than as something assembled, its three largest units meeting at the three long, shallow V-channels cut in to delineate lower back and buttocks. Then he exchanges the modeled monolith's language of bumps and hollows for one of angled planes and gouges. These planes express the figure's "general architecture" by indicating its major hinge points, such as the aforementioned V-channels and the broad plane cutting deeply into the leg that both models the left buttock and defines its separation from the upper thigh.

A collision between percept and concept in *Back II* alerts us to Matisse's evolving ideas about representation under the influence of Cubism. There are two nearly identical gouges—each deep, three-sided, and looking as if made by a blow with a pyramid-tipped tool. One, in the upper left, reads as a typically Matissean, semi-abstract representation of the space between raised arm and head. The other is slightly below the right shoulder and between right arm and torso. It has no counterpart in nature. This gouge is a fully abstract, Cubist space. Matisse has left behind nineteenth-century mimesis and is now firmly entrenched in the twentieth-century aesthetic of pure plastic expression.

Back III is more architectural. The figure has been straightened up, and Matisse has eliminated the contrapposto pose and its associated arabesque to give an overall vertical emphasis, although the cocked right leg remains. Right

shoulder and neck meet at a right angle. The individual parts are now broadly modeled masses, like building blocks or the boulders in a stone wall. The most distinctive element is the central vertical. It is often described as a ponytail, but a small notch at roughly neck level suggests Matisse was still thinking of the same coiffure as before, so everything below the notch is the spine, here rendered as a combination of external armature and keystone.

But Matisse undermines this architectural solidity by invading it—cutting, slicing, and burrowing into these solid masses to reduce that very sense of solidity and monolithic structure. A deep gouge penetrates it just below the left shoulder; an equally deep, curving slice is taken out of the right shoulder while the hand below it is cleft in two. The right leg barely exists, seeming to dissolve into a column of staccato, horizontal hatchings. All manner of tool marks vigorously activate surface and mass. Most striking of all is the splayed breast. A vertical L-channel has been cut into it from top to bottom. There is something startling, even unsettling about seeing one of a woman's most intimate parts violated in this way. Not even Picasso did that.

Back III has often been likened to *Bathers by a River* owing to its similarity to the picture's left-hand figure. But the painting it has most in common with is MOMA's *Still Life after Jan Davidsz. de Heem's "La Desserte"* (1915). This was Matisse's do-or-die confrontation with Cubism. He emerged from it triumphant, having adapted its language of planes, flattened space, and multiple viewpoints to his own aesthetic of color-light, aerated space, and the arabesque. *Back III* involves a similarly high-stakes showdown, this one between closed and open sculptural form, the Greco-Roman tradition and modernism. Hence the impatient surface, the frenzied attack, the welter of variegated tool marks, and the overtone of violence. Here, however, Matisse had to settle for a draw. He could only achieve *Still Life's* parity with Cubism by doing even greater violence to the figure, effectuating more and more extreme cuts, excavations, and fragmentations. And this he could not bring himself to do, the full figure being the thing in his art that meant the most to him. Matisse used to say that his

finished works belied the effort and torment that went into them. Not this one.

Then, the fever breaks. A mood of calm pervades *Back IV* (variously dated between 1929 and 1931), so different from the emotional turmoil of its predecessor. The relief shows a severely simplified, monumental figure that recalls Cézanne and Giotto, the latter's frescoes having deeply impressed Matisse when he saw them in 1907. But here he has outdone both artists, and by a wide margin. No tooling is visible. Instead the surfaces of both figure and relief plane are uniformly roughened, like plaster or stucco. Architecture, previously only implied, now becomes the defining characteristic. There is no flexion or articulation of parts. The structural logic of the legs and spine—that vertical members make the firmest armatures and can support the most downward thrust—has here been expanded to define the whole figure. On either side of the central element, now more pronounced than ever, the area from shoulder to ankle has been resolved into a single, column-like form. The left forearm has swung up to align with the horizontal of the relief plane's top edge and the elbow locked into the corner. The upper arm, positioned at an angle of forty-five degrees, reads like a truss. The crown of the head has been sheared off, its flattened top now parallel with the relief's upper edge though it projects slightly above. This truncated head transforms our reading of what's going on at the bottom. Instead of seeing legs cut off at the ankles, we see supporting members terminating naturally at the ground, like columns in a building. In *Back IV*, then, the bather has morphed into a caryatid. The figure has become architecture itself. But Matisse goes farther. She is webbed into her support, defining and being defined by the relief's flat plane and framing edges, so that the image too has become a form of architectural expression. Seeking to impart to his figures a renewed sense of structure, Matisse began with Cézanne, battled his way through Cubism, and finally arrived at something wholly original and independent of both.

But the story of the *Backs* doesn't end there, and not only because Matisse kept the plas-

ter of *Back IV* in his studio for the rest of his life. They are the portal to the late work. The new architectural underpinning announced in *Back IV* informs subsequent paintings and cutouts. The poses of the two central figures in the Barnes *Dance* are firmly tied to, and express, the architectural setting of the three lunettes spanned by the piece, while the poses of the outermost ones not only do the same but also angle diagonally inward, functioning like flying buttresses holding everything in place. The Baltimore Museum's *Large Reclining Nude* (1935) reads like *Back IV* rethought as a painting, the pink figure filling the space, flattened flush with the picture plane, left arm defining the canvas's right-bottom corner: in both, image as structure. The disposition of the limbs in the Pompidou's cutout *Blue Nude III* (1952) forms a rectangle bisected by a diagonal: figure as structure. And as in *Back IV*, her pose is both determined and constrained by the bounding edges of the support, while the head is fashioned like a piece of joinery to rhyme with the upper-right corner: image as structure.

More broadly, over the course of his career, Matisse steadily enlarged the circumference of his thought, moving smoothly from the studio scale of the small sculptures and easel paintings to the architectural scale of the Barnes *Dance* and thence to the environmental scale of MOMA's *The Swimming Pool* and, spectacularly, the Vence Chapel. And he did so without sacrificing the essential characteristics of his aesthetic. No other modernists besides Brancusi and Noguchi successfully negotiated such transitions. Considering that Matisse's only prior experience with architectural decoration was painting a frieze of laurel leaves for the 1900 Paris Exposition, it's hard to imagine him having done so without the way station of the *Backs*. In the studio, he dwarfed his creations, while from the Barnes commission onward the opposite was true. The *Backs'* combination of mural scale and one-to-one congruence between artist and image—see Alvin Langdon Coburn's 1913 photograph of Matisse at work on *Back II*—made them a critical intermediate stage. Far from being an isolated episode in Matisse's oeuvre, then, the *Backs* are central to it—the spine, you might say.

For Queen & country

by Nicola Shulman

Somewhere in the history of Buckingham Palace, there lies discarded a little-known counterfactual in which I, your writer, can declare a personal interest. My husband's direct ancestor Catherine Darnley (1681–1743) was once married to John Sheffield, the Duke of Buckingham (1648–1721) and the original owner of Buckingham House, which later became Buckingham Palace. It was her second marriage. Her first had been to the Earl of Anglesey, whose death she marked with the commission of a singular portrait of herself, which still hangs over our fireplace. She wears widows' weeds and points at the earth where, we are to understand, the earl now resides, and there is written over her head the rhyming couplet: "*Puis que le Comte d'Anglesey mourut sans remords/ J'avoue que mon deuil n'est qu'en dehors*" ("since the Earl of Anglesey died without remorse, I confess that my mourning is only on the outside"). She had separated from him for cruelty some years earlier, a feat requiring an Act of Parliament. She later enlarged the painting, bolting on a view of Buckingham House, then the most splendid private residence in London. The reason for this was that the duke had died, and so had the sons she bore him; she spent much of her remaining life pursuing a ruinous legal case to maintain her rights to Buckingham House against the rival claimant, Sir Charles Herbert, the duke's illegitimate son. She lost. If she'd won, the house might never have become a royal palace, and I would not be writing about the show of masterpieces currently on

display in its purpose-built exhibition space, the Queen's Gallery.¹

The duchess's Buckingham House was a thing of infinitely greater beauty than the dull and pompous Portland stone block at the end of the Mall today, where the soldiers change the guard. It was built of rosy-red brick, had murals of Diana and Actaeon by Louis Laguerre in its elegant double staircase, and stood between two pavilions connected by a curving colonnade to the central house. One of them was a library pavilion, in which the books were so clearly marked that "even an Irish footman" could fetch what the duke required. When the duchess died, Herbert sold the building to King George III, who wanted it as a house for his wife, Queen Charlotte.

It was the next king, the late-coming George IV, who decided to adapt and enlarge it for palatial use. He engaged the architect John Nash to do the arduous conversion, and it was Nash who conceived a picture gallery as an integral feature of the state rooms, thus seeding a point of future contention he could not have imagined, but which is vigorously alive in the twenty-first century. To illustrate, here's a quotation from Olivia McEwan, reviewing the current exhibition in the Brooklyn-based *Hyperallergic*:

In contrast to the usual display [in the picture gallery at Buckingham Palace], the exhibition

1 "Masterpieces from Buckingham Palace" opened at the Queen's Gallery, London, on May 17, 2021, and remains on view through February 13, 2022.

offers the chance to view the works at eye level in a modern gallery format that allows proper perusal, as opposed to double-stacked and hung as if the paintings were more part of the furniture than individual artworks. When in the palace, they “make a grand, splendid ornamental impact,” as curator Desmond Shawe-Taylor claims in a Facebook video. Their usual function *in situ* is to provide a grand backdrop for diplomatic and special visits, forming surely the most art historically rich wallpaper in existence.

McEwan also deplores the “exorbitant” entrance fee you would pay, as a member of the public, to see these paintings in their usual home in the palace, in contrast to the free admission we have come to expect from museums such as the National Gallery.

It is unquestionable that from a scholarly perspective the pictures are not hung to best advantage in the picture gallery, with its smoked-salmon flock wallpaper and swan-neck picture lights hanging over the frames, bouncing glare off the varnished surfaces. This, however, is not the result of the Queen’s rapacity, as implied here, so much as her frugality. When Sarah Ferguson, the ex-Duchess of York, wrote her memoir of coming to Buckingham Palace as a royal bride-to-be, the detail revealing most about the Queen’s household management was the omnipresence of the forty-watt light bulb in all the private rooms.

Clearly the underlying concern for McEwan, and those who share her misgivings, is the complicated question of ownership, wealth, and the rights of the British taxpayers, who pay for the monarchy via the Sovereign Grant, to look at its pictures. We will come to that. As for her ostensible complaint, that a modern, brightly lit gallery is the “proper” environment in which to view these paintings, not everyone agrees. Sir Nicholas Penny, Britain’s preeminent scholar of Old Master paintings and lately Director of the National Gallery, looks at it another way. “It is a fiction,” he said,

that very rapidly develops in art-historical minds, that collections have perfect environments. In the days before electric light, it was obviously considered a very big plus for the paintings to

be in the same light as you, the occupant of the room, were in. It made it more real.

We can see this principle in action in the first comprehensive inventory of royal paintings, those of Charles I, compiled *circa* 1639 by the Dutchman Abraham van der Doort, the original overstretched keeper of the king’s art collection. Van der Doort, who had imperfect English, describes the light in each picture: “painted in the right light” or “in the wrong light.” This means with the light in the picture falling from respectively the beholder’s left or right. The information was an aid for someone coming to hang them so they looked like they were sharing the room with you—and especially pertinent, says Penny, in the case of double portraits. These would very often be hung not side by side, as they are now, but facing one another, with the light painted to come in on opposite sides, like daylight through the windows.

It is also not quite true that this exhibition, which takes advantage of internal works to “re-service” the Buckingham Palace picture gallery, gives us our one opportunity to see these paintings. Even an intermittent visitor to the Queen’s Gallery will know half of them already, as they have often been diligently repurposed as reference points for the kinds of thematic shows in which the gallery excels. Furthermore, the Royal Collection is exemplary and generous in its loans to other museums. Even so, the chance to see them all together in the excellent lighting and conditions of the Queen’s Gallery, and without the customary rope to keep one at a distance, is an undiluted aesthetic pleasure. To put your nose up to these familiar paintings is to feel, I imagine, something like waking up on the morning after a cataract operation. The shock is finding that all this—these colors, this detail, this clarity, these little marks—has been here *the whole time*, without our being able to see it.

If we were only to see the two Rembrandt portraits in the first and second rooms (of three: the gallery is compact, preventing the onset of masterpiece-blindness), it would be worth the £16 entrance fee. One of these is the *Portrait of Agatha Bas* (1641), the poster girl for the show. Agatha has had her thin hair crimped and is

dressed in her best clothes: she has on a sharply laced gold-embroidered bodice under her black *vlieger*, the open-fronted gown worn by married women, and her white cambric cuffs, miracles of the starchers' art, are scalloped with eyelet lace. A pearl necklace has been wound three times around her neck, and over her shoulders a folded square of pristine white linen, scalloped like the cuffs, has been placed. She's standing within a painted inner frame, in a space Rembrandt has manipulated so that her gold-lace fan appears to be extending over the frame's edge, as does her left hand, which grips the fictive surround like a doorjamb, as if to steady herself.

These clothes bespeak an elevated level of familial grandeur and expectations, which they fulfill much more effectively than their occupant, poor Agatha. Rembrandt has painted a young woman with a homeliness of feature that all this gussying-up, with crimped hair and the gorgeous Rembrandt gleam, sparking light from the accumulations of gold thread, has only accentuated. She looks like a sad poodle. Rembrandt's sitters often have worn-in human faces, startlingly at odds with the brilliance of their linen, but they seem unaware of, or untroubled by, the contrast. With *Agatha Bas*, it's different: it seems that both she and the portraitist are painfully conscious of her failure to live up to the clothes. Up close, you can also see she does not look well. A web of rash—rosacea, perhaps, or psoriasis—is creeping over her cheeks. There are shadows under her lashless, guileless eyes, and a sore-looking puff of skin has been raised beneath her left eyebrow. And while the painting is halfway to a diagnosis, there is nothing clinical in this masterpiece of imaginative sympathy.

On the far side of the doorway hangs another Rembrandt (there are five on show): a self-portrait made in his young, prosperous years, before penury overtook him, the artist sporting low-thread-count whiskers, a splendid velvet cap, and heavy gold chains to clasp his cloak. What you can't see, unless inches away from it, is the handling of his earring: the way the miniscule blob of white paint that forms its tiny pendent pearl stands away from the surface of the painting. A detail, but with ramifications for the whole picture: this raised point of light controls and balances the composition. It's like the note of

the triangle in a symphony, the only instrument that can be heard clearly over the entire orchestra.

That's just two Rembrandts. To reach them, you will have already passed the dwarfish statelyness of Hendrick Pot's *circa* 1632 family portrait of Charles I, Henrietta Maria, and their son Charles, with its lilac-pink and russet background, and a wall of spectacular Dutch cabinet pictures from the Golden Age. There's one de Hooch courtyard scene, his light-washed interior with card players, then two celebrated pictures where the figures are not posed but happened upon. They distill an atmosphere of transgression, and we, the beholders, have an uncertain sense of whether we should rightly be looking at this. Jan Steen's *Woman at Her Toilet* (1663) shows a feminine bedroom, glimpsed through a fictive stone arch. A young woman is sitting on the bed, oblivious to us, stripping off her stockings, the same blue as her silk bed hangings. Her shoes are lying on the floor, and she's unlaced her fur-trimmed jacket so it gapes open over her corset, trapping, we are invited to imagine, wafts of warmth and scent from her body in the space between corset and cloth. On the threshold of the bedroom, Steen has painted a reproving vanitas, so we can rest easy that the woman has been found out in her vanity and materialism, but the skull is not so large as to impede a gentleman's view of, for example, the pliant young flesh of her legs that still bears the impress of the garter in her hand.

Nearby hangs Vermeer's enigmatic *The Music Lesson* (early 1660s), where an adolescent girl is playing the harpsichord under the eye of her instructor. The picture has obsessed, among others, a Texan inventor called Tim Jenison, who decided to paint it himself using the camera obscura technology Vermeer used and that some, like David Hockney, believe holds the whole secret to the Dutch masters' realism. The result can be found in the Marianas Trench of YouTube, where the documentary *Tim's Vermeer* (2013) still lurks. In reality, Jenison's efforts produce no solutions to Vermeer's mysteries, just multiplying questions. And for me, a new question did arise about this painting, with its curiously low viewpoint, almost from behind the table-carpet in the foreground that hangs to the

floor: are we seeing through the eyes of an imagined child who has strayed into the room?

The collection can be seen as an appendix to the biographies of British monarchs. Sometimes the paintings confirm what we think we know of the princes who acquired them. In the third room, consecrated to Italy, there are two glowing paintings by Claude Lorrain (ca. 1600–82). These belonged to Frederick, Prince of Wales (1707–51), an early and active adopter of the “new style” of gardening popularized by William Kent, known to us now as the English landscape manner. This “new style” had sprung from admiration for Claude’s idealized views of the Roman Campagna, with their soft undulations, their choreographed trees and animals, and their pale pavilions, models for the follies or “eyecatchers” in the new painterly garden schemes. For Frederick, these paintings would have been companion pieces to the changes he was making in the gardens at Carlton House, in London, and at Kew. He died of gardening complications (a chill contracted while out surveying his plantings) and never acceded. You could say his Claudes were the death of him.

The paintings can also act as a corrective: for most visitors, the great surprise of the present exhibition will be the number of paintings acquired by George IV (1762–1830), the man who, as Prince Regent, presided over the excesses of the Regency period, and whom we know from the satirical prints of Gillray and Rowlandson as a coarse-cut pudding of a man, stuffed to bursting with self-indulgence, lust, greed, and folly. But thanks to him and his advisor Charles Long, first Baron Farnborough, who was known to contemporaries as “the King’s Spectacles,” the collection enriched itself with almost all the paintings in Room One and many of the Van Dycks and Rubenses in Room Two. Though the market was then awash with Italian Renaissance works that had come loose in the aftermath of the French Revolution, Prinny, as the Regent was known, inclined more to the paintings of the Dutch Golden Age: Cuyp, de Hooch, Steen, Hobbema. He also acquired three of the five Rembrandts on show.

George IV bought back some of the paintings that had belonged to the greatest of all Brit-

ish royal collectors, Charles I. Before Charles, the English throne owned few paintings of note; when he died, it possessed a collection to compare with any European royal house. He had educated his taste for such things in Spain, where, as Prince of Wales, he’d been on a hubristic wooing expedition. There, he was exposed to the Spanish treasure house of paintings. He sat to Velázquez for his portrait (now lost but which, it is still hoped, might one day emerge in a junk shop, or forming the ceiling to a chicken coop in a Welsh farm) and returned home carrying no princesses but two great Titians and a Correggio, gifts from the young Philip IV. On Charles’s accession, he managed to buy a really important collection: that of Vincenzo Gonzaga II, Duke of Mantua, who owned the largest holding of Titians in Italy as well as works by Correggio, Caravaggio, Raphael, and Giulio Romano, painters whose works had never been seen in England.

Little of the Mantua purchase remains. The sums Charles spent on art were one of many controversial undertakings that led to the day in January 1649, when he, as King Charles I, stepped out of a first-floor window in the Banqueting House in Whitehall, with its ceiling by Rubens exalting his father’s reign, onto a raised scaffold. There, an executioner hacked off his head before a crowd of amazed onlookers, who half-expected that God would retaliate against the regicide with bombardments of aerial brimstone. God did not. The Commonwealth government, however, did continue its assault on the legitimacy of kings, and one of the ways they did so was by selling off Charles’s artworks.

The ostensible rationale for this was that the fruits of the king’s recklessness and extravagance should be seen to pay for his colossal debts. But the sale also achieved a more pernicious and enduring erosion of monarchy’s mystique, in that it put a price on kingship. As Jerry Brotton remarks in his indispensable 2006 book on the subject, *The Sale of The Late King’s Goods*, “the sale itself transformed the royal paintings into worldly commodities, destroying forever their royal exclusivity [by] removing them from the privacy of the royal palace and releasing them into the world of public sale.” At a stroke, London became one

of Europe's busiest art markets, with cannier buyers liquidating their purchases at once, for fear of their being recalled in the event of a reversion to monarchy—as did in fact happen, within days of the restoration under Charles's son Charles II. No compensation was offered.

For those in charge of the collection today, we might say that their guiding principle is almost the exact reverse of monetizing. It is not in the interest of the Queen or her curators to think of it in terms of money, and every effort is made to weaken the association between the works of art and their market value. One reason for this is that the collection can't be sold: the works are inalienable; they belong to a charitable trust. It is clearly thought unhelpful if, whenever a Leonardo drawing is sold at auction, it is noted that the Queen's "worth" has gone up by that amount times the number of Leonardo drawings in the collection (about six hundred). Unhelpful to her treasurer, because he cannot sell it, and offensive to her curators, who don't estimate their charges with a pocket calculator.

This aim—to erase the link between the collection and the market—may be behind the decision by the Royal Collection Trust, which is one of the five departments of the royal household, to take no money from the Sovereign Grant (a government grant to support the Queen's official duties and maintain the occupied royal palaces). Instead, it pays for itself with money from entrance fees and sales from its shops, cafés, and similar commercial enterprises. It is not paid for by British taxpayers and hence, you could argue, can put up some resistance to their demands to look at its holdings whenever they want.

The situation of the royal collection is certainly anomalous. All royal collections of comparable stature have formed the foundations of national museums like the Louvre, the Prado, and the museums throughout the old Habsburg Empire. Penny points out that when the National Gallery was founded, in 1824, there was "certainly an expectation" in some quarters that the royal paintings would go there. Optimistic contemporary allusions to a "Royal National Gallery" also point to the hope that George IV would lead the philanthropic charge—a call he appears to have ignored, preferring to develop

the collection in his own way, by selling in order to buy. In recent years, there has been little appetite for a transfer of ownership to the state. The biggest change has been in access: frequent loans to other galleries, an imaginative program of exhibitions at the Queen's Gallery and Holyrood House in Scotland, which aims to show the full range of objects (the next one will be on the courts of Britain and Japan), and the opening of Buckingham Palace, Hampton Court, and Windsor Castle to a paying public.

Lately, COVID-19 has sucked revenue from the trust. Last year it lost £64 million, with the result that it has had to trench drastically, putting into "abeyance" the post of Surveyor of the Queen's Pictures, a position held since Van der Doort in Charles I's time, and one later notoriously occupied by the Soviet spy Anthony Blunt. As the art historian and broadcaster Bendor Grosvenor remarked in *The Times*, "It has taken COVID to end the continuous presence of the surveyor, which even the treachery of Anthony Blunt did not achieve."

The Royal Collection doesn't belong to the monarch. It belongs to that mysterious entity "the Crown," which does not die but passes on successive breaths from a dying monarch to her heir. To posit an awkward question: what would happen to it if the Crown itself ceased to exist and Britain became a republic? Could the royal family claim the paintings as theirs? When I put this to Penny, his expressive eyebrows lifted a fraction. There are, he said, some historical precedents for absconding with royal paintings: Queen Christina of Sweden (1626–89) prudently sent ahead of her abdication some eighty choice artworks looted from the great connoisseur Rudolph II; the small but select collection of King William II of the Netherlands (1792–1849) was eventually sold at the Hague. The world lacks recent examples, and the most likely fate for the collection under a republic is that it would pass to the state. Should the monarchy survive the death of the present Queen, Prince Charles has declared that on his accession he will throw open Buckingham Palace to the public for free. Unlike his mother, he cares for art; how that will affect the Royal Collection remains to be seen. Sometimes there is a case for benign neglect.

Double Jasper

by Karen Wilkin

The most-discussed events of the fall art season, or at least the ones that generated the most buzz among people who still believe that aesthetic value is different from financial worth, were the late-September openings of the paired retrospectives, both titled “Jasper Johns: Mind/Mirror,” at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York and the Philadelphia Museum of Art.¹ Conceived and curated by the Whitney’s Scott Rothkopf and Philadelphia’s Carlos Basualdo, the double whammy was supposed to take place last year as a ninetieth birthday celebration for the artist, who was born in 1930, but, like so many events, it was postponed because of COVID-19 restrictions. The mere fact of the twin exhibitions, each a complete overview with a slightly different emphasis, provoked some elemental questions, rather like the ones that first encounters with Johns’s work raised for the distinguished art historian Leo Steinberg. One of his most engaging essays, “Jasper Johns: The First Seven Years of His Art,” tracks this initial perplexity. Steinberg describes Johns’s paintings from the mid-1950s to about 1962 in a manner as laconic and straightforward as the works themselves, asking such questions as “What does it mean?” “Why had he chosen to paint subjects of such aggressive uninterest?” and “Does this all

1 “Jasper Johns: Mind/Mirror” opened at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, and the Philadelphia Museum of Art on September 29, 2021, and remains on view through February 13, 2022.

mean that Johns is a respecter of what used to be called ‘the integrity of the picture plane?’” Ultimately, Steinberg becomes a believer. Mesmerized by the way colors, their names, and a familiar image wrestle it out in one of Johns’s *Map* paintings, he decides that the artist “counts on our knowledge that this is a map to maintain surface tension against the natural spatial pressures of colors.” In the end, Steinberg capitulates completely to Johns’s paintings: “Seeing them becomes thinking.”

But our questions and our responses may be less high-minded. Why two separate shows? Is Johns really that important? On the plus side, it’s true that, at ninety-one, he has had a long and productive working life. It’s true, too, that his close relationships, early on, with his lover Robert Rauschenberg and their friends, the choreographer Merce Cunningham and the composer John Cage, placed him at the center of New York’s avant-garde in the heady years of the 1960s. Johns’s truculent early paintings—the *Flags*, the *Targets*, and the stenciled letter and number images, which remain his best-known works—are at once as familiar and recognizable as the banal objects from which they derive, yet they remain mysterious in hard-to-articulate ways. That mystery separates Johns from the Pop artists, with whose work his own is often compared. While his imagery, like theirs, appears quintessentially vernacular and American, he seems to share none of Pop’s alliance with mass culture. Most of Johns’s work is intensely serious and deeply concerned with aesthetics—even those celebrated sculptures of beer cans and

brushes in a coffee tin. He clearly has always seen himself as part of the historical continuum of what used to be called “high art,” an attachment that seems to have intensified with time; witness the sometimes fragmentary, sometimes obvious, sometimes almost indecipherable allusions to the art of the past and, revealingly, to his own work, along with near-traditional illusionism—characteristics that begin in the 1980s and persist. It’s true, as well, that Johns’s work has changed, sometimes dramatically, many times over the years, which makes that long and productive working life more interesting.

But most of what I’ve just said about Johns could also apply to Frank Stella, who is six years younger, as radical in his inventions, and far wider-ranging in his appetite for new materials, approaches, and disciplines. The spectacular 2015 Stella retrospective, one of the first exhibitions in the Whitney’s Gansevoort Street building, was, like “Mind/Mirror,” a collaboration between art historians from different museums—the Whitney’s director and the chief curator of the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth. The result of their combined efforts was seen in both institutions but had no doppelgänger. So what is it about Johns that justifies concurrent exhibitions in museums that usually avoid presenting even marginally similar shows because of proximity?

The Whitney’s and Philadelphia’s collecting histories offer a partial explanation. Both museums have notably large holdings of John’s work, admittedly heavy on prints—which is not surprising since they are a major part of his oeuvre, intimately related to his paintings, and among his most expressive, dramatic efforts. I suspect that there is similar enthusiasm and commitment among the trustees and supporters of both institutions, which I am cynical enough to think may also have influenced the decision. But there are other anomalies in how Johns is regarded. He is among the very few recent artists who are recognized as having continued to make work during a long career. Most of his peers and colleagues, no matter how consistent the level of their paintings or sculpture over a lifetime, are identified primarily with the works that first established their reputations. (See: “There are

no second acts in American lives.”) Take, for example, Helen Frankenthaler, whose life as an artist spanned six decades, during which she made richly varied paintings, sculptures, prints, a ceramic mural, stage sets and costumes, and more. When Gagosian Gallery began to represent her, after her death, a spectacular, museum-quality show of her most important work of the 1950s was mounted, assembled from many sources. That raised expectations of a series of decade-by-decade overviews of Frankenthaler’s achievement, but the celebration of her early work was followed by a disappointing, much smaller exhibition of 1960s paintings drawn solely from her estate. The rest, to date, has been ignored. (Her foundation’s evident desire to reposition her as an Abstract Expressionist may factor into this, but that’s another matter.) Johns’s evolving work, by contrast, has been regularly shown. The efforts of his more recent decades are given full attention in “Mind/Mirror”, all but outweighing the “signature” *Flags, Targets, Numbers, and Maps* with which the exhibition begins.

If the concurrent versions of “Mind/Mirror” have provoked questions, they have also stimulated a remarkable amount of hyperbole. “Jasper Johns Remains Contemporary Art’s Philosopher King” was the headline of Peter Schjeldahl’s worshipful piece in *The New Yorker*. Jerry Saltz in *New York* magazine describes Johns as “the artist who invented contemporary art” and credits him with changing his life. Does “Mind/Mirror” really warrant all this? There’s no doubt that, the wide variations in Johns’s approach notwithstanding, we are always aware of the presence of a singular, thoughtful, idiosyncratic individual. Whether his ideas about image-making constitute a philosophy or whether he “invented contemporary art” remain debatable. Are Johns’s flags and targets more radical than Stella’s implacable pinstripes? Their recognizable imagery may have made them more irritating to skeptics when they were first shown, but it can also be argued that it made them more accessible.

At the Whitney, we are encouraged to draw our own conclusions from the start.

The first thing we encounter is a wall of Johns's graphic works—a "Print Timeline"—a comprehensive introduction that, in a sense, provides everything we need to know, even at the risk of making some of what follows redundant. Just about all of Johns's recurrent motifs are represented: flags, numbers, the so-called crosshatches (which never cross), the ghostly figure who floats in about the same time as the quotations from other works of art make themselves felt, flagstones and other patterning, the facing profiles that switch into a swelling vase, and more. Johns's entire toolbox of image-making is on view in the prints: layering, inversion, repetition, and reversal; anonymity and signature calligraphy; incongruity in the service of the recognizable and the inexplicable, much of it in surprisingly rich color. The imagery in the prints ranges from flat, "readymade" everyday items that we normally recognize or scrutinize for information without thinking about their special visual properties, to a mashup of the *Mona Lisa*, a seahorse, and that tipped ghost, a combination designed to baffle that we must closely, albeit fruitlessly, interrogate. The prints are usually complex, sometimes antic, always moody and introspective. We rediscover all of these qualities, in diverse guises and various media, as we move through the Whitney's flashy installation of twelve galleries of paintings, works on paper, prints, sculpture, and mixed-media works bracketing 1955–2018. (Each gallery, we learn from the wall texts, has an equivalent in Philadelphia with a different emphasis; New York's "Flags and Maps" section, for example, is balanced by "Numbers" at the PMA. Philadelphia revisits Johns's 1960 exhibition at Leo Castelli, which concentrated on maps, while the Whitney examines the wider-ranging 1968 show, with its splotchy flagstones, its airy grids, and its brooding gray *Screen Pieces*. And so on.)

What distinguishes the paintings is their physicality. Johns's deadpan, utterly recognizable subject matter in the 1950s and 1960s may have been a rejection of the emotion-laden *Sturm und Drang* of gestural Abstract Expressionism, but his lush encaustic surfaces are as

seductive as his predecessors' most dramatic efforts. The flag and map images, the rows of numbers and letters, often seem engulfed, buried in urgent brushstrokes, with each touch memorialized by viscid wax. In other early works, objects such as rulers or string are set against the lush encaustic surfaces, heightening the material presence and self-sufficient object-quality of the works, while reminding us, at the same time, of the role of the artist: Johns's willful insistence on attaching these "alien" things. These works make it impossible not to think about Johns's relationship with Rauschenberg and about Rauschenberg's "combines," with their aggressive additions, most of them made during the years that the two rebellious young artists spent together. The surfaces of Johns's later works are often less articulate than those of his earlier efforts, but they still make us intensely aware of his hand, of the act of making.

"Mind/Mirror" is organized more or less chronologically, but some galleries focus on individual themes that cut across time and media. "South Carolina," for example, includes paintings, prints, and works on paper mostly made in the 1960s, during Johns's sojourns on Edisto Island, South Carolina, in his native South, after he and Rauschenberg painfully separated. There are particularly intimate works inflected by Johns's friendship with the poet/curator Frank O'Hara, who died suddenly in 1966 in a freak automobile accident, a context that adds to the mood of poignant reflection. The section also includes substantial paintings from the 1990s whose layered imagery derives from Johns's recollections of his childhood, family photographs, schematically drawn remembered objects, and the like. (The Philadelphia equivalent of this gallery is about Johns's relationship to Japan, where he has spent extensive time.) Other sections concentrate on small works or on surprisingly delicate watercolors under the heading "Dreams." There's a section dedicated to a suite of radiant monotypes, made in 1982, about the well-known sculpture of brushes in a Savarin coffee can, made in 1960. Here the repetition inherent in the monotype pro-

cess is challenged by variations in background patterns, from handprints to crosshatches to spatters, and riotous color.

Elsewhere, works from approximately the same period but in different media are brought together, as in the last gallery, “Elegies in Dark.” Here monotypes and paintings made between the 1990s and 2018 underscore the aging Johns’s preoccupation with what the wall text calls “mortality and its attendants, death, loss, and sorrow.” Earlier motifs are revisited: the vase/profile illusion, an outline of a slender boy, crosshatching, and harlequin lozenges, with the occasional addition of a looming skeleton. In contrast to the confrontational early works or the crowded, complicated extravaganzas that followed, Johns’s paintings of the past twenty-five years or so are spatially ambiguous, brooding, and delicately stroked, with layering and patterning that create complexity and richness. The imagery remains arcane, obscure, or impenetrable, which either gives viewers enormous license to interpret or pushes them away.

Among the best things about the duo of Johns exhibitions is the amount of conversation they have sparked. A perceptive and impressively knowledgeable friend, thrilled by seeing the New York version of “Mind/Mirror”, suggested that the much-admired early works are less interesting than what followed, after Johns and Rauschenberg separated. The later allusive, enigmatic paintings, she feels, are the “real Jasper Johns.” One of my graduate students agrees. She describes visiting “Mind/Mirror” as “like being inside Jasper Johns’s head,” expanding this idea to compare the palimpsest paintings to sophisticated scrapbooks—lovingly assembled collections of salvaged fragments that constitute

a private narrative. “Private,” I think, is the operative word. Despite the wealth of allusions, quasi-appropriations, and occasional explications in the later paintings, they are no more forthcoming than the deliberately uncommunicative flags, maps, numbers, and letters. Johns, it seems, makes work only for himself, refusing to extend or ingratiate. He probably doesn’t care if we get any of his allusions or references, and he certainly doesn’t care what we think. We are allowed to look, to note subtle surfaces and accomplished structure, to try, if we must, to tease out meanings and sources, but we are finally told to mind our own business and keep our distance. It’s rather like being permitted to observe parts of the Native American ritual dances held in the plazas of the Southwestern pueblos. We stand behind a barrier, at a respectful distance, waiting for the dancers and musicians to emerge from the kiva, where the ceremony has been taking place. What we are watching is not a performance, but a section of a profoundly serious, profoundly inward rite, and we are privileged to witness it. As outsiders, we undoubtedly fail to grasp the full meaning of the event, but we can still be deeply engaged, fascinated, and even, perhaps, enlightened. Or a better analogy might be with W. G. Sebald’s enthralling novels. Like Johns’s later paintings, they are full of inventions and appropriations, sometimes from his own work, whose sources we do not always grasp. Yet even when we are aware of the artifice, we find the books to be utterly convincing. We believe, as Sebald intended us to believe, that they are not fiction but beautifully honed personal histories. That’s a little like spending time with Johns’s strongest later paintings, whatever our final evaluations may be.

Anglicizing the avant-garde

by Benjamin Riley

In May 1926, the British General Council of the Trades Union Congress called a “general strike” to attempt to force the Conservative government, led by Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin, to rectify poor wages and conditions for miners. For nine days, workers from bus drivers to policemen to printing-press operators refused to go to work, a situation that promised to suspend the gears of London life. The first day of the strike, Duff Cooper, then the member of Parliament for Oldham, noticed only that the size of his evening paper had shrunk. By the next day, things had worsened; at White’s, the club on St James’s Street, rumors spread. Winston Churchill, the chancellor of the exchequer, had been assassinated, some claimed. Cooper relates how, at White’s, “there were some half dozen in full policemen’s uniforms,” and what a sight that must have been, with men more accustomed to riding crops than billy clubs fully kitted out as peacekeepers.

Chips Channon, not yet a member of Parliament, thought the strike might be “the beginning of a real revolt skilfully engineered by Moscow.” A lifelong opponent of Bolshevism both real and perceived, Channon “joined up as a Special Constable,” noting with pride his “baton and whistle”—he always did like a bit of dress-up. While his friends were driving buses, he drilled at Scotland Yard, still leaving time for “tea with Mary, Lady Curzon . . . and the Spanish Ambassador and others. All trivial and jesting as usual, and the proletariat rattling at the gates.”

A half-hour walk away from White’s, at 33 Warwick Square in pleasingly scruffy Pimlico, Claude Flight (1881–1955) was teaching the new technique of linocut at the Grosvenor School of Modern Art, which had been founded the previous October by Iain Macnab (1890–1967), a wood engraver formerly associated with Heatherley’s School of Fine Art, a traditional outfit. The Grosvenor was to be no such thing, having “neither entrance requirements nor fixed terms,” as the Metropolitan Museum of Art curator Jennifer Farrell explains in an illuminating essay in the catalogue for the museum’s new exhibition “Modern Times: British Prints, 1913–1939.”¹

Linocut was representative of the values of the Grosvenor School itself—democratic and new, but not entirely divorced from tradition. The method is more or less the same as woodcut, but with the matrix not wood but linoleum, a synthetic flooring material invented only in 1860. Flight was the technique’s greatest promoter in England, believing it had the power to beautify lower-class life. As he wrote in his 1927 book *Lino-Cuts: A Hand-Book of Linoleum-Cut Colour Printing*:

Mass production in business is essential to our very existence. Living as we do in closely packed communities[,] mass production brings down

1 “Modern Times: British Prints, 1913–1939” opened at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, on November 1, 2021, and remains on view through January 9, 2022.

the price of our goods to a reasonable and saleable rate.

Pictures both in oil and water-colour can never be painted so as to be sold at a price which appeals to the pocket of the average man, pockets already taxed to such an extent by the State that the only relaxation he can afford is of the cheapest kind.

Linoleum-cut colour prints could be sold, if only the interest in and the demand for them could be stimulated, at a price which is equivalent to that paid by the average man for his daily beer or his cinema ticket.

Flight even imagined a “lending library” of linocuts, so that the medium could be enjoyed by all. Here, then, was a third way for contemporary British life. Not the fearful noblesse oblige of Cooper and Channon, nor the deleterious organized-labor action taken by the strikers, but a recognition that, with the right media, the average man could have a meaningful, stimulating life. As Flight put it:

Given the right art education in the elementary schools . . . the average man will buy these colour prints, for he will realize that the satisfaction to be obtained from their possession has a greater lasting quality than that to be derived from the taste and exhilaration from the beer or the excitement and comfort from the cinema; knowing also that aesthetic pleasure surmounts creature comforts, and that the harmony, the intensity, and the vision which a good work of art affords would be his for the asking.

If Flight’s vision seems utopian, it was merely one artistic manifesto in an era overfull of them. In April 1909, the Italian poet Filippo Tommaso Marinetti published *The Futurist Manifesto* in English translation, declaring that “the splendor of the world has been enriched by a new beauty: the beauty of speed” and that “Beauty exists only in struggle. There is no masterpiece that has not an aggressive character.” Defiantly violent, Marinetti and his cadre declared they “want[ed] to glorify war—the only cure for the world.” The resultant art established new styles that set the tone for much of the Teens, Twenties, and Thir-

ties, with paintings lacking fixed perspective, forms with hard edges, and a glorification of new technologies, especially the automobile. Simultaneously, the English art establishment was getting in on the act. The critic Clive Bell, in his introduction to the catalogue for Roger Fry’s 1912 “Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition,” suggested that the terms of engagement with art had changed: “We have ceased to ask, ‘What does this picture represent?’ and ask instead, ‘What does it make us feel?’” Wyndham Lewis (1882–1957), the *enfant terrible* of British art, the man Hemingway described as having “the eyes . . . of an unsuccessful rapist,” refused to be left out. In June 1914 he published the first edition of *BLAST*, a journal dedicated to besmirching what Lewis viewed as self-satisfied Victorian Englishness and promoting his own movement, which Ezra Pound had dubbed “Vorticism.” Among those to be blasted were the prim novelist John Galsworthy, the composer of empire Edward Elgar, and the traditionalist Slade professor Henry Tonks. To be blessed were James Joyce, the music-hall performer George Mozart, and Castor Oil. As part of the manifesto, Lewis asserted that “To believe that it is necessary or conducive to art, to ‘Improve’ life, for instance—make architecture, dress, ornament, in ‘better taste,’ is absurd.”

This febrile atmosphere was interrupted by the cataclysm of the First World War, which is more or less where “Modern Times” begins. If the war seemed confirmation of the Futurist and Vorticist wishes, there was little time for manifestos in the mud. Christopher Richard Wynne Nevinson’s 1916 drypoint *Returning to the Trenches*, which appeared in the second issue of *BLAST* and is on display here, depicts a column of French soldiers rushing onward, their bodies overlapping so as to become a single unit. The motion is inexorably forward, but the troops’ downcast faces, angular and hardened, suggest that valor is far from the picture. As Nevinson (1889–1946), who had served in France and as a medic in England, later commented, “It happened that I was the first artist to paint war pictures without pageantry[,] without glory, and without the

over-coloured heroic that had made up the tradition of all war paintings up to this time. I had done this unconsciously. No man saw pageantry in the trenches.” Officially commissioned as a war artist in the summer of 1917, Nevinson arrived in Europe three weeks before the Battle of Passchendaele, where an estimated 300,000 British soldiers died in a mere three months. Whereas *Returning to the Trenches* focused on the human actors in the nascent war drama, *That Cursed Wood* (1918) shows a bleak, dead forest, with spindly trees bereft of leaves standing behind a bomb-cratered foreground and nary a soldier in sight. Above, biplanes, those mechanical agents of destruction, circle, while birds—mere V-shaped flecks—fly closer to the ground. The drypoint’s title is taken from Siegfried Sassoon’s 1916 poem “At Carnoy”:

Crouched among thistle-tufts I’ve watched the
glow
Of a blurred orange sunset flare and fade;
And I’m content. Tomorrow we must go
To take some cursed Wood . . .
O world God made!

While *Returning to the Trenches* eschewed pageantry, it nonetheless expressed some amount of martial solidarity. Here, in this haunted landscape, the impression is merely one of ash.

The mechanization of the war effort was reflected in the art of Edward Alexander Wadsworth (1889–1949), who worked on the “dazzle ships” project, which sought to use artists’ skills to camouflage British watercraft, thus making them less susceptible to sinking by U-boats. Wadsworth’s early Vorticist work, characterized by striking abstract patterning, found use in the fight. *Liverpool Shipping*, a 1918 woodcut on cream paper, shows a massive ship with irregular patterns crossing its bow, patterns echoed by the well-defined black-and-white lines of the docks around it. The vessel’s hull recedes into the back of the composition, and it’s impossible to tell where the ship ends and the city of Liverpool begins: camouflage in action. When Wadsworth turned to industrial subjects in 1919, his keen sense of pattern served him well. *Black Coun-*

try, showing dark furnaces against a piercing orange-red ground, is hardly representational at all. Stylized flames flare up and out, recalling in shape Umberto Boccioni’s 1913 Futurist sculpture *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space*, while the furnaces themselves recede. Here is an industrial hell, the modern world of carnage vivified.

Given the desolation of the first room of the exhibition, it’s rather a relief to reach Flight’s ca. 1922 linocut *Speed* in the second. Here we find a throwing-off of war weariness in service of a celebration of the modern city. Both the Futurists and the Vorticists had saluted London, with Marinetti declaring “London itself is a Futurist city! Look at those brilliant-hued motor-buses” and the *BLAST* manifesto insisting “London is NOT a provincial town.” In *Speed*, Flight has given due emphasis to the primacy of the machine, with an iconic red bus at right, but he has domesticated it, placing it on the curve of London’s grand boulevard, Regent Street, next to shadowy shoppers and a policeman at left. Whereas the Futurists glorified the machine for its mechanical properties, Flight sought to humanize it. As Farrell says in her catalogue essay on Flight, “The city as portrayed by Grosvenor School artists was full of people, the majority of whom were in movement.” Modern forms of transport in London became an abiding concern for the Grosvenor School artists. Cyril Edward Power (1872–1951), another Grosvenor School practitioner, was particularly interested in the Underground. His *Whence & Whither?* (ca. 1930) shows a column of behatted men filing down a Tube escalator. Like Nevinson’s soldiers, they cohere into a single unit, but, unlike those doomed men, Power’s commuters lack even the barest suggestion of facial expressions. What might seem a dehumanization is in fact a tribute to modern city life and the human capital that powers it, so propulsive is the forward motion of the straphangers. The bright colors of the linocut—washed oranges and blues—herald exaltation, not doom. Power’s ca. 1932 *The Tube Station* is a companion piece, depicting a red subway car entering or exiting a station, those escalator-riding men now seated

in orderly fashion on the train itself, models of efficiency. The station, decorated with jutting patterns that form vaults and pointed arches on the floor and ceiling—based on Power’s studies of Gothic architecture—and containing electronic notice boards and a clock, is as much a character in the scene as any of the riders, a marriage of old England and new. Power’s longtime collaborator Sybil Andrews (1898–1992) abstracted her Tube scenes even further. *Straphangers* (1929) shows her own behatted commuters, but forms a crescent of them, their arms extending out as points to grab an invisible railing. These crescent forms recur in 1930’s *Rush Hour*, showing only the sharply curved legs of men and women as they stride atop what must be stairs, but which are hardly identifiable as such, so elliptical is their shape.

The Grosvenor School artists, despite a fascination with urban life, were not city chauvinists. Among the best work on view in this exhibition full of fascinating specimens has to do with the outdoor pursuits traditionally loved in green England. Most impressive of these is Power’s *The Eight* (1930), which presents a shell of eight men rowing, their boat forming a diagonal that anchors the scene, their oars moving centrifugally towards the edges of the paper. Mostly by using various blocks of color, Power has distilled the scene to its essence, showing movement on the water, and the effectors of that movement, while leaving out all extraneous detail. A comparison of preparatory drawings for *The Eight* and the finished print show this impulse in action. The drawings are replete with individual details such as the rowers’ arms and hats and the coxswain’s megaphone, all clearly delineated. By the time of the finished print, the cox is omitted entirely. Andrews took a similar approach in her 1931 linocut *In Full Cry*. The traditional fox-hunting picture has been given the Grosvenor School treatment with color blocks moving the action forward. At left a blue-coated rider surmounts a hedge on a shadowy black horse, while to the right further riders grab hold of their unnaturally stretched steeds. Not a single hoof is yet on

the ground, but we know that in seconds the sound will be deafening as the riders follow the off-paper hounds and quarry. The pared-down nature of linocut prints was deliberate; while nineteenth-century printing methods used dozens of blocks to produce multicolored images of painting-like complexity, Flight had suggested that the number of blocks be limited, which both constricted the palette and circumscribed the form linocuts could take—and made the medium more accessible to the beginning artist.

If Flight’s vision of democratized art was a third way in 1920s politics, the Grosvenor School’s insistence on treating disparate aspects of English life—both urban and rural, work and leisure—marks their methods as a way out of the dead ends of Futurism and Vorticism. Those two movements, for all their artistic innovations, were fundamentally removed from life on the ground, preferring to sneer at it from above. How far indeed is a poster advertising bus routes to Lord’s Cricket Ground, collaboratively designed in 1934 by Andrews and Power, from Marinetti’s pointed question: “Do you want to waste the best part of your strength in a useless admiration of the past, from which you will emerge exhausted, diminished, trampled on?”

The great avant-garde war artist Paul Nash (1889–1946) noted in 1932 that “whether it is possible to ‘Go Modern’ and still ‘Be British’” is “a question vexing quite a few people to-day.” The work on show at the Met answers quite tidily. Here is a modernism—consisting of deliberately new forms and media, and aimed at a mass audience—that recognizes and appreciates history. The Grosvenor School artists adapted the deracinated styles of the Futurists and Vorticists to the traditions of England, with the result being an art for the people. The prints on show at the Met, collected and transferred to the museum by Leslie and the late Johanna Garfield, and elegantly presented in three rooms with ample space between pictures, confirm that the common sense of England, despite major upheaval in the interwar era, remained intact.

Of bodies chang'd

by Andrew L. Shea

Who said old dogs can't learn new tricks? One by-product of our culture machine's obsession with novelty is the prevailing idea that creative accomplishment is reserved for the young. But a quick glance towards history will reveal countless instances of artists pushing through to some of their greatest works after many decades in the business. Think of Michelangelo's immortal work on St. Peter's Basilica—he was seventy-one when Pope Paul III appointed him chief architect of the project. Or, in more modern times, of Cézanne's *Large Bathers* (now in the Philadelphia Museum of Art), completed a year before the Provençal painter died in 1906 at sixty-seven. Or of Monet's spellbinding *Water Lilies* series, the most daring of which were made in Giverny only after the painter had turned eighty. Other examples abound, but few are quite as notable as Titian's late-in-life mythological series for Philip II of Spain, which the Venetian master worked on from 1551–62, throughout his seventh decade and into his eighth.

Indeed, Tiziano Vecellio (ca. 1488–1576) had already been for about forty years the master of Venetian painting—the “Sun Amidst Small Stars,” as he was commonly known—by the time he first met with Philip II in 1548–49 in Milan and Augsburg to paint his portraits. Prince Philip (then angling to succeed his father as Holy Roman Emperor) was impressed, and he effectively contracted Titian to serve as court painter *in absentia*, with the artist sending pictures from his Venice studio on a regular basis for a handsome salary.

The arrangement allowed Titian unprecedented latitude to choose his own subjects and formats. At some point it was agreed that he would paint a cycle of narratives using Greco-Roman mythology as versified in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* as its primary source. Titian ultimately sent six of these intricate, stylistically radical, and conceptually bold narratives to Philip, and by the end of the sixteenth century they were installed together in a single chamber within the Alcázar in Madrid. The paintings—which Titian came to call his *poesie*, his poems in paint—remained in the Spanish royal collection until they were dispersed in 1704.

Now at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, the paintings are reunited, for the first time since their scattering, in a compact exhibition that began in Europe—first at the National Gallery, London, and then at the Prado in Madrid.¹ The Gardner is its only U.S. stop, and in all likelihood the paintings will never again be seen together in our lifetimes. It is thus, if anything ever was, a “must-see.”

Several of the paintings show Titian at the top of his game, which means they are some of the most beautiful oil paintings ever made. The six are, in order of their creation, *Danaë* (1551–53), *Venus and Adonis* (ca. 1553–54), *Perseus and Andromeda* (ca. 1554–56), *Diana and Actaeon* (1556–59), *Diana and Callisto* (1556–59), and *The Rape of Europa* (1559–62). These tales,

1 “Titian: Women, Myth & Power” opened at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston, on August 12, 2021, and remains on view through January 2, 2022.

in which gods and mortals mix and mingle, playing out all-too-human themes of love and lust, greed and despair, vengeance and violence, found immaculate expression in the mind and brush of Titian. The paintings, with their careening compositions, throbbing colors, and vivacious surfaces, run parallel to Ovid's own discursive, flitting, metamorphic impulse.

Following formal and narrative relationships among the paintings (as well as extant correspondence between Titian and Philip), the Gardner's curator, Nathaniel Silver, has divided the large canvases into three pairs. Thus, *Danaë*, of the reclining nude princess at the moment of her insemination by Jupiter as golden rain, goes with *Venus and Adonis*, in which the goddess of beauty, also reclining (though now seen from behind), begs her lover not to embark on his fatal hunt. *Diana and Actaeon*, at the moment when Actaeon stumbles upon the bathing goddess and her retinue of nymphs, goes with *Diana and Callisto*, in which an imperious Diana banishes one of her followers for having been impregnated (also by Jupiter). Finally, the seaside *Perseus and Andromeda*, in which a nude Andromeda stands chained, watching the demigod Perseus crash out of the sky, goes with *The Rape of Europa*, in which Jupiter, this time transformed into a sinewy white bull, absconds through the Mediterranean with a frightened Europa on his back. These are hung in matching gilded frames on temporary walls that angle inward at a slight V so that the viewer can take in each duo simultaneously, at an appropriate distance.

What's an appropriate distance? As Titian developed the series, the paintings became brushier and brushier. Contemporary commentators applauded the vivacity of Titian's color and compositions but were often nonplussed by what we'd now call their radically impressionistic manner. The line went that the paintings looked great from afar, but that Titian's *disegno*, his drawing, appeared "hurried" when seen up close. Nevertheless, over the course of his *poesie*, Titian pushed this manner even further, developing it to a radical extreme. Compare, for instance, the crisp, sober edges

of the earlier *Venus and Adonis* to analogous passages in the later *Diana and Actaeon*. Get near to *Diana*, and much of the surface presents as a dissolving mist of diaphanous pigment. Ten steps back, and that surface coheres, as if by magic, into a convincing perceptual space, intelligible yet shifty, never allowing a moment's rest as it scatters the eye about its ins and outs, its nears and fars, its sightlines and colors and lights.

Because he built them up through innumerable layers of thin glazes, scumbled lightly over the visible weaves of his canvases, Titian's surfaces often look more breathed-into-being than painted. As Delacroix wrote in the nineteenth century, "The touch is so difficult to see in his work, the hand of the craftsman so completely concealed, that the steps he took to arrive at such perfection remain a mystery." With Titian's hand goes our sense of his toil. In these consummately sensuous images, hard work has no place.

Nevertheless, Titian labored intensely on these paintings, often over the course of several years. In his striking account of Titian's creative practice, Palma il Giovane, a workshop assistant, writes that the master

laid in his pictures with a mass of color, which served as a groundwork for what he wanted to express. . . . With the same brush dipped in red, black, or yellow he worked up the light parts and in four strokes he could create a remarkably fine figure. . . . Then he turned the picture to the wall and left it for months without looking at it, until he turned to it and stared critically at it, as if it were a mortal enemy. . . . If he found something which displeased him he went to work like a surgeon. . . . Thus, by repeated revisions he brought his pictures to a high state of perfection He never painted a figure *alla prima*, and used to say that he who improvises can never make a perfect line of poetry. . . . He finished his figures like this and in the last stages he used his fingers more than his brush.

Within this passage lies a key to painting: the necessity of gaining psychological distance from one's own picture. An artist must be able to go inside and outside his creation—

to be fully involved in its making, but also to achieve critical separation, to see it with fresh, impartial eyes, as if for the first time. By turning his canvas to the wall, then leaving it unseen for months, then glaring at it in a flash as if a “mortal enemy,” then caressing it to completion with the touch of his fingertips, Titian could create a picture that steals breath on initial impact, yet also unfolds with unhurried calm, getting better and better as you sit and linger in its presence.

Time is thus embedded in the *poesie*. As a narrative construct, time also directs Titian's storytelling. There's an insistence about the way Titian seeks out the exact psychological inflection point in his chosen fable, the instant of transition, where movement and stasis coexist. In doing so Titian often declines to dazzle his patron with more spectacular physical action. Action's aplenty, to be sure—nowhere more so than in *The Rape of Europa*, with its tumbling cupids, those gruesome fish-monsters, the hurtling white bull, Europa gripping his horn tight, her loose-fitting gown fluttering away in the wind. But consider his *Diana and Actaeon*. Pretty much every other contemporary depiction of the myth shows Diana actively splashing Actaeon with the water that will transform him into a stag. In Paolo Veronese's rendition of the story a few years later (1560s, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston), for instance, Actaeon reclines in voyeuristic pleasure at the edge of the stream—he's been there for a while—and receives the retributive splash as warranted punishment for that gaze.

Titian, however, takes on an earlier moment, charging the fable with a far more complicated moral and message. The setting is a grotto of rusticated ruins on the edge of a forest, with deep blue mountains lining the horizon behind. A carved-stone fountain sags askew into a pool and quiet stream, in and around which Diana and her six maidens bathe. From the left, Actaeon bursts onto the scene while recoiling in surprise. His pose communicates both forward and backward momentum. His left hand reaches out with tense ambiguity, seeming to draw back the vermilion curtain behind it—revealing the nude women to his gaze—simultaneously shouting “stop!” Alas,

it's but a futile attempt to block his accidental, yet nonetheless shameful, look.

Opposite is Diana, seated in a chair at the edge of the pool and furiously covering up. She's in no position to splash Actaeon. Her toe just barely reaches the water's glassy surface. Are we to presume that she'll use that foot to kick the water? It's not quite clear, and there's brittle tension in the dramatic suspension. Diana's nymphs, scattered about the composition, don't know what to do. Some stare at Actaeon, some at Diana, anxious to know how she'll respond. One of Actaeon's hounds, emerging in profile out of the left side of the canvas, looks as stunned as his master, a visual kinship that only underscores the heartbreaking fact that soon this loyal companion will turn executioner once the transformation is complete.

Yet despite Titian's freeze-frame naturalism, the *poesie* also hint at broader narrative arcs. Thus, for instance, hanging in a murky corner, the skulls and hides of Diana's hunt foreshadow Actaeon's looming metamorphosis and dismemberment. And though each of the vignettes belongs to its own myth—they're about as disjointed as the *Metamorphoses* themselves—subtle formal continuities evoke an overall sense of passing time. Consider the way that the crisp, cool, noontime daylight of *Diana and Actaeon* proceeds to the warmer dusk of *Diana and Callisto*, whose similarly scaled figures inhabit a similar outdoor setting. Or how the similarly doomed Callisto and Actaeon wear similarly colored vermilion socks, both of which daringly draw our attention to the bottom-left extremes of their respective canvases.

All this comes to a head with *The Rape of Europa*, which concludes the series. Look for a straight horizontal or vertical that might ground you in the picture—you won't find it. There's a reckless asymmetry to the composition. Titian whips us around the edges of the rectangle like a cyclone: drawn first to the faces of Europa and the bull at the far right of the picture, our eye moves down the diagonal of Europa's body to the fish-riding putti on the bottom left, from there to the tumbling cupids above—around again and again.

The current exhibition offers a unique opportunity to see this picture, which usually hangs above furniture on the Gardner's third floor, in ideal lighting and at eye level. It's also our first look at the painting after its 2020 cleaning and restoration. The results of that process are (dare I say) miraculous. Its colors are splashy and brilliant, yet clear and convincing. The painting is seductive and ravishing.

It's also a painting about seduction and rape, necessarily provoking an aesthetic experience that's meant to parallel the violence it depicts. Does Titian's aestheticization trivialize that violence? Perhaps more importantly, Titian's expression of violence is inextricably mixed in with a boiling eroticism that's uncomfortable in its sheer audacity. Europa is not only being taken away by Jupiter, she is available *to us*, the voyeurs of this picture.

That overt eroticism sat uneasily in Philip's Spanish court. Many of his advisors thought it unwise to display the pictures publicly, amid the Inquisition's repressive enforcement of religious orthodoxy. Ovid himself was exiled from Rome by Augustus, his books banned from the libraries, in 8 A.D.—the very same year that he finished his subversive, destabilizing *Metamorphoses*.

Today, it's no less potent. If the American response to the current exhibition is any indication, the puritan demand for moral sterility lives on, more than two millennia later. In *The New York Times*, an article by Holland Cotter, appearing in the print edition of August 13, was headlined, "Do Classic Paintings Get a Pass?" Citing new attitudes brought on by the #MeToo movement, Cotter calls Titian's erotics a "blindness" that "put us on red alerts" and should probably be "call[ed] out." The *Times*'s co-chief art critic is careful never actually to denounce Titian and his paintings. It's still uncool to be a philistine or a prude. Nevertheless, in this cultural moment, there is an implicit threat within his accusation of ethical stain.

Perhaps of more consequence is that this strategy of hedging, of not saying precisely what one means, is duplicated by the Gardner itself, which, unlike the National Gallery or the

Prado, saw fit to commission two "responses" to Titian's depiction of Ovid's ancient tales by contemporary artists. The first, a banner designed by Barbara Kruger and hung at the entrance to the museum, superimposes the letters "BODY// LANG/ UAGE" on a cropped and tilted detail of Titian's *Diana and Actaeon*, in which Actaeon's knee overlaps with that of a nymph. This is said to "challenge dynamics of gender and power." The second, a video performance by Mary Reid Kelly and Patrick Kelly, gives us Europa as feminist *circa* 2021, deadpanning saucy limericks about dribbling body fluids.

Given the seriousness of the topic they feign to approach, these "responses" are remarkable for their emotional apathy. They seem, in fact, to say nothing at all. Insofar as they serve any purpose whatsoever, they do so as institutional mouthpieces, as empty vessels of ironic distance through which the museum positions itself at arm's length from the Titians it has presented to our view. The implication is that Titian's paintings, while beautiful and influential, are glorifications of male violence, or otherwise sexist, and thus morally dubious (at best). Clearly, such objects must not be wholeheartedly embraced.

It speaks to the power of Titian's psychological realism that his paintings engage us as they do, despite these efforts. Against what appears to be the growing consensus, Titian's paintings do not glorify male sexual violence. Look at Europa's anguished face, empathize with it, and then look at the eye of the bull. Others have found humor in that eye, and it's impossible to know what Titian or Philip thought of it. To me, it communicates terror—ferocity and trepidation, as if Jupiter himself is scared of his own power: of what he's doing and what he is about to do. Despite their consummate formal beauty, the *poesie* are deeply equivocal as statements of morality. That they were painted for a lusty, hypocritical monarch doesn't change the fact that, on the evidence of the pictures themselves, Titian's own sympathies seem to be fall on the side of his helpless human victims—male or female—rather than their divine anti-heroes. These are complex, profound works of art.

Czech, please

by Peter Pennoyer

Architects were then able to cut into the stillness of the block by plastic treatment, reach deeper into its physical organism, and interfere with the natural ordering of its parts. They united elements, destroyed their autonomy, and subordinated to formal ideas the tectonic functions of the post, the pillar, the cornice, and the roof. Against construction, purpose, and material, they placed the idea of form; they entered into an active relationship with matter and set it in motion. Motion was perceived as a spiritual activity that transformed matter: it was an assertion of creative will against mere existence, a more profound appropriation of the inorganic world and its conquest through expression.

—Václav Vilém Štech, *Werkbund Exhibition Catalogue* (1914)

Few periods have produced such an effusion of artistic manifestos as the first quarter of the twentieth century. In our time, the architectural manifesto has declined to such straightforward confessions as Frank Gehry's declaration, "So you get an idea. A stupid idea but you like it" and Wolf D. Prix's vow, "We want architecture that has more. Architecture that bleeds, that exhausts, that whirls and even breaks." In the first decades of the last century, however, Europe was ablaze with creative types who joined together to tell the world (and opposing movements) what they were up to and why. The

This piece is adapted from the introduction to *Rowdy Meadow: House, Land, Art*, by Peter Pennoyer, published by Vendome Press in November 2021.

Secessionists, the Cubists, the Futurists, the Dadaists, the Constructivists, and even the Vorticists recorded their philosophies. Frequently, their words obscured their ideas. In many cases, their ideas were untethered from their works. But the architects in one short-lived artistic movement, Czech Cubism, produced a small but exquisite group of buildings that survive as pure expressions of their manifesto.

That Prague-based Czech Cubism, also known as Cubo-expressionism, is relatively unknown is unsurprising considering that the movement flourished for barely six years, from 1908 to 1914. Though the movement encompassed painting, sculpture, music, and even poetry, its architectural legacy stands most apart from the preceding manifestations of the style in Paris. And though the style faded in 1914, it is not entirely dead. My architectural firm has been looking back to Czech Cubism as an inspiration for our own designs, in particular a new house called Rowdy Meadow in Hunting Valley, Ohio, and a clock in New York's new Moynihan Train Hall. After World War I, Cubism reemerged in Prague and transformed into Rondocubism, an ungainly cousin that presented patterns and forms from Bohemian textiles and which looks uncannily like the clumsiest examples of 1970s postmodernism. Unlike the paintings produced by artists in the greater Cubist movement, the architecture is less Cubist than it is Expressionist. Indeed, "Czech Cubism" is a misnomer. Although Czech Cubism blossomed at the same time that Picasso and Léger were pursuing a Cub-

ist vision in their painting in Paris, there is no meaningful connection between the principles of Cubist two-dimensional art and the architecture that bears the name. The emblematic qualities of the Cubism that arose in Paris—simultaneity, reduction of synthetic form to multiple, fractured parts, and diagrammatic abstraction—were not present in Czech Cubist architecture. In fact, Czech Cubism was about triangles, crystalline shapes, and oblique angles—not about cubes at all.

Czech Cubism must be seen in the context of Prague. The style defies clear categorization; it fits into the sphere of imagination and fantasy that animates some of the Bohemian capital's most spectacular buildings. Prague is full of examples of unusual architecture from every period, including the Riders' Staircase (1493–1502) in Prague Castle, where the ribs that conventionally describe vaults fly off in all directions. Instead of simply defining the edges of vaults and their connection to structural piers, the ribs take on an independent life, growing free of the architecture like tree branches. Likewise, in classical modes, Prague offers examples of architecture that break the rules, such as building façades designed with four bays, resulting in a very unclassical column at the center. Many buildings in Prague are hybrid in character, and seeing these buildings for the first time is a surprise. They appear as beautiful anomalies that must have been hidden from every standard art history survey lest the students be confused.

The roots of Czech Cubism are complex and reach into the history of architecture in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Influences include the work of Josef Plečnik (1872–1957), the Slovenian architect whose poetic style seemed to presage some of the forms of Czech Cubism. We visited his works in Vienna, Prague, and Ljubljana. While working for Otto Wagner, Plečnik designed the Zacherlhaus (1905) in Vienna, a mixed-use building of taut façades in plaques of granite with a monumental, faceted cornice featuring highly abstracted atlantes. Plečnik's designs are among the buildings that make Prague feel like a city where the imagination of architectural design-

ers has always pushed against the orthodoxy of contemporaneous styles in Western Europe. Czech Cubism is part of this tradition: it resisted the simplification of modernism just as Bohemia resisted the classical direction of the Renaissance—which was seen as a symbol of papal authority—and held onto the Gothic later than much of Europe.

Any study of Czech Cubism must begin with Jan Kotěra (1871–1923), the central figure in modern architecture in what is now known as the Czech Republic. Like most architects and artists within the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Kotěra was drawn to Vienna, where he studied with Otto Wagner at the Academy of Fine Arts from 1893 to 1897. After winning the Prix de Rome, he returned in 1897 to Prague, where he was appointed Professor of Architecture at the Prague Academy of Fine Arts in 1910. As a central figure and teacher, Kotěra instructed Josef Gočár, Pavel Janák, and Josef Chochol, who—along with Vlastislav Hofman—formed the core group of architects who developed Czech Cubism.

Kotěra's designs, like the Pavilion in the Exhibition of the Chamber of Commerce (1908) and the East Bohemian Museum (1910), project the monumentality of the architecture of the Vienna Secession. The entrance to the museum is flanked by block-like, one-story projections that serve as pedestals for massive sculptures seated on architectural thrones. As in the work of Wagner and Joseph Maria Olbrich, monumentality in architecture is complemented by heroically scaled sculpture. Adding to the weight of the museum's façade, Kotěra steps back flanking towers with alternating bands of brick and stone. Here, we see bold planar geometry dominating while traditional details such as cornices, panels, and ornament are suppressed. More about geometry and cubic forms, Kotěra's work eliminates or abstracts the traditional elements of the architectural orders and ornament. It does not, however, project the elusiveness or include the spiritually motivated forms that became the signatures of Hofman and his colleagues.

Czech Cubism is inseparable from the context of the first decade of the twentieth century, when architects and artists were searching for

new ways to express their reactions to fervent intellectual and political debates. Modernism and ideas about social structures were combining to shift fundamentally the very pedagogical and professional foundations of architecture. Industrialization continued to challenge the relationship of artist and architect to production and, by extension, to commerce. While the imprint of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and institutions like the Vienna Academy of Arts dominated the turn-of-the-century scene, the founders of the Secession, which included Josef Hoffmann, Koloman Moser, and Olbrich, saw their mission as not just a new path towards modernism, but also as a spiritually distinct approach to design and art.

While key modernist architects admired the idea of a non-style, shorn of ornament and celebrating functionalism, which would culminate in Le Corbusier's house as "a machine for living," other conflicting impulses drove architectural design. As the Austro-Hungarian Empire dissolved, national identity emerged and opened the possibility of celebrating Bohemian traditions. Czech Cubism was an attempt to establish a style distinct from the work of architects associated with Vienna and the fading empire.

In the architecture of the Vienna Secession, strong, pure orthogonal forms became the canvas for decoration and ornament. Olbrich's Secession Building has gilded bas-reliefs of trees set in its walls with leaves in the implied frieze, while Otto Wagner's Majolikahaus is covered in decorative Majolica tiles. Key landmarks of the Secession present surfaces of panels and veneers that obscure the underlying structure. Wagner's Austrian Postal Savings Bank, a steel and reinforced concrete structure, is covered in square plaques of marble, which appear to be held in place by aluminum rivets. Here even the stone is used as a decorative veneer. The Czech Cubist architects rejected this approach to ornament and structure; they sought out the vitalizing force of the diagonal, the triangular, and the crystalline. Sculpture and structure are one. Nothing is attached, incised, or additive.

Drawing away from superficial ornament, Hofman and his colleagues looked to Bohe-

mian late-Gothic and Baroque precedents, finding internal power implied by the vaults, buttresses, and other diagonal elements that seemed to proclaim an inner energy. From elements like these, they hoped to express forces that were beyond the entirely orderly approach of the simple post-and-beam technique of one stone laid upon another.

The Czech Cubists found inspiration in the expressive, angular forms of peculiarly pure Gothic architecture, like the vaults in the nave of the Franciscan Church in Bechyně. The angular, faceted treatment of the piers and continuity of the vertical structure with the vaults suggested an architecture of mass and form that appealed to the Cubist quest for a style that transcended the more rational and materialistic paradigm of post-and-beam construction. It was in their own land, in places like Bechyně and beyond, that the Cubist architects found a legacy of earlier models to emulate. The Baroque-Gothic work of the Bohemian mason-turned-architect Jan Santini (1677–1723) was a particularly powerful inspiration. Santini's Church at Zelená Hora is formed with folded planes that energize the mass of the structure and form the culminating star-shaped ceiling within. Czech Cubists abstracted and systematized the central forms of the Gothic and Baroque. While paring the details, they worked in a vocabulary where references are deeply sublimated.

Gočár's House of the Black Madonna, designed as a department store in 1911 and now serving as the Museum of Czech Cubism, exemplifies the challenge that these architects faced in bringing their new style to Prague. The historic location, along the coronation route of the Bohemian kings, subjected the architecture to what we now call design review. The Prague City Council imposed rules that required that the building harmonize with its neighbors. Gočár's response is fundamentally different from its Baroque context while, at the same time, gracefully referencing the key elements of this streetscape. Inspired by the Chicago School, the House of the Black Madonna is a concrete-frame building—a structural system that allows for wide spans. The loft-like floors worked well for the program. but, on

the façade, Gočár had to devise a system of angled, three-part windows and muscular piers to counterbalance the horizontal bays of the concrete structure. These monumental piers and their highly abstracted capitals, capped by an angular cornice, allowed the building to express an architectural language that was radically new while also making it an immutable part of the historic streetscape; meanwhile, the underlying Doric character of the architecture makes this building a less-than-complete essay in the style.

Gočár was able to explore the potential of Cubist geometry more completely in his Bohdaneč Spa, designed in 1911. This long, low-slung building is brimming with the implied movement of angular forms. Framed by triangular piers, the bays are set with paired windows with angled mullions that seem to spring forward with the pressure of the folded plane that describes each interior room.

Gočár was an important figure in establishing Czech Cubism as a distinct style, but his work did not reach the essential transformation of approach seen in Hofman's work. Breaking from the formalism of the Secession, Hofman became an important architect and designer in the movement, distilling a style marked by crystalline forms where the character of each building is manifest in the angles, diagonals, and pyramidal shapes that emerge, almost organically, in response to the plan, section, and elevation of each building. Hofman's approach rejects both the classical language of the Western canon *and* the sterility of the reductive, functionalist, flat planes of modernism. Like Bohemian Gothic and classical buildings, Hofman's designs represented an ambivalent attitude towards their contexts and strayed from the dominant movements in Europe.

Though Hofman did not have as many opportunities to build as his colleagues, his influence was felt through his competition entries, urban-planning schemes, and furniture designs. His position in Prague's Municipal Building Authority gave him the opportunity to plan portions of an ambitious urban scheme. While conceptualizing furniture, Hofman was able to apply his design principles and create pure forms composed of smooth

vertical, horizontal, and diagonal planes. His chair for the sculptor Josef Mařatka from 1912 is a striking example of his expressive manipulation of mass and form.

Josef Chochol, also a student of Kotěra's, designed noteworthy examples in the Czech Cubist style. His Villa Korařovic, below the Vyšehrad fort, projects a faceted, angular, two-story bay that breaks the cornice of the main block of the building into the court at the corner of the lot. Each window pulls back into the envelope of the villa and is framed by the spare, angled planes of wall. Nowhere is ornament present. At the top story of the villa, the walls are sculpted into massively powerful piers that push outwards from the façade, and the cornice line seems to release energy that is barely contained by the symmetrical plan.

Chochol's chef-d'oeuvre is his 1913 design for a five-story apartment house in Prague on a triangular lot. The entire façade is faceted, and the pier-like protrusions between the window bays fan out in prisms that envelope the massive, angled projection serving as a cornice. Reflecting the key point in the plan—the tip of the angled lot—Chochol fashioned a faceted pier vertically linking the corner balconies and rising straight from the ground to fan out at the cornice.

Cubism was a challenging design approach at the scale of a building, but at a smaller scale it achieved ineffable beauty: a lamppost in Jungmann Square, the sole remaining work of the architect Emil Králíček, is one of the better-known emblems of Czech Cubism in Prague. This faceted columnar support surmounted by a prismatic lantern embodies all of the energy and strength of the Cubist paradigm. The lamppost is solid but implies movement. Instead of the superficial ornament of traditional urban street furniture, a unique geometric form results from Králíček's approach.

When architects promulgate manifestos and design simultaneously, there is a clear risk. Any approach to design that is heavy on ideology can sink under the weight of self-importance. This group was young and arrived at a pivotal moment just before the establishment of an independent Czechoslovakia. Yet their skills

and understanding of history grounded their designs, which remain more successful than many less deeply felt contemporaneous styles. Their writing illuminates the work and its relation to its architectural and intellectual context, and their understanding of formal transformation in Baroque architecture brought both a new perspective and deep inspiration. Pavel Janák noted in his 1911 essay “The Prism and the Pyramid” that Baroque architecture “discovered another way to reach abstraction . . . [with] the rotation and movement of entire forms from their original, calm, antique position into planes standing obliquely and dramatically against the heart of the building.” Janák saw that understanding the architecture that emanated from the classical world—what he referred to as “the south”—would allow the creation of a radically new style:

If Baroque abstraction consists of the strengthening and animation of matter and the moving of masses, then the principle of the northern style

of architecture is quite the opposite: it overcomes the tranquility and material quality of matter by delving into it, and by reducing matter in the direction of the third oblique plane.

Despite their prodigious virtuosity in conceiving architecture in complex geometries, the Cubist architects were never able to achieve the total work of art—the *Gesamtkunstwerk*—that was their explicit goal. The houses—even the landmark House of the Black Madonna—had interiors that were closer to Arts and Crafts. Patronage to support the expense of constructing a fully Cubist house, both inside and out, did not exist. Yet these architects delivered on the promise of the Czech Cubist manifesto. The impulse to break free of the post-and-beam paradigm and find new forms led these designers back to the Gothic and Baroque of the Bohemian past. That they successfully synthesized and abstracted these strands of history to create a distinct style was a significant achievement.

New poems

by *Deborah Warren, George Green*
& *James Matthew Wilson*

Memento mori

Being thin, I feel mortality
more than most, because it's always there
in rib and hipbone, right beneath my skin.
Here in my wrist and clavicle I see
my skeleton laid prematurely bare—
the frame under the flesh. Because I'm thin,
my sternum, sacrum, and my stony spine,
at night especially, rise up to remind
me I'm a living ossuary. Yet,
haunted by my bones' gaunt pokes and fey
elbowings, I'm glad enough to let
them prod me with their message—Seize the day with
metacarpals wide—not to forget
what waits only a thin membrane away.

—*Deborah Warren*

From Livorno, Shelley casts Edmund Kean and Eliza O'Neill as leads in "The Cenci"

Kean having performed the most sensational
of acting stunts, erupting like Vesuvius
as *Overreach*, ripping his shirt to ribbons,
then diving acrobatically to hit the stage
"biting the earth." Lord Byron took convulsions,
and bawling fainters blocked the aisles and doors.

Hazlitt loved the way O'Neill could also hurl herself
flat on the stage, as if struck down by lightning,
and later commended her for retiring young,
and sparing herself the fate of Mrs. Crawford
and Mrs. Abington, who returned to the boards
when older and, unwanted, to "poverty,

neglect, and scorn." Hazlitt felt sorry as well
for has-been players who avoided his glance
as they shambled down the street on futile errands.
Some chanted bleeding chunks of Shakespeare
in exchange for drinks, while others coached
young actresses, though long-toothed Romeos

often "assumed" too much. Those who could still
be cast were commonly hooted and hissed,
pelted and booed, and sent back mocked and sulking
to their seedy garrets in tumbledown lodging houses.
O'Neill rushed out to wed a baron after Hazlitt
accused her of acting with her alluring body

and not her immortal soul, which rendered her quite
unworthy of playing Juliet again
or *Belvidera*, even. And if, Hazlitt would warn,
her blatant "fleshiness" remained untempered,
she'd mar her finer sense, and be forced to play
a common sort of *Magdalen* forever.

—*George Green*

Farewell to Berwyn

Somewhere, a dog is barking in the night,
But our house idles still.
Our plastic dumpsters rolled down to the curb,
Some hours ago, they will
Stand stout in their perched state of burdened waiting.
We have some hours to kill.

Our pile this week is bigger than the rest,
Heaped with a rocking horse,
Some outgrown clothes, the spindles of a chair
That came apart, of course,
Just as we started packing: fate, it seems,
Compels us now by force.

Our first night in this house, I came outside
With emptied boxes flat
And saw how much the clarity of stars
Asked to be wondered at.
What luck, I thought, that we had settled in
So graced a habitat.

The stars grow old far slower than we do.
They'll still be shining down
After I latch this door a final time
And idle with a frown,
Doubting that we have made the proper choice
To leave our house and town.

But now, the hour, suspended, swirls with clouds,
The sky reflecting grey;
The children's voices clamor in my head,
To unsay all I say,
To call the movers and call off the truck
And tell them that we'll stay.

What is it makes me disregard those words
And my own aching doubt?
A stubborn heart that, where it ought to yield,
Puts fantasies to rout—
And I, the one who locked the door at night
To shut the darkness out?

—*James Matthew Wilson*

Leaves of the White Rose

by *Malcolm Forbes*

On June 28, 1940, four days after the fall of France, the German Sophie Scholl wrote a letter to her boyfriend Fritz Hartnagel, an officer on the front lines in Russia. Scholl, whose bitter disillusionment with Nazi misrule had hardened into firm opposition to it, expressed her despair at the onward march of Hitler's forces and his stranglehold on power. "If I didn't know that I'll probably outlive many older people," she wrote, "then I'd be overcome with horror at the spirit that's dominating history today."

But Scholl wasn't outliving older people for long. Less than three years later, her life was tragically, and barbarically, cut short. As a member of the underground resistance movement *Die Weiße Rose*, she was caught and found guilty of preparing and distributing "seditious pamphlets" containing "attacks on National Socialism and on its cultural-political policies." The price for high treason was death. At five o'clock in the afternoon on February 22, 1943, just three hours after the end of her show trial, Scholl was guillotined at Stadelheim prison in Munich. She was twenty-one years old.

Had Scholl eluded her murderers, survived the war, and lived on until today, she would have just turned one hundred. But back then the odds were stacked too firmly against her and the other members of the White Rose. The group was predominantly made up of a small band of students who, though wily operators, could only defy for so long the iron fist of the state. Under the watchful Gestapo, resistance was futile.

And in the *Volksgerichtshof*, the so-called People's Court, presided over by the hysterical, fanatical Roland Freisler, mercy was nonexistent.

Despite the odds, Scholl insisted on facing up to a Goliath-type foe. Allowing a bout of horror and injustice to pass her by unchallenged was simply not an option. Doing nothing was tacitly complying. "I want to share the suffering of these days," she wrote in her diary. "Sympathy becomes hollow if one feels no pain." The Nazis ensured she felt enough of that when they finally captured her. They took her life, but her memory has lived on, reminding successive generations of the impact of human bravery and the power of passive protest.

Sophie Scholl was born on May 9, 1921, in Forchtenberg, a town in the north of what is today Baden-Württemberg. She and her four siblings, Inge, Hans, Elisabeth, and Werner, grew up in a liberal Protestant family. Her mother, Magdalena, was a former nurse and church deacon; her father, Robert, was the town mayor. In 1932 he moved his family to Ulm to start a company as a tax and business consultant. There Sophie attended secondary school and, to her father's dismay, became a member of the *Bund Deutscher Mädel*, the League of German Girls. Hans, her older brother by almost three years, joined the Hitler Youth. Both children climbed the ranks, embracing ideals, enjoying activities, and relishing their contribution to the Fatherland.

But their initial enthusiasm soured, and they came to react against Nazi persecution

and indoctrination. They admired “degenerate” art and read and helped circulate forbidden literature. Hans became involved with a banned German youth group until a clampdown led to the Gestapo taking him away and detaining him for three weeks. They also hauled in sixteen-year-old Sophie for interrogation, giving her a first taste of state brutality. She finished high school in March 1940 after passing her *Abitur* exams, glad to leave behind conformist classmates and lessons infused with National Socialist ideology. “Sometimes school seems like a film to me,” she wrote. “I look on but for all intents and purposes I’m excluded from performing.”

She looked forward to a new start at Munich University studying biology and philosophy. First, though, she trained as a kindergarten teacher in the hope that a posting would be seen as an acceptable substitute for compulsory farm work with the National Labor Service. It wasn’t, and so she was made to endure six months of manual toil and ideological training sessions. After this she received another conscription order, this time from the War Assistance Program, stipulating an additional six months of work as an attendant at a kindergarten attached to an armaments factory in a town near the Swiss border. So began a bleak period of her life, one in which she was ground down both by daily duties and by the knowledge that she was indirectly contributing to the war effort.

Once at university, things looked up. Sophie socialized with Hans, who was studying medicine, and his friends. Through her brother, she also came in contact with the Catholic journalist Carl Muth and the writer and philosopher Theodor Haecker—two men who had fallen foul of the Nazis and who, in private company, stimulated the Scholl siblings with intellectual discussions and inspired them with state-of-the-nation criticism.

Then in June 1942, while in a lecture, Sophie spotted a leaflet under a desk. It was produced by an organization called the White Rose and was an impassioned appeal for passive resistance against a criminal government. The language was flowery: “If everyone waits for someone else to make a start, the messengers

of avenging Nemesis will come steadily closer, until even the last victim has been cast senselessly into the maw of the insatiable demon.” The content was padded out with lengthy literary quotes from Goethe and Schiller. The message, however, was clear: it was time for the German public to stand up and take action. The leaflet ended by exhorting the reader to make copies and pass them on.

Sophie discovered that Hans and his friend Alexander Schmorell were behind the leaflet, and that the other core members of the White Rose comprised fellow medical students Christoph Probst and Willi Graf, plus a professor, Kurt Huber. To begin with, Hans denied all involvement to Sophie. When he owned up, he defended the risk he was taking as a calculated one and assured his sister there was no way that the leaflets could be traced back to him. Despite his protestations, Sophie insisted on joining the movement, completing its inner circle. She turned out to be a valuable asset: she acted as treasurer, bought writing materials, prepared, copied, and posted leaflets, and, most dangerous of all, scattered them on solo courier runs.

Three more leaflets were created and distributed over the summer of 1942. Two further leaflets followed in the winter. Each successive leaflet came with a stronger tone and a more urgent plea. In the first leaflet, the Nazis are merely “an irresponsible clique”; by the third one they are constructors of a “dictatorship of evil.” That third leaflet exhorts Germans to become saboteurs, whereas in the sixth and final one, written after Germany’s rout at Stalingrad, they are told to “arise, fight back, and atone, smash our tormentors, and set up a new Europe of the spirit.”

The White Rose expanded, building cells and establishing contacts in other German cities. As leaflets began to show up in Frankfurt and Vienna, the Gestapo redoubled their efforts and launched a manhunt to track down and stamp out the perpetrators. They needn’t have bothered. In the end, it was a humble university caretaker named Jakob Schmid who caught the first two culprits—Sophie and Hans. On February 18, 1943, the pair were depositing copies of

the sixth leaflet around their university. Sophie took the last of the batch and threw them over a balustrade from a top floor. Schmid was standing below. As the leaflets fluttered down into the atrium, he pounced. Four days later, the Scholls and Probst were sentenced to death. Schmorell, Graf, and Huber were caught in the next wave of arrests and suffered the same punishment in April.

Sophie displayed fortitude until the bitter end. Under interrogation she didn't reveal the names of any White Rose members. When her questioner, Robert Mohr, tried to persuade her to recant her misguided beliefs and pledge allegiance to National Socialism in order to save her life, she refused and rejected his warped vision. "I would do it all over again," she said, "because I'm not wrong. *You* have the wrong worldview." In court she interrupted Freisler's crazed tirade. "Somebody had to make a start," she shouted out. "What we said and wrote are what many people are thinking. They just don't dare say it out loud!" She walked calmly to her execution with her back straight and her head held high.

The White Rose was one of many groups who, in the final analysis, only managed to undermine rather than overthrow the Nazi regime. The Red Orchestra and the Kreisau Circle were also mercilessly crushed by the Gestapo. Claus Schenk Graf von Stauffenberg and his co-conspirators paid the ultimate price for their failed assassination of Hitler and attempted *coup d'état* in July 1944. So too did the husband and wife Otto and Elise Hampel, whose anti-Nazi campaign was a less sophisticated but just as daring version of the White Rose's. Instead of distributing articulate leaflets throughout Munich, they scattered what were often poorly written postcards across Berlin. Hans Fallada immortalized the couple's struggle in his novel *Every Man Dies Alone*. In one of the later scenes, Otto Hampel's fictional

counterpart Otto Quangel is told by a Gestapo inspector that he is no more than a gnat trying to take on an elephant. Quangel's defiant reply echoes Sophie's comeback to Mohr: "I had to fight, and given the chance I would do it again."

Sophie and her comrades also had to fight, and while they didn't defeat their oppressor, they didn't die in vain. Their leaflets, and by extension their message, spread to all corners of occupied Europe. A copy of the sixth leaflet was smuggled out of Germany by one of the founding members of the Kreisau Circle, Helmuth James Graf von Moltke, and sent on to London. There it was reprinted with the title "The Manifesto of the Students of Munich," reproduced in the tens of thousands, and dropped over Germany from Allied aircraft. The words of the White Rose gave hope, strength, and encouragement to those whose reserves had run low or run out.

"Such a beautiful sunny day," Sophie said after learning her fate, "and I have to go . . ." She has, however, left her mark. In Germany, streets, squares, schools, and other institutions are named after her and her brother, as is the country's most prestigious humanitarian literary prize. The powerful and poignant 2005 film *Sophie Scholl—Die letzten Tage* ("Sophie Scholl—The Final Days") reminded German viewers of her heroism and martyrdom. Its Academy Award nomination for Best Foreign Language Film enabled Sophie's story to reach and affect wider audiences.

Clive James once wrote that "part of the sad truth about Sophie Scholl is that nobody remembers a thing she said, and in her last few minutes alive she said nothing at all." But in the end it was what she did that mattered, not what she said. Her actions spoke far louder than her words. A century on from her birth, they still inspire awe. We should never forget how cruelly her light was extinguished, or how brightly it once burned.

Theater

Grim tales

by Kyle Smith

The musical *Six* (ongoing at the Brooks Atkinson Theatre), about the half dozen spouses of a much-married Tudor king, is heaping with fascinating historical tidbits. I did not know, for instance, that three of Henry VIII's six wives were black (and one was Asian), I didn't know that the sad fate of the first five was to be "unfriended," and I hadn't heard that all of them dressed like interstellar cocktail waitresses. Nor did I know that these famously ill-used women were secret avatars of girl power. Introducing themselves in a blastoff of an opening number, "Ex-Wives," they sing, "Get your hands up, get this party buzzin'/ you want queen bees? Well, here's half a dozen."

The show is, in a word, outlandish, but it's also a great deal of fun, the musical event of the (admittedly bleak) Broadway season and by far the most ingenious and enjoyable offering on the Rialto since the pandemic began. Even before this "historemix," as the ladies call it, came to town after an eighteen-month delay, the cast album derived from the West End production that launched in 2019 began attracting attention among American teens, who have led the cheers for its giddy rhymes, its slick beats, and its retrofitting of patriarchal history to today's girl-centered Instagram sensibility.

The production turns a bit maudlin in the end, but mostly it's a laugh, rewriting the dramas of the sixteenth century with pop and R&B beats and lyrical chutzpah. How can you not love a zingy dance number sung by Anne Boleyn in which she says, "Tried to elope but the pope said nope"? Or a synthesizer riff on

the deathless melody from "Greensleeves," supposedly a tune which accompanied a poem written by Henry in honor of Boleyn's attire? Or a whirlwind dash through the "House of Holbein"—the music alternates between dance club and oom-pah-pah—where the famous painter's portrait of (number four) Anna of Cleves captivates the king?

Six is far less deeply invested in the historical record than *Hamilton*, which it superficially resembles, but there is plenty of history in it, certainly more than you will often find in popular culture these days. Although I fear that the average U.S. teen does not even know the name "Henry VIII," much less his marital record, you may find your daughter or granddaughter taking up a pleasing interest in the court intrigue of the period. I had a smashing time and so did my high-school-aged daughter. Best of all, the show runs only eighty minutes. Like Boleyn, it's cute; unlike Boleyn, it doesn't overstay its welcome. Even in a normal Broadway season, it'd be rare to discover more than one or two new musicals that deliver anything like *Six*'s level of wit and ebullience.

Six isn't really a full-fledged show but more of a revue, which could have been enriched considerably by the addition of, say, a strong central story. Though omitting the king from the cast is a novel idea that forces us to look back at history from an unexpected direction, the absence of a fully developed libretto is a shame. As it is, each of the ladies tells us her life story in one brief number, plus there are several sung by the entire group.

First presented by the Cambridge University Musical Theatre Society, *Six* was written by then-undergraduates Toby Marlow and Lucy Moss, who work on lyrics and music together and have a flair for both catchy radio-style hooks and amusing lyrics. Lorenz Hart would have smiled at the wordplay:

My name is Catherine of Aragon
 Married twenty-four years, I'm a paragon
 Of royalty, my loyalty
 is to the Vatican
 So if you try to dump me,
 You won't do that again.

The piece is staged in penny-pinching fashion with only the six actresses, four rock musicians on the stage behind them, and a single glitzy set with no scene changes. After the introductory group number, each lady gets the stage to herself: from Catherine of Aragon (Adrianna Hicks) to Boleyn (Andrea Macasaet), Jane Seymour (Abby Mueller), Anna of Cleves (Brittney Mack), Katherine Howard (Samantha Pauly), and the ultimate victor, Catherine Parr (Anna Uzele). There is a bit of jokey patter between songs that establishes the structure of a sort of reality-television contest in which each of the six competes to prove that she is the queen of the queens. In the final moments, the show does a narrative volte-face as the ladies turn to sisterly solidarity and say they regret their catty competition. The weepy earnestness of the conclusion makes a poor match for most of the rest of the show, but, even so, *Six* leaves you with a grateful smile.

Both problem plays and comedies tend to age very badly, so it's baffling to me that anyone still bothers to try to stage the defense-of-prostitution comedy *Mrs. Warren's Profession*. George Bernard Shaw wrote it in 1893 but couldn't get it staged until 1902, at which point it was performed in one of the private London theater clubs that existed to evade the censorship office, that of the Lord Chamberlain. So-called "private performances" faced fewer strictures, but, regardless, no word as bold as "prostitute" or "brothel" appears in the play, whose exercises in euphemism and

circumlocution make it as tame today as it was outrageous in the early years of the last century. In New York City, a 1905 performance was shut down by the police on moral grounds; back in England, the play wasn't performed in a public venue until 1925.

In his "apology" to accompany the published edition of the play, Shaw reveled in his bad-boy status: "I have once more shared with Ibsen the triumphant amusement of startling all but the strongest-headed of the London theatre critics clean out of the practice of their profession." He savored the "exultation of sending the Press into an hysterical tumult of protest, of moral panic, of involuntary and frantic confession of sin," etc.

The titular character is Kitty, a wealthy woman who grew up in dire poverty. Long ago, she was working as a barmaid when her estranged sister appeared and enticed her to give prostitution a try. She graduated from that to management, and, as the play opens, she and her business partner Sir George Crofts are the proprietors of a chain of brothels on the Continent. Her headstrong daughter Vivie, a Cambridge graduate, is portrayed as both sophisticated and yet so naive that she has never made inquiries into either the identity of her father or the source of her mother's wealth. Vivie is a typical message-bearing Shaw type, the Dangerously Modern Woman who is meant to shock the audience when she mentions her penchants for smoking cigars, drinking whisky, and practicing law.

As was the norm in Shaw's best-known plays, the high point of the evening is supposed to be a Shavian sociopolitical essay in the form of a monologue delivered by an authorial stand-in (in this case, Mrs. Warren) who makes what at the time would have been a daring, contrarian, mischievous defense of prostitution.

As a dramatic narrative, the play is nothing much, nor is it written with any particular stylistic flair. All there really is to the thing is Shaw's ideas. What of them? As a thinker, Shaw promoted some notions that later came to seem so obvious as scarcely to be worth mentioning (women turn to prostitution out of economic desperation, not because they're

sluts) and others that were fatuous and/or naive. Mrs. Warren says prostitution is no more dishonorable or disgusting than any other kind of labor and suggests it's the only way for a woman to achieve wealth, other than marriage, which Shaw labels merely a respectable form of prostitution.

In short, Shaw was not what you'd call a great thinker. Today his kind of argument is as rare as grass and can be heard wherever half-bright high-school debaters or *New York Times* columnists lurk. Among a middlebrow audience of Vicwardian theatergoers, Shaw's work might well have been the first exposure to certain then-startling concepts, but it's a reach to say a play is enjoyable in 2021 because it was shocking a hundred years ago. This lackluster production, directed by David Staller with a now-de rigueur multiracial cast, does nothing to liven up the chestnut, presented by Staller's Gingold Theatrical Group on Theater Row in October and November.

Staged on a single richly detailed set suggesting an upper-middle-class garden, the play finds Mrs. Warren (played by the sturdy veteran Karen Ziemba) and her middle-aged friends Sir George Crofts (Robert Cuccioli) and the Rev. Samuel Gardner (Raphael Nash Thompson) discussing Vivie (Nicole King) as though either of them could be her father. Gardner's son, the brainless but sunny twit Frank (David Lee Huynh), is fond of the girl himself, though he might be her half-brother, and the hint of possible incest is meant to further antagonize the early twentieth-century audience that Shaw thought defined mainly by its hypocrisy and thus deserving of being baited.

For a play about uncertain parentage, the racial randomness of the casting is even more puzzling than usual; why would a quintessential English playboy be Asian, and why would his father be black? The effect is to make a very artificial play even more artificial. Not for a single moment can you forget that you're watching actors act. Shaw must have hoped that his much-celebrated wit would keep the play lively indefinitely, but as is true of Shaw's work overall, the humor on offer has gone as stale and turgid as its didacticism. Almost nothing written in 1893 remains

funny today, and a contemporary audience will have to strain mightily even to detect the passages that are meant to amuse. Asked by her daughter whether she is ashamed of herself, Mrs. Warren says, "Well, of course, dearie, it's only good manners to be ashamed of it: it's expected from a woman. Women have to pretend to feel a great deal that they don't feel." Maybe that line slayed in 1902, but like everything else in the play it has no zing left in it today.

I was ten minutes into *Fairycakes* (at the Greenwich House Theater through January 2) when I started deeply regretting the life choices that had brought me to this space on this evening. After twenty minutes I was holding my head in my hands. Intermission I spent desperately scanning the concessions stand for arsenic or chloroform; when the play finally ended and my tortures were concluded I trudged home in the rain with the same level of spring in my step as characterized the movements of Frederic Henry at the end of *A Farewell to Arms*. There is so much good art in the world to be savored, and there is also *Fairycakes*.

The author of this punitively awful *misbegotten* is Douglas Carter Beane, a sixty-something writer whose credits include campy Broadway and off-Broadway comedies such as *As Bees in Honey Drown* (1997), *The Little Dog Laughed* (2006), and the book for the musical *Xanadu* (2007). I mention that Beane is a bit on the venerable side because it fascinates me that anyone past college age could present this work to an audience in expectation of any response but hurled projectiles.

The play, with a handful of songs interspersed, blends together fairy tales and elements from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, then throws in Queen Elizabeth, for what is meant to be a frolic through a Shakespearean wonderland in which an enchanted mist causes various figures to fall in love with the first person they see when they awaken. Among the dramatis personae are Gepetto and Pinocchio (played respectively by Mo Rocca of *CBS Sunday Morning* and a child actor named Sabatino Cruz); Cinderella and her prince (Kuhoo Verma, Jason Tam); a pirate named Dirk Deadeye (Arnie

Burton); and Moth, Titania, and Puck from *Midsummer* (Jackie Hoffman, Julie Halston, and Chris Myers). As this is a New York theatrical production in 2021, several of the characters are gay, although in some cases only temporarily rendered so by the enchanted mist. The introduction of homosexuality into the plot is presented as an offbeat, wacky, completely out-of-the-blue twist. Given the preeminence of gay elements in theater, however, the effect is somewhat like watching someone marvel that he has somehow stumbled upon sand at the beach.

In mashing up oft-told tales, Beane invites comparisons to Stephen Sondheim's *Into the Woods* (1986) that are not favorable to his effort. Sondheim's work was ingenious and frequently moving; Beane's blend of elements has much the same level of appeal as something your dog bestowed to you on the carpet. Worse, Beane writes the first three-quarters of the show in heroic couplets, which he uses to such ill effect that it's like hearing a thousand terrible knock-knock jokes in a row. In nearly every case, the first line of a couplet amounts to a setup that is completed by a terrible punch line. Warning: examples follow. I will keep their number limited so as not to cause you undue distress, but do bear in mind that on your behalf I had to sit through nearly two hours of these before relief came in the closing scenes, which are written in prose and are marginally more tolerable. Among the running gags in the prose portion of the play, Moth, the fairy caught in the whale with Pinocchio, keeps delivering malapropisms when trying to remember the little wooden boy's name—Pistachio, Pensacola, etc. Hoffman, who can be scathingly funny (and was this past summer, in the backstage study *Fruma-Sarah*, reviewed in *The New Criterion* of September 2021) is the performer burdened with these lines, and if anyone could make them funny, she could. But alas.

As for the majority of the play written in verse, imagine the irritation level of an evening built around lines such as:

This is terrible, extreme in the most
One technicality—now we're all toast.

And:

I shoot my arrow straight into the air
Bet it's gonna hit the girl with red hair.

And:

You are so fickle you just turn me off
I'm walking away now—I may just scoff.

And:

We're the coolest gang on the salty sea
And our navigator has OCD.

And:

There now a princess so rare and aloof-y
So far her story has just been goofy.

Fairycakes has the feel of a larkish undergraduate fringe production written by a theater-smitten future lawyer. At the collegiate level, however, I imagine this play presented as a showcase, intended to display its creator's potential at a length of maybe thirty minutes, which is as much of it as any person with a reasonable level of taste could last. Beane must have called in a lot of chits earned over the last three decades to convince anyone *Fairycakes* was worth producing even at a smallish off-Broadway house, but, at the performance I attended, the vast majority of the audience sat in sullen silence throughout act one. Then a few dozen theatergoers disappeared during the intermission. My envy of them was nearly unbearable.

Art

Dynamic Chadwick

by Jessica Douglas-Home

This autumn, the work of the sculptor Lynn Chadwick (1914–2003), one of the most significant British artists of the twentieth century, has been essential viewing. A special show was on at the Willer Gallery in Kensington, London, and at the Willer’s outpost at Sotheby’s, while a wilder and more dramatic experience may still be found via a journey to Lypiatt Park in Gloucestershire.¹

Chadwick’s work and reputation evolved in interesting ways. He began as an architect in London, working as a draftsman at a number of firms until he came across Rodney Thomas’s practice. Thomas’s unique talents as a creative thinker and his deep knowledge of European historical architecture gave Chadwick his essential grounding.

After a break during the Second World War, in which he served as a Royal Navy pilot, Chadwick rejoined Thomas’s practice, where he widened his knowledge, gained confidence, and learned to make use of his mentor’s skills in creating new forms, among them structures similar to early mobiles. He began experimenting with synthetic materials that had become widely used during the war, such as aircraft plywood, balsam, acrylic, and aluminum wire and rods, adapting them for works in specific locations.

¹ “Lynn Chadwick: Exploring the Abstract, 60 years on” was on view at Willer, London, from December 3, 2020, through September 9, 2021. “Willer Gallery at the London Showroom” was on view at Sotheby’s, London, from September 10 through September 30, 2021.

These pieces were initially made not as independent works of art but as decorative features at trade and industry fairs. In 1946, Chadwick won a prize in a textile-design competition, and by 1950, with several commissions under his belt, he felt ready to launch himself as a freelance designer. The need for more space and quiet in which to work led him to move to a cottage near Stroud in Gloucestershire, a hundred miles west of London in the Cotswolds.

His mobile structures caught the attention of the London-based art dealers Charles and Peter Gimpel, who ran the Gimpel Fils Gallery. They saw his works not as architectural constructions but as sculpture. In 1949 they placed a small mobile in the window; a year later, they displayed fourteen Chadwick pieces in a one-man show.

Then came the 1951 Festival of Britain, where Chadwick received three sculpture commissions for the South Bank. The first mobile was put in a café on Waterloo Bridge; it was balanced to move with the flow of air, continually redefining the space around it. The second, *Cypress*, a thirteen-foot-high stabile, was placed in a garden. The third, *The Fish-eater*, commissioned by the Arts Council, was a delicate and magnificent early masterpiece: a seven-and-a-half-foot-high iron and copper mobile, combining simplified fishlike forms with open meshwork of spiky ribs and long lateral rods, all balanced on a tripod.

In 1952 Chadwick was invited to show his sculpture alongside Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth at the Venice Biennale. Further suc-

cess followed when the Arts Council chose him to mount a one-man exhibition at the 1956 Venice Biennale: here he was awarded the International Sculpture Prize, besting the most renowned of all European artists, Alberto Giacometti. National and international acclaim brought a mass of commissions from Europe and America. He could now afford a house of his own. In 1958 he discovered a deserted medieval mansion, Lypiatt Park, much of it in ruin, and bought it.

His semi-abstract sculpture had grown in size, and Lypiatt Park, with its stone granary, dovecote, chapel, great hall, large drawing room, and kitchens, provided the space he now needed. He began slowly restoring its buildings and landscaping the park for the larger sculptures, which derived from both the human and the animal kingdoms. He set up his studio inside the house and a blacksmith's anvil in the barn.

Lypiatt Park stands on a plateau dipping down into a valley above Stroud, half a mile from Nether Lypiatt Manor, where I lived with my father when I was young. Close by, in another secluded valley, were five hamlets surrounding the village of Sapperton. Here Chadwick met up with a group of major artists and craftsmen, protégés of William Morris and now led by Ernest Gimson, the Barnsley brothers, Peter Waals, C. R. Ashbee, and Gordon Russell.

My father bought a piece from Chadwick in 1961, which he left to me in his will. Regrettably, ignorant as I was, I mistreated it by placing it outside; I had not known that the frame was filled in with an industrial compound of iron filings and plaster called Stolit (which could be worked wet or dry and set like stone). It absorbed moisture and rain, which over time distorted and rusted the rods. When I asked the head of Chadwick foundry (which still casts and restores Chadwick's pieces) if there was any hope of restoring it, he said it was too far gone to be saved, but sent me its original picture in a catalogue, confirming that it was the working model for Chadwick's 1961 *Sitting Figure I*.

Chadwick moved on to working in metal, mostly steel and bronze—well resistant to the

elements. In 1988 he was able to buy 180 acres surrounding Lypiatt Park's boundary. With a careful eye on the landscape, he built an avenue and planted hundreds of trees throughout the now vast park. It is here that one can best ascertain—strolling along discreetly mown pathways within this wild but controlled patch of nature—the overwhelming beauty of his work.

You will discover a majestic welded steel *Sitting Couple on Bench* (1990) on the brow of the hill—scrutinizing the horizon, watching and guarding, looking down onto the Toadsmoor river; then an almost repetitive, though smaller, version is found lower down protected among the trees.

Other figures in bronze or steel (which in time develops a rich patina but never becomes rusty) are dotted about in trios or pairs, some naked, others draped in pleated robes with flowing sleeves (all still metal) and capes or cloaks that appear to billow in the wind. Visitors should seek out *Pair of Walking Figures* (1977) and then find three separately placed lone figures, part of a series titled *High Wind* (1984). Go on to discover more pieces where the wind effect has grown stronger: the longer hair, the concealed face, the lifted skirts. There are also sculptures of feral animals, like the mysterious *Beast XVI* (1959) and the dramatic *Beast Alerted* (1990) or the more delicate *Black Beast* (1990) and *Lion I* (1986), the last like a grounded mobile.

Before you leave Lypiatt Park, be sure to find *Stairs* (1991), a deeper exploration of a theme Chadwick had been experimenting with before failing eyesight brought his working life to an end: two figures in bronze walking up and down stairs, meeting and attempting to cross each other's path.

From October onwards the Willer Gallery has been exhibiting a limited edition of Chadwick's bronze candle holders and sculptural bronze candelabra. Even those who know his work well are unlikely to be familiar with his fascination for domestic objects, which he returned to at regular intervals over decades. The Chadwick foundry produced them in small series during the artist's lifetime. Practical, dramatic, and beautiful—and for sale—catch them while you can

Exhibition note

“Etel Adnan: Light’s New Measure”
The Solomon R. Guggenheim
Museum, New York.
October 8, 2021–January 10, 2022

“Etel Adnan: Light’s New Measure” has to be the most genteel exhibition of art the Guggenheim has ever mounted. Not the most over-hyped; not the worst. Unlike the museum’s recently concluded show of photographs by Deanna Lawson, “Light’s New Measure” avoids overt politics. Nor does it place an emphasis on pictorial innovation like the concurrent show devoted to the pioneering abstractionist Vasily Kandinsky. The Adnan exhibition is just . . . mild. There’s no sin in that. Were contemporary artists inclined more toward gentility than provocation we might be better off. And Adnan’s art—the paintings, in particular; the tapestries, ditto; the videos, not at all—bears suitable merit to invite pause. Pause over what, you might ask? The vagaries of reputation, for one; the primacy of the painted mark, for another. The museum touts Adnan’s work as “an intensely personal distillation of her faith in the human spirit and the beauty of the natural world”—boilerplate PR, you might say, but it’s to the credit of Adnan’s color-saturated pictures that they capture some of that optimism.

Occupying the bottom two rungs of the Guggenheim’s rotunda, “Light’s New Measure” is the first of three exhibitions organized in conjunction with the aforementioned “Vasily Kandinsky: Around the Circle,” an array of paintings and works on paper culled from the permanent collection. (The other shows will feature the artists Jennie C. Jones and Cecilia Vicuña.) Katherine Brinson, the Daskalopoulos Curator of Contemporary Art, and Lauren Hinkson, an associate curator, have set out to establish commonalities between Adnan and Kandinsky, painters who “explore the potential of abstract form.” Locating a shared purpose between artists living and dead is to be applauded, particularly at a cultural moment in which history is vilified or distorted—that is, when it’s acknowledged at all. Kandinsky

would have approved of Adnan’s likening abstraction to music—Kandinsky insisted, after all, that color could convey sound—as well as the goal of creating “depth of meaning that has nothing to do with words.” Great minds think alike, right?

Adnan’s partner, the sculptor Simone Fattal, extols the work as being reminiscent of icons or talismans, intimating that the paintings embody visionary longings. The pairing with Kandinsky would seem to reinforce the point. At the risk of indulging in semantic nitpickery, let me say that the paintings featured in “Light’s New Measure” aren’t talismanic or iconic. They’re grounded and concrete, predicated, as they are, on specific motifs and spatial relationships gleaned from observed experience. The basis for several of the pictures is Mount Tamalpais, a distinctive peak in the Marin Hills near Adnan’s home in Sausalito, California. Divining mystical portent from the landscape is an age-old pursuit. But notwithstanding some coloristic liberties, Adnan is less a mystic and something closer to a classicist. Structure is her bread and butter. She’s more in the spirit of Nicolas Poussin and Georges Seurat than Caspar David Friedrich or George Inness. A cynic might be forgiven for wondering if some of this supernatural heavy-breathing is an attempt to poach upon the afterglow of Hilma af Klint—the subject of a recent and hugely popular exhibition at the Guggenheim. Now *there* was a visionary. Adnan’s lack of hocus pocus is, in point of comparison, straight talk. Strong-arming the paintings in the service of their antithesis is the curatorial equivalent of fake news.

Adnan has lived life as a true multiculturalist. She was born in Beirut in 1925. Her father was a Syrian-born military officer in the Ottoman Empire and a non-practicing Muslim, her mother a practicing member of the Greek Orthodox Church. Adnan learned Turkish and Greek at home; in school, she was taught French. After studying philosophy and literature at the Sorbonne, Adnan traveled to the United States to attend Berkeley and Harvard. After teaching at Dominican University of California from 1958 to 1972, Adnan returned to Lebanon to work as a journalist. She fled to

Paris at the onset of the Civil War. That conflict served as backdrop for Adnan's *Sitt Marie Rose*, a novel based on Marie Rose Boulos, a Syrian social worker who was executed by the Christian militia. The book went on to win a prize from the Association de solidarité franco-arabe but remains Adnan's only prose work. Poetry is her primary literary focus. Included at the Guggenheim is *Funeral March for the First Cosmonaut* (1968), an accordion book that features the title poem as well as a surrounding array of watercolor drawings. "I write what I see," the artist has stated, and "paint what I am."

And what is Adnan? A ninety-six-year-old dab hand at buttery surfaces and ramshackle geometries, a genial temperament with a tart and sunny palette. Her canvases are small and simple: a few snug forms cobbled together and animated by gently bumptious rhythms. Adnan's chock-a-block shapes and rich impasto have earned comparisons to Nicolas de Staël; her nudgy insistence on contour recalls Serge

Poliakoff. A few years back, Adnan's art was exhibited alongside that of Paul Klee—a pairing that is, on the whole, more propitious given Adnan's off-kilter compositions and quirky distillations of shape. An untitled canvas from 1983—a centrifugal composition of staccato marks punctuated by cool greens and anchored by a clarifying white—is Adnan at her most engaging. When she settles for less—a line here, a circle there, a cursory swipe of pigment—the results are not more. The attendant tapestries benefit from an increase in scale, and, with that, greater complexity and dynamism. It's worth mulling over whether collaboration—in this case, with various weavers—benefits a poet for whom painting is a happy sideline. Isolation can, after all, be limiting. Let's hope Adnan invites more guests to the studio in the coming years. In the meantime, "Light's New Measure" provides an amiable enough entry into one of the myriad outskirts of contemporary culture.

—*Mario Naves*

*We mourn the passing of
Mary Jo Claugus (1949–2021)
A valued supporter of The New Criterion*

Music

New York chronicle

by Jay Nordlinger

Carnegie Hall opened its season with the Philadelphia Orchestra, under its music director, Yannick Nézet-Séguin. As the music director of the Metropolitan Opera, too, Nézet-Séguin had opened the Met season a week and a half before. (I discussed this opening, and other Met performances, in last month's chronicle.) The Philadelphia Orchestra is Carnegie Hall's home orchestra, more or less. The Philadelphians make the hundred-mile trip to New York frequently. No doubt, Yannick Nézet-Séguin is New York's maestro—near ubiquitous. He enjoys a very good press. Has there been a greater conductorial presence in New York since Leonard Bernstein?

Jaap van Zweden is the New York Philharmonic's music director. Yet he seems in the shadow of Nézet-Séguin. Van Zweden is leaving at the end of the 2023–24 season, which will make his tenure at the Philharmonic a mere six years. I wonder whether the city knows what it has in this formidable Dutchman.

The opening night of Carnegie Hall is always a festive occasion, but it was especially festive this year, in that the hall had been dark for a long time—572 days, specifically. The Philadelphians' program included Beethoven, Shostakovich, and the aforementioned Bernstein. It also included two contemporary composers: Valerie Coleman, an American, and Iman Habibi, a Canadian who began life in Iran. Nézet-Séguin called them, in remarks to the audience, “two geniuses of our time.” That is a remarkable statement.

Coleman's piece was *Seven O'Clock Shout*, which evokes a practice from early in the pan-

demic: when people leaned out their windows at 7 p.m. to make all sorts of noise, in tribute to frontline workers. Coleman's is a clever and enjoyable piece, with a large dose of humanity. Iman Habibi was represented on the program with *Jeder Baum spricht* (“Every tree speaks”). I will quote from Carnegie Hall's program notes:

Although Beethoven's own perspective was that of Romanticism, in modern terms he might be described as an environmentalist. With this in mind, Habibi wondered how Beethoven would respond to twenty-first-century climate change. He describes *Jeder Baum spricht* as “an unsettling rhapsodic reflection on the climate catastrophe, written in dialogue with Beethoven's Fifth and Sixth symphonies.”

Some years ago, I identified a new genre in music: the “green piece.” Green or not, Habibi's is an interesting and intelligent piece. That it is related to climate change, you could not know, unless someone told you. Nézet-Séguin programmed the piece right before Beethoven's Fifth. Indeed, he launched directly into the Fifth, without pause, making *Jeder Baum spricht* a sort of prelude. The conductor was making a point of some kind. Whether such point-making is in harmony with music is a fit subject for debate.

In his remarks to the audience, Nézet-Séguin had made a standard point—also a debatable one, speaking of that: the arts have the power to change the world. He said, if I heard him correctly, that music needed to rep-

resent a range of “communities.” It was still okay to play Beethoven, he said: “Beethoven is still relevant.” (What a relief.) But music needed to change, said Nézet-Séguin. Earlier in the evening, a music-industry veteran had told me that the industry would now have a focus on “social justice.”

Three nights after Opening Night, Jonas Kaufmann came into Carnegie Hall, in the company of Helmut Deutsch. Kaufmann is the starry German tenor, Deutsch the veteran Vienna-born accompanist. (“Accompanist,” please note, is not a putdown in my vocabulary.) They performed a recital of German art songs, or German-*language* art songs, let’s say, because the program began with Liszt. I reviewed this recital at some length on *The New Criterion’s* website. (Same with Opening Night, and same with the other Carnegie Hall evening I will discuss.) Here in my chronicle, I will offer some generalities.

Kaufmann is an uneven performer—up and down. On this night, he was way, way up. He sang a beautiful, inspired, and brave recital. What do I mean by “brave”? He was willing to leave himself exposed, going up for high *pianos*, taking other risks as well. He gave a clinic, frankly, in *Lieder*-singing. Helmut Deutsch was equally impressive, even more impressive than he reliably is. My cousin happened to be sitting next to me. She is a singer. At the first opportunity, she whispered, “My gosh, what a pianist?” When I mentioned Deutsch to a pianist friend some days later, he said, “He’s pretty much the GOAT, where accompanists are concerned.” (By that acronym, he meant “Greatest of All Time.”)

Once the printed program was over, Kaufmann and Deutsch performed a slew of encores—six. These were some of the greatest hits of *Lieder*: “Mondnacht” (Schumann), “Die Forelle” (Schubert), “Morgen!” (Strauss), etc. People had their phones up, as usual, taking pictures and making videos. As he sang what turned out to be his last encore—Strauss’s “Cäcilie”—Kaufmann stopped and made an impassioned plea to the audience: “Ladies and gentlemen, I do everything for you, but please respect the rules: stop filming!” The audience responded with some of its biggest applause of the night.

A question: When is it time to declare a singer “great”? Not just good, not just excellent, not just *capable* of greatness, but outright great? I have mentioned Kaufmann’s unevenness. I have heard nights he would rather forget. But I have also heard a great Parsifal (the title role in Wagner’s last opera) and his latest Carnegie recital, plus other nights in the “great” zone. For me, at least, it is time.

How do you solve a problem like Lang Lang? You don’t. He arrived at Carnegie Hall three nights after Kaufmann (and Deutsch). Lang Lang is now one year shy of forty. That means the Lang Lang wars have gone on for about twenty years. People either love him or loathe him. The truth, as I see it, is this: he is an immensely talented man whose career is a rollercoaster. He has crazy-bad nights and stunningly good ones. Lang Lang’s unevenness makes Jonas Kaufmann’s look like consistency. And, unlike Kaufmann, Lang Lang doesn’t have the excuse of being a singer (whose instrument is physical—his own body).

Longtime readers are perhaps acquainted with a line of mine: “Lang Lang never *plays* badly. Never. It’s just that he sometimes *thinks* badly. His fingers can do whatever his mind commands.” I think of another line, this one from Sam Snead, the golf champion. As an older man, he said, “In my prime, I could do whatever I wanted with a golf ball.” Lang Lang can do whatever he wants with a keyboard.

He began his Carnegie recital with Schumann’s *Arabesque* and then got to the main event: the *Goldberg Variations* of Bach. This performance was a rollercoaster all on its own. Lang Lang was wizardly, eccentric, maddening, and divine. He did things that no other pianist would do—and things that no other pianist *could* do. As he played, I thought, “What would Bach think?” I think the master would be amazed, appalled, fascinated—and maybe a little confused.

We speak of “playing” the piano, or another instrument. Consider that word for a moment: “playing.” You may think of children and their toys. Lang Lang really does play, and play with. In his hands, the piano is a grown-up toy. I do not mean this as an insult.

Perhaps the rest of us could stand to do a little more playing. If I am to give a bottom line, it is this: I do not want every pianist to play the *Goldberg Variations* as Lang Lang does. If I could take one recording of this masterwork to a desert island, it would not be his. Am I glad that Lang Lang exists and that this one person plays the *Goldbergs* the way he does? Yes, a thousand times yes.

The talent that this guy has—even when you want to kill him—is mind-boggling.

After his Bach, Lang Lang played two encores: *Für Elise* and an arrangement, by Peter Schindler, of “Mo Li Hua” a.k.a. “Jasmine Flower,” the Chinese folk song that Puccini employs in his final opera, *Turandot*—which was being revived at the Metropolitan Opera that very night. More about *Turandot* at the Met in due course.

The New York Philharmonic is not playing in David Geffen Hall this season. That hall is being renovated, due to reopen next season. One night, the Philharmonic played in—get ready, I will quote—the “Rose Theater at Jazz at Lincoln Center’s Frederick P. Rose Hall.” That must be one of the most awkward names in town. At any rate, this concert was guest-conducted by a Central American with an Italian first name and a Spanish last name: Giancarlo Guerrero, who was born in Nicaragua and grew up in Costa Rica. He leads two orchestras: one in Nashville, Tennessee, and the other in Wrocław, Poland. The guest soloist for the concert was Alessio Bax—a man who shares a last name with an English composer (Sir Arnold Bax, who lived from 1883 to 1953) but who is, in fact, Italian. Signor Bax is a pianist, and the concert began with the Schumann Piano Concerto.

Actually, it began with a solo-piano piece by Clara Schumann: a romance in A minor (same key as her husband’s famous concerto). The piece takes about four minutes. At its conclusion, the orchestra and the pianist launched right into the concerto—as though the two pieces were linked. There’s a lot of that going around these days.

Why? Why did this happen? Since when does an orchestra concert begin with a solo-piano piece? I think both Clara and Robert

would have said, “This is nuts.” Whatever the case, Alessio Bax played both the romance and the concerto in his usual fashion—which is to say, the playing was tidy and tasteful, with a dash of aristocracy. Maestro Guerrero proved himself musically adept. For one thing, he breathed along with the score. I would like to say, too, that it’s gratifying to hear an orchestra—a symphony orchestra—in a smaller-than-usual hall. You can hear more. And you feel rather in the center of it all.

Concluding the concert was a Brahms piece, but not one of the four symphonies: his Serenade No. 2 in A major, Op. 16. A work in five movements, it puts a variety of instruments on display, especially the oboe. This serenade can almost seem an oboe concerto. Liang Wang handled this role well—how could he not?—although I often wish for more pliancy from him: more of a bendy, sinuous, taffy-like quality. At Maestro Guerrero, I could pick a bit. (“Pick a little, talk a little.”) But he is a competent and personable fellow, and I hope that the Philharmonic has him back—maybe in a proper symphony? (No offense to the serenade, which, like its Mozart predecessors, has its homely charms.)

On another night, the orchestra played in a hall about the same size as the Rose Theater at Jazz at Lincoln Center’s Frederick P. Rose Hall: Alice Tully Hall. The program was all-American, and it was led by a young Finn. Finland is virtually a conductor factory. Finland may have more conductors than France has chefs—and I’m not talking about *chefs d’orchestre*. This particular young Finn is Dalia Stasevska, who is the chief conductor in Lahti, a city about sixty-five miles north and slightly east of Helsinki.

First on the Philharmonic’s program was a piece by Missy Mazzoli, a native of Lansdale, Pennsylvania, born in 1980. That piece is *Sinfonia (for Orbiting Spheres)*, composed in 2014. In a composer’s note, Mazzoli says that her piece is “music in the shape of a solar system, a collection of rococo loops that twist around each other within a larger orbit.” Her piece is like many, many other contemporary pieces. You have that woozy, drunken feeling. Soft percussion. A slow building. There is a touch of minimalism, lull-

ing you, and then some Romantic blooming. Throughout, there are twinkling stars.

Is there anything setting this piece apart? Yes, it's a good one—a *good* piece. I look forward to hearing it again. Among the virtues of the piece is that it's the right length. It does not wear out its welcome or run on the fumes of its materials. I often quote Earl Wild: "Music ought to say what it has to say and get off the stage."

In 2006, Anthony Davis—born in Paterson, New Jersey, in 1951—composed *You Have the Right to Remain Silent*. A four-movement work, it is a type of clarinet concerto. The movements are marked "Interrogation," "Loss," "Incarceration," and "Dance of the Other." Obviously, this work is telling a story, and making some points. But how can it, without words? Well, you can read the words of the title and the movement headings. Also, members of the orchestra *speak* words—the words of the *Miranda* warning, which begins, "You have the right to remain silent." When the orchestra intones the words, they sound sinister—though *Miranda*, when the decision was handed down in the mid-1960s, was held to be a great civil-rights advance.

Davis's score is eclectic, reflecting jazz, modernism, the New Age, and more. It is also thoroughly American. The clarinet part was given royal treatment by Anthony McGill, the Philharmonic's principal.

Last on the program was an old work by John Adams. Does 1992 qualify as old now? I am speaking of Adams's Chamber Symphony, which was inspired by cartoons. The third and final movement is headed "Roadrunner." The symphony is a tricky, intricate one, with many twists and turns. Rhythm is at a premium here, and you really have to count. Maestra Stasevska led the orchestra skillfully, ever alert. In my estimation, the symphony is busy, insistent, and unrelenting. It won't stop coming at you. One of Adams's best-known works is *Short Ride in a Fast Machine* (1986). The symphony, I thought, when leaving Alice Tully Hall, is a *longish* ride in a fast machine.

About *Turandot* at the Metropolitan Opera, I have already written on TNC's website. Here, I will say a quick word about *Turan-*

dot's "cultural insensitivities," which the Met warned about on its own website. That is the company's phrase: "cultural insensitivities." Is the composer, Puccini, truly guilty of such insensitivities? Once upon a time, he was hailed for his liberality—his cosmopolitanism, his curiosity about the world beyond his doorstep. He cared enough about other cultures and their music to incorporate some of that music into his own works. *Madama Butterfly* has a Japanese flavor; *La fanciulla del West*, an American flavor; *Turandot*, a Chinese flavor. Puccini was thought to be *honoring* these various traditions; now he is accused of *dishonoring* them. He is a "cultural appropriator," an exploiter, an operatic Leopold II. An Orientalist!

Look, when it comes to cultural appropriation, no one has anything on Bach—with those French overtures, Italian caprices, Irish jigs, and the rest.

The night I attended *Turandot*, a member of the low brass, in the pit, was practicing some familiar music during an intermission. Not Puccini, but Wagner: a passage from *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*. A run of this opera opened about ten nights later. In the pit—conducting—was Sir Antonio Pappano, the longtime chief of opera in London. The cast was about as good as can be assembled for *Meistersinger*: with Michael Volle as Hans Sachs and Lise Davidsen as Eva, for starters. I reviewed *this* show, too, on the web. But here at the end of my chronicle, I wish to wring my hands.

I am not a great worrier over classical music—its future, its viability. In fact, I frequently quote Charles Rosen, the late pianist-scholar, who said, "The death of classical music is perhaps the oldest tradition of classical music." In every generation, music is said to be dying, and yet it marches on. But: a Met *Boris Godunov*, with René Pape, no less, in the title role, was lightly attended and lightly applauded; this *Meistersinger*—this magnificent *Meistersinger*—was lightly attended and lightly applauded. I realize there is a pandemic on, or lingering. I don't want to make too much of a couple of nights at the Met. Still: the worrywarts may have a point.

The media

Vulgar chants

by James Bowman

Right up there with “Tippecanoe and Tyler Too” as an instant American classic is what *Slate* has called “the secretly vulgar chant suddenly beloved by Republicans”—though “secretly vulgar” is an oxymoron, and enthusiasm for the increasingly popular “Let’s Go Brandon” chant is hardly limited to Republicans. It isn’t by way of the country club and the Chamber of Commerce that you arrive at viral meme-hood, I think. Ex-military guys who shop at convenience stores are a different matter. When one of them, a Marine Corps veteran named James Kilcer from Yuma, Arizona, went viral himself by disarming and capturing a gas-station robber, he accepted his award for valor from the Yuma County sheriff’s office wearing a tee-shirt emblazoned with the slogan LETS [*sic*] GO BRANDON over an image of an American flag.

He would have been ill-advised to do that if he were still serving, of course, but I imagine that sales of the shirt will be plentiful among victims of the advertised purge of political “extremists” from the American armed forces. What made the slogan suddenly beloved by me is that its satirical shaft is directed not just at hapless Joe Biden, who is no more capable of inspiring Trumpian levels of hatred than he is Trumpian levels of love. Coined in October 2021 by Kelli Stavast of NBC Sports, when she ostensibly misheard a vulgar chant directed at the President by the crowd at a NASCAR race in Talladega, Alabama, “Let’s Go Brandon” has since become even more popular than its original, at least partly because it ridicules

the slavishly devoted media, whose absurd attempts to cover for the President’s many failures appear to have reached their *ne plus ultra* with Ms. Stavast’s version of the slogan.

Ah, yes, the media is much more hated than old Joe can ever hope to be, or so I believe, and the sense of irony with which its representatives are skewered by “Let’s Go Brandon” gives me new hope for my fellow much-battered deplorables. If America’s ruling class ever becomes the victim of a Tyler-style (Wat Tyler, that is, not John) peasants’ revolt—and Mr. Biden more and more appears to be just the man to make one happen—the lawyers will have to get in line behind the journalists on the way to the executioner’s scaffold.

And maybe behind those teachers, too, who are openly or surreptitiously trying to introduce fashionable left-wing orthodoxies into our public school curricula, indoctrinating children as young as five. At any rate, such teachers and the local school boards that employ them have already inspired a revolt by enraged parents, whom the Attorney General of the United States has averred pose a threat to the republic comparable to that of “domestic terrorists.” As Mr. Biden himself would say, I’m not kidding. Not that that it’s any real surprise. The same characterization of the Capitol rioters of January 6 by the President (not to mention the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff of the nation’s armed forces) suggested some time ago that any resistance to the Left’s agenda “to fundamentally transform the country” is liable to be treated as potential, if not actual, terrorism.

I think the states that are passing laws to prohibit the teaching of Critical Race Theory—I don't know of any that have yet tried to ban "gender" theory—are making a mistake. Such pernicious ideas, I fear, will always find their way into schools under the ideological radar if the state attempts to get into the business of legislating the curriculum. Yet, for the second time in a year, states with the best interests of children at heart have, in my view, been presented with a window of political opportunity to abolish public education entirely, along with the education industry that supports it, and instead give parents a voucher with which they may purchase the private education of their choosing. I suspect that both Critical Race Theory and gender studies would die on the vine except in those few places where guilt-crazed liberal parents would choose it.

Then again, if Republican-controlled states didn't think to do that in response to the shutting down of schools at the behest of teachers' unions during the pandemic lockdown, they probably never will. I guess the one lesson we've all learned from the Left is that noisily protesting against the things you don't like is more fun than the hard work of actually doing something about them. Just as Democrats need racial discord in order to provide themselves with a perpetual reason for existing—discord which, nevertheless, no one will ever expect them to do anything about, except to increase it—so Republicans badly need to rail against underperforming and miseducating public schools, especially if they're not in their own neighborhoods, as an excuse for not doing anything to change them.

Such cynicism in no way applies to Scott Smith, the enraged father from Loudoun County, Virginia, who was arrested and forcibly removed from a school board meeting last June for protesting that his daughter had been raped in a Stone Bridge High School lavatory by a teenage boy in a skirt. The boy, as you will already have guessed, had obtained the school's ideologically based sanction for pretending to be a girl. Before the cops hauled Mr. Smith away, Scott Ziegler, the Loudoun County school superintendent, sniffily informed him

not only that "to my knowledge, we don't have any record of assaults occurring in our restrooms," but also, on the authority of *Time* magazine, that "the predator transgender student or person simply does not exist."

That was good enough for local law enforcement and also for the media, whose reports of the incident were not always followed up by news of the subsequent conviction in late October of the teen predator, who apparently *did* exist, not only for the Stone Bridge assault but also for the same offense at another school to which he had been transferred after the Stone Bridge incident. Likewise, you had to look to The Daily Wire or the *New York Post* for an explanation of Mr. Ziegler's carefully worded claim that ("to my knowledge") there was no record of sexual assault in Loudoun County restrooms. In the words of the Wire's headline on October 14: "Loudoun Schools Did Not Record Multiple Alleged Sexual Assaults Over A Period Of Years Despite State Law, Records Show." The rest of the media, four years after their advocacy campaign on behalf of the #MeToo movement began (see "New directions in scandalology" in *The New Criterion* of December 2017) appeared to have no interest in poor Mr. Smith's—and his daughter's—vindication, nor in what ought to have been Mr. Ziegler's disgrace. At this writing, the latter remains in his job, just like Mr. Biden, impervious to disgrace, thanks to the media's perpetual indulgence.

John Daniel Davidson, writing for *The Federalist*, compares the affair to the Rotherham "grooming" scandals of a decade ago in which a criminal gang of Pakistani men ran a child prostitution ring in the Yorkshire town of Rotherham, England, with the knowledge of local authorities. They allowed the business to go on for years without any interference from them for fear that they would be accused of "racism." This was "political correctness gone mad," as they used to say before it became apparent that political correctness was itself mad to begin with. But I think we now have to reach beyond that tired cliché. The idea of madness, or insanity, just doesn't cover it any more. That progressives who have long called even the most basic prudential advice

to women about how to avoid sexual assault “blaming the victim” should now blame a teenage victim’s father for trying publicly to expose her rapist is clearly a very special kind of insanity.

How then to explain it? I think we should look to the single word “intersectionality,” first mentioned in this column just over four years ago (see “Right side vs. white side” in *The New Criterion* of October 2017). Invented thirty years earlier by the law professor Kimberlé Crenshaw, intersectionality has since become not only a foundational element in Critical Race Theory but the necessary mortar holding together the coalition of the Left which is currently in the business, as mentioned above, of fundamentally transforming America. Those of us who sort of liked America as it was before, and expect nothing good to eventuate from its transformation, need to understand it, not least because it is both what holds the Left coalition together and what makes it, in my view, inherently unstable.

Like so many bad ideas, intersectionality is a development out of Marxist-Leninist thinking that divides the world into oppressors and oppressees. Since the white working class, the original oppressees of *ur*-Marxism, graduated (theoretically, anyway) into the ranks of the oppressors, the pretense of being a mass movement for “change” (or, less coyly, revolution) has depended on the fiction of a unity in oppression of a plethora of other groups of notional victims unknown to Marx or Lenin. The two largest of these identity groups—or those entitled to claim victim status merely by virtue of their sex or race—are, of course, women and “people of color,” but they now also include homosexuals and, the newest addition to the coalition, those who call themselves “transgender people.”

Now, those of us on the outside of this ideological hothouse ought to be able to see at once the serious, perhaps fatal flaw in the idea of a unity in oppression of women and transgenders—for reasons not entirely unrelated to what went on in the girls’ restroom at Stone Bridge High School last May. I think the most radical of the radicals of the Left can see the

problem with it themselves, which is why they have been busy for the last several years drumming out of their ranks as undesirables those they call TERFs, or Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminists, such as Germaine Greer—people, in other words, who believe that women’s rights include the right to be *women* and not, as the prestigious medical journal *The Lancet* would prefer it, “bodies with vaginas.”

The upshot of it all is that, if the coalition of the “woke” is like a family, feminism is now its battered wife—denied, with threatened punishments, any right to an independent existence and bidden to shut up if minded to lodge any complaint against her abuser. The very word “woman” has been banned by the most advanced to mean, you know, a woman. It’s okay to call a man pretending to be a woman a woman. In fact you must. “Trans women are women,” goes the slogan. But real women must be qualified out of existence and referred to as “cisgendered women” or “people who menstruate” or “people with vaginas.” “People who have babies” is problematical, however, since, just as trans women are women, so it is an article of faith among the wokest of the woke-ist politbureau that men can have babies too. And even this is not so crazy as the idea that prepubescent children have the right to decide which sex they wish to belong to and undergo medical intervention accordingly, with no parental veto allowed.

Again, looking from the outside in, I think it ought to be obvious that even a slight outbreak of common sense in such a pressurized environment would have the effect of destroying the fiction of a commonality of interests of the notionally oppressed and, with it, the “woke” coalition itself—which is why the media’s unofficial commissars of the Left have to keep the pressure up on behalf of ideological conformity. Still, wherever their writ does not run—which is, still, most of America—they’ve got to be able to see the terrible public image of their kind that is projected by stories like that of the incident at Stone Bridge High School and the subsequent cover-up. These stories, like the many that reveal Mr. Biden’s incompetence and disconnectedness from reality, they themselves cannot continue to cover up forever.

If I were they, it would have looked to me like the writing on the wall, not only for the fiction presenting parental outrage as “domestic terrorism” but perhaps for the coalition of the woke itself, when pupils at Broad Run High School—the school to which Mr. Smith’s daughter’s fifteen-year-old rapist was transferred, only to strike again there—walked out of their classes to stage a protest, chanting, “Loudoun County protects rapists.” You wouldn’t have read about it in the prestige press, represented locally by *The Washington Post*, but several local television news organizations covered the protest and word does, as they say, get around.

It’s enough to make you wonder why the militant transgenders were welcomed into the coalition in the first place. There are not enough of them to add appreciably to the numbers of what purports to be a mass movement, and the strains placed on the other members of the coalition, particularly feminists, called on to defend them, and the consequent bad publicity, could hardly be thought to be worth whatever benefits they might bring to the movement. I don’t know the answer to this question, but I suspect that it must have something to do with the denial of nature—and, with it, everything formerly known as reality—that has been at the heart of the Marxist project from its beginning. The

Left would be nowhere and nothing without its devout belief in the social construction of reality, and the transgenders have come on board with them saying, in effect, “Put up or shut up.” For such devotees to deny them, along with their assault on nature, would have been to deny themselves.

Once seemingly god-like, nature herself has been downgraded to “the environment”—an expression reeking of anthropocentrism, or so one would have thought. But thus does “the environment” take its place among the (alas, non-voting) victims of oppression—white, male, capitalist, imperialist, patriarchal, heterosexual, cisgendered oppression—cultivated by the Left and the media, who lead the charge for the overthrow of their oppressors. The silence of the environment about her sufferings must make up to some extent for the noisiness of, and the occasional embarrassment caused by, the transgender faction, but such relief comes at a price. It means that people like Mr. Biden must speak on the environment’s behalf. And when other people, quite a lot of other people, go around chanting “F— Joe Biden”—or, indeed, “Let’s Go Brandon”—it cannot but have a knock-on effect on the poor oppressed environment. I think that, like old Joe himself, the environment has suffered enough. Don’t you?

*We mourn the passing of
Mary Campbell Gallagher (1938–2021)
A valued contributor to The New Criterion*

Verse chronicle

The dead & the naked

by *William Logan*

Louise Glück's new poems have the simplicity of fairy tales. *Winter Recipes from the Collective* is an ungainly title for a book of fifteen poems ghostly, spectral, and often attenuated. They're apparently rough drafts for Hans Christian Andersen or the Grimm brothers.¹ The tales are told simply, acidly, with a psychological weight only a writer like Glück, who says so much by saying so little, could manage—or bear.

Day and night come
hand in hand like a boy and a girl
pausing only to eat wild berries out of a dish
painted with pictures of birds.

They climb the high ice-covered mountain,
then they fly away.

A “you” and “I” enter. The boy and girl return. Things happen. Nothing happens. These sneaky, daring little pieces hold out the promise of a completion that can never be complete, even when an ending is offered. Like fairy tales, they don't say what they mean; they mean what they say—or don't say. A monster always lurks behind the arras but never shows his face.

Glück has been masterful at refusing to bare her soul, always a good way to bare it. She has revealed the grotesque in the ordinary as well as that much rarer thing, the ordinary in the grotesque, while maintaining a demeanor that approaches absolute zero. If this is confessional

¹ *Winter Recipes from the Collective*, by Louise Glück; Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 45 pages, \$25.

poetry, it's utterly alien to what Lowell and Plath and Berryman were doing—and what, in watered-down versions, most poets are doing still. Glück's strength lies in the shadow lands between myth and reality. Though her use of Greek myth has often been strained, the fairy-tale motifs have stripped off a layer of the psyche, all while denying—in style, in presence—that she's doing anything of the kind:

And how small
I must have been, suspended
in my mother, being patted by her
approvingly.
What a shame I became
verbal, with no connection
to that memory. My mother's love!
All too soon I emerged
my true self,
robust but sour,
like an alarm clock.

It's hard to believe that lines could be pared any further and still exist. The reader who thinks all Glück's poems are about Glück is mistaken, as is the reader who believes none of them is. Her precursors are not the Modernists—Coleridge, however, a poet with the same attraction to the uncanny, bears similar psychic wounds. Glück's cunning keeps the reader away from the windows, standing before a locked door.

Since *Life Studies* (1959), American poetry has been devoted to confessing even its confessions, whether the self is naked or wearing a three-piece suit and a bowler hat. Glück's

spare and contrary style, rarely concretely located in time or space, gives these new poems an extremity long desired. If her earlier work could appear feigned, feigning has now been perfected. Perhaps the poems that gorged on Greco-Roman myth, some more successfully than others, recommended her to the judges of the Nobel Prize in Literature, which she won last year, the first American poet—Bob Dylan excepted—since T. S. Eliot in 1948. Her new poems go beyond myth into the lurking subconscious. If you take Glück with her limitations (or, worse, *for* them), you end up thinking you’ve overburdened her poems with your enthusiasm. If you don’t, you think that there wasn’t much there to begin with.

In “The Denial of Death,” the longest poem in this book of short receipts, what begins as the loss of a passport becomes the *noche oscura del alma* of St. John of the Cross. Plain sentences, laid out like floor plans—always pointed, always unsentimental—slide from happenstance to horror. The self is restricted, a no-fly zone, and therefore always in view. Glück makes the case, not that fiction is better than truth, but that fiction substitutes for whatever truth is missing.

On either bank, the tall marsh grass blew calmly, continuously, in the autumn wind.
And it seemed to me I remembered this place from my childhood, though
there was no river in my childhood,
only houses and lawns. So perhaps
I was going back to that time
before my childhood, to oblivion, maybe
it was that river I remembered.

Glück has always been a fabulist. Her neutral tone and arctic detachment were there in her first book, but now she knows how to turn Freud’s couch into a creepy piece of furniture. These poems have the contemplative force and invitation of haiku. They start deep and sink deeper, happy to be as prosy and plain as a Midwestern summer. This is a brilliant, scary book.

August Kleinzahler isn’t the tough-guy poet he’d like to be, the sort who reads too much

Bukowski by day and binge-watches *The Wild One* by night. Frank O’Hara has long been his domineering influence—Kleinzahler’s version of the “I do this I do that” poems pays homage to the New York curator and typewriter fiend but revels in the O’Hara whose work rarely exposes the aesthete beneath. Kleinzahler’s poems hang loosely together, and fall loosely apart:

—*Elvis is dead*, the radio said,
where it sat behind a fresh-baked loaf of bread
and broken link of *kolbasz*
fetched only lately from Boucherie Hongroise:
Still Life Without Blue Pitcher.
I read that piece of meat as if I were Chaim
Soutine,
with its capillaries and tiny kernels of fat,
bound up in its burnt-sienna casing.

Snow Approaching on the Hudson is an often scatterbrained trot through time, travel, and temperament.² In those eight lines we have the swivel-hipped King, Hungarian sausage, a Quebec charcuterie, Max Weber’s still life—and Soutine’s beef carcass, painted as it gradually rotted before him. Soon after, we’re offered Parcheesi, Tuinal, Presley’s *Blue Hawaii*, and Satie. The poem is largely about soup.

Such a piece can ramble on for fifty lines, throwing more gimcracks and geegaws into the pot, doing nothing but evoking a day and a place far more important to the poet than to the reader. The writing is strongly rendered, full of controlled flourishes, never cheap or meaningless—though the infestation of rhymes can be like bedbugs in a pricey hotel. The torrent of bookish allusion conceals a dogged shrewdness. Beneath the mannerism lies love of craft.

Kleinzahler’s poems suffer from long lines that refuse to quit, from an outlandishness that would embarrass anyone but Thomas Pynchon. *Snow Approaching* is at times a Grand Tour of the poet’s life without discrimination or revelation. These poems sit hard by others that seem by Browning out of Browning,

2 *Snow Approaching on the Hudson*, by August Kleinzahler; Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 85 pages, \$25.

written by a poet trapped in a library who has read everything in sight:

Galleys bob out on the Marmora, oars dipped,
dragon-headed prows making ready to spit
fire.

Siege engines take up position outside the
gate of St. Romanus.

Sappers burrow below.

This must be the siege of Constantinople, which fell in 1453, Christian defenders supported by Muslim defectors, attacking Muslim troops swollen with Christian slaves. The fire must be the infamous Greek fire, whose recipe has long been lost. This is not the first book where Kleinzahler has dipped into and out of the past like a man who pinched H. G. Wells's time machine but forgot to grab the manual. Sometimes I have no idea what the poet's writing about, and sometimes I'd rather not know—his style is the point. The content exists merely to carry the freight of manner.

If you're put off by Kleinzahler's posturing, you'll have trouble appreciating his graces. When he isn't just dithering, he can be a poet of elegant control and impressive force. Still, too many poems are junkyard collections of things, things, things, the lines stretching to the horizon, without an end in view:

Windshield wipers slapping back and forth,
Murph's Celebrity Sedan
hugged the curve as it sped onto the Edison
Bridge, Super 88 4 barrel
High Compression 394 Rocket V8, Roto
Hydro-Matic transmission, power steering,
Pedal-Ease power brakes, the rolling black
cylinder speedometer
flashing green, yellow, and red, holding steady
at 65 mph, midnight-blue frame
encasing me in terror, where I remain still,
sleeping or awake.

And so on. And on. Somewhere in this particular avalanche of detail is a convincing portrait of a teenaged Kleinzahler and his unofficial, taxi-driving, Hart Crane-spouting guide. (Virgil, he's not.) It's a road movie that never gets off the road—the poem rattles on for four pages

without a highway turnoff in sight. There's a modicum of self-indulgence in the gross surfeit of these poems, many of which lack a point.

Kleinzahler is the current heavyweight champ of bizarre lists ("He stands before me, festooned/ with pneumatocysts, red, testosterone, blue, cortisol,/ pompadour and cowlick rigid with gel,/ orange knee socks, 'laser green' running shoes"); and once he starts an inventory he finds it hard to quit:

The sun now above the tree line, the world
again renews,
bicycling from point A to point B, a box lunch
of Brie and
ham on a kaiser roll, twelve grapes, a Fanta,
attached to the rear rack.
It continues on like this until the leaves begin
to fall
and the first snow arrives, but much the same,
different footwear.
Off they go to the groovy software design
studio and columbarium,
enorbed by their things-to-do lists and
amorous set-backs.

Kleinzahler plays the lout but knows what a columbarium is and can probably distinguish it from a mausoleum, though perhaps he means "inorbed," not "enorbed," and elsewhere "imposture," not "impostiture." (Browning used "enorbed," but almost no one else.) I lament the frequent attacks of logorrhea and suspect that the poems read much better after a third bottle of Old Crow. Despite the rough-edged gossip and historical noodling (one poem brings Kwakiutl to Ocean Beach), Kleinzahler's a raconteur of the old school, one who doesn't know when to shut up. These accumulations of happenstance are half amateur history and half Jerry Lewis comedy. It's sometimes hard to tell one from the other.

Rita Dove has been a brand almost longer than she's been a poet—and having become a brand she no longer found it necessary to write poetry, just a pasteboard-and-tinsel version that makes readers ooh and aah if you say the right things about the right things in a style

that would not trouble the average high-school student (or a particularly brainy toddler). That would drive to distraction, however, anyone who expects poetry to possess subtlety or the memorable use of language.

In *Playlist for the Apocalypse*, Dove begins with either an argument or an apologia for the difference between prose and poetry, composed in a prose I'm almost embarrassed to quote:

It's supposed to be prose if it runs on and on, isn't it? All those words, too many to fall into rank and file, stumbling bare-assed drunk onto the field reporting for duty, yessir, spilling out as shamelessly as the glut from a megabillion-dollar chemical facility, just the amount of glittering effluvium it takes to transport a little girl across a room.³

The little girl is probably Dove in childhood, but what she's doing amid that effluvium with all those bare-assed soldiers, well, I don't know—her images are often shifty if not make-shift, cobbled together from polystyrene, zip cord, and old car-parts.

Despite this little gush in prose about prose, she manages to say nothing crucial about the distinction between the genres, except, perhaps, that prose “applauds such syntactical dalliances.” Take that, Shakespeare, Milton, Keats, Dickinson, Pound, Eliot, Bishop, Lowell. Yet what could be prosier than this?

Thirty seconds into the barbecue,
my Cleveland cousins
have everyone speaking
Southern—broadened vowels
and dropped consonants,
whoops and caws.
It's more osmosis than magic.

I've been to barbecues and never heard Southerners or Northerners descend into whoops and caws, or anything passing for a Southern accent if they didn't already possess one. What I admire is how alert Dove is to black culture, which infuses her poems in a way so natural

³ *Playlist for the Apocalypse*, by Rita Dove; W. W. Norton, 114 pages, \$26.95.

it's not always evident. (She courageously reveals in the notes that she has MS, a secret she has kept for more than two decades.) Unfortunately, the poems are often just prose pretending to be verse: “If loving every minute spent jostling syllables/ while out in the world others slog through their messes/ implies such shuttered industry is selfish or irresponsible.”

Dove has a surprising gift for writing without any sense of freshness or shock. Once you know the subject, you can predict her response, which seems middle-aged and middlebrow, even when it's neither. Consider her version of Woodstock:

Year of the moon, year of love & music:
Everyone in batik, dripping beads & good
will;
peace to the world, peace to the Universe!
Sing along, kiss a stranger; blankets quilting
the hill.

There may have been a little batik at Yasgur's Farm, but mostly it was tie-dye. If the most famous rock festival ever staged had been so banal, the audience would have slunk off, ashamed. Still, “*Dripping beads & good will*”? Why write poetry if that's all poetry can muster? (I love Zeugma, but really!) Joni Mitchell's song about the festival (“And we got to get ourselves back to the Gar-uh-ar-uh-ah-*den*”) was the worst piece of Woodstock-lit I could imagine until Dove came along.

The poem is part of a song cycle, *A Standing Witness*, written on commission like many of these poems. The cycle whizzes through half a century of America from the Sixties through Trump. Does she do better with Muhammad Ali?

He flicks those angry eyes,
then flings out a rhyme
quick as tossing a biscuit to a dog.

He's our homegrown warrior, America's
toffee-toned Titan; how dare he swagger
in the name of peace? No black man
strutting his minstrel ambitions

deserves those eloquent lips.

Quick as tossing a biscuit to a dog? Toffee-toned Titan? His minstrel ambitions? A poet can't survive on terrible metaphors—not as a poet, at least. I could go on through her poems on Nixon (“*I’m not a crook* he crowed, and people believed him, / persuaded by flags and honor guard”), on Roe v. Wade, AIDS, and 9/11, all perfectly terrible.

Dove is addicted equally to blather and sentiment. Many of her poems serve up dollops of the stuff like so many scoops of poisoned whipped-cream:

A day like this I should count
among the miracles of living—breath,

a heart that beats, that aches and sings;
even the ecstasy of thirst

or sweat peppering my brow,
fanned by the mercurial breezes

crisscrossing this reserve,
our allotment on earth.

This is part of another commission, a series of poems on the half-millennium anniversary of the forced isolation of Venetian Jews in the Ghetto, once an island dump for foundry slag. A group of writers and artists were asked to “reflect on the evolution of the word ‘ghetto.’” The project was noble, but it’s hard to take seriously a poet who humble-brags that “I spent a month in *La Serenissima*, overlooking the Canale Grande from a magnificent apartment in the Palazzo Malipiero,” rather than, say, windowless rooms in the Ghetto itself. She might as well have said, “I was so grateful, while working in Paris on my Holocaust poems, to have been gifted a richly decorated suite at the Ritz and a chauffeured Rolls.” Her Venetian palazzo was the “very building where a young Giacomo Casanova began solidifying his scandalous reputation.” *Solidifying?*

This embarrassing book, the poems so bland and dispiriting, shows that a poet can make all the politic gestures against racism and violence yet never write a line worth remembering. Dove has won the Pulitzer Prize, been Poet Laureate twice, and received the National Hu-

manities Medal, the National Medal of Arts, the Gold Medal for Poetry, and the Golden Plate Award. The robes from twenty-eight honorary Ph.D.s hang in her closet.

Valzhyna Mort’s brutal, brutalized poems revisit a family history, and a country, littered with corpses. Born in Minsk (the capital of Belarus, former Byelorussia), she came to the United States in 2005. Russian was her first language, perhaps inflected by the “heavy-handed pigeon [*sic*] of Russian, Belarusian, and Polish” spoken, as she said in an interview, by the grandmother who raised her. (“Pidgin” may have been mistranscribed.) Mort learned Belarusian only in middle school. She has the virtue and responsibility of a poet whose language is silently infiltrated by other languages—the occasional off-note may be a dissonance calculated or unwilling.

Music for the Dead and Resurrected, her third book in English (the first appeared in translation), returns to the shattered scenes that have come to consume her work.⁴ She has forced herself to address the oppressive governments, murderous politics, and shifting borders that characterized Mitteleuropa from the Russian Revolution into the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union. The current president of Belarus, called by the BBC “Europe’s last dictator,” has been in office since 1994.

Here, history comes to an end
like a movie
with rolling credits of headstones,
with nameless credits of mass graves.

Every ditch, every hill is suspect.

Pick me for a sister, Antigone.
In this suspicious land
I have a bright shovel of a face.

Mort slaps down her images like trump cards, making her arguments with bullet points. (Is the shovel bright because new, or because polished after every grave?) This isn’t a poetry

4 *Music for the Dead and Resurrected*, by Valzhyna Mort; Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 95 pages, \$25.

of nuance—the sentences are sharp as stakes, with an occasional shudder of black humor. The tales of her family would have been too grim for the Grimms.

At best the poet's experience provides her objective correlatives where mere recitation of history's facts would seem untethered. Her bright, off-kilter images show the tea-table influence of the Surrealists:

In the temple of Supermarket
I stand
like a candle

in the line to the priestesses who preserve
the knowledge of sausage prices, the virginity
of milk cartons. My future, small
change.

The images are striking, even when they outshine the poem. ("A Supermarket in California" is still the only supermarket poem worth reading, but Ginsberg had to frogmarch Whitman in to help.) Mort's poems often judder along, rimshot to rimshot, with too many stanzas capped, *Ba-da-boom!*, by a desperate simile or overwrought metaphor, more than a few of them stunning: "I pray to the trees and language migrates down my legs like mute cattle," "An air-raid warning rings/ like a telephone from the future," "Your straight hair/ falls like currency in a counting machine," "She stands inside,/ as at the bottom of a river, her heart an octopus." (The freshwater octopus is sadly unknown to science.) In such lines, the Martian School rises again. However darkly comic, however scouring, the images time after time stop the poem cold.

Mort's country, that shadowy, dangerous landscape that withstood invasions by the Huns and Avars, was devastated during the last world war. Now it seems secretly inhabited by trolls or Beowulf's dragon—it's the place even fairy tales are afraid of. The poems are piecemeal by calculation, fragments not shored against the ruins but composed of ruins themselves. They offer riddles without answers, grief without resolution, remarks of little depth that nevertheless make the skin prickle: "Our famous skills/ in tank produc-

tion/ have been redirected/ at students and journalists."

If many of her poems wander between Beckett's desperation and Barnum's empty promises, if Mort's taste for mismatched parts plays to her weaknesses rather than her strengths, the broken stories tremble with ravaged power amid destructive loss. Mort is a poet of attractive intelligence whose family history has dragged her into realms where hope glints only rarely, yet without the pressure of history she could easily have become a poet of empty images. Her voice is so troubled, so haunted, her language so compelling, I'll look forward to whatever she does next.

Paul Muldoon has been our Puck for so many decades, it's difficult to remember the modest, restrained, Heaney-esque poet he was at the start. *Howdie-Skelp* (the midwife's slap) is the latest of the tent shows he's put on, and it's a humdinger.⁵ For jumble sales and lucky dips of cultural artifacts from here to Timbuktu, for rhymes that would have dizzied the bedizened ancients, for loopy goofballery no other poet could get away with, for all the thats of thisses, and thisses of thats (if this sounds like Dr. Seuss, so does Muldoon at times), well, he's your man. Muldoon is our most boyish, talented, and frustrating poet, his great gifts left to rust just to see what happens.

This new book, almost longer than the Yellow Pages, is anchored by four sequences, the first a rewriting of *The Waste Land*, because, well, why not? With his usual waggle of wit, Muldoon calls it *American Standard*—that is, the brand of toilet; and, indeed, a lot of things get thrown in before he flushes. (If the toilet is a sidelong reference to Duchamp's 1917 *Fountain*, exhibited five years before *The Waste Land* was published, it doesn't pass unnoticed.)

By the mud walls of an ancient city, where
Escort Drive runs into Sunup,
a construction worker finds a packet wrapped
in clear

⁵ *Howdie-Skelp*, by Paul Muldoon; Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 179 pages, \$27.

ing, much of the window dressing that now makes up his poems.

Back in the day when our political
representatives at least showed up at the Althing
you drove my Triumph Herald convertible
from Notting Hill to the Beeb
to buy cigarettes from a vending machine.
The car roof flapped like the wing
of some bird of death as we passed
the shuttered shops and pubs.

If Puck is rarely drawn these days to subjects that test the emotional rigor of that devious imagination, poetry must bear the loss. He can only rarely turn off the cleverness switch even when the poem doesn't need the little fits or frenzies. Cleverness can be a curse. Muldoon's late poems could be mistaken for those contraptions that preceded the Wright Brothers at Kitty Hawk, bouncing along until the wings collapsed or the wheels fell off.

When John Ashbery died in 2017, I thought the arcane machines of his invention, which produced poetry of such an astonishing but mechanical sort, had stopped. No way. In the thirty years before his death, he published over eighteen hundred pages of poetry. *Parallel Movement of the Hands* gathers five long poems dragged from the dust heap, poems unfinished or abandoned.⁶

Ashbery had a free-floating imagination, closely resembling free-floating anxiety, that let him bash out poem after poem without relying on sense or logic, leaving just silly sentence after silly sentence, some making sense, but few glued to the ones before or after. He churned out brilliant guff like a butter factory, stick after stick, boxcar after boxcar of it.

The first sip of intelligence
splits the diapered sky, already crackled
with the losses that events are.

At the old treehouse one is clogged

6 *Parallel Movement of the Hands: Five Unfinished Longer Works*, by John Ashbery; Ecco, 268 pages, \$29.99.

with sleep in any case. Dust garlands that sway
like chains of mice. And up from under
the palaver there is golden food.

Words other poets would have trouble using these days (*garlands, palaver*) were, well, bread and butter to Ashbery. He thrived on narratives that weren't narratives, misleading clues, random incidents, obscure references, and a truckload of kitchen sinks—yet the poems, in their infinite solicitation and refusal, their smirking and sniggering, could be delightful when you didn't feel furious.

The poems didn't need to start where they did or end where they did. Ben Lerner, who wrote the foreword to this book, recalls that at a reading fifty years ago Ashbery found that he'd forgotten something. "Oh, I don't think I have the last page of it with me," he said, referring to a long prose poem. "Well, it doesn't matter, actually." That was true of much of his work. You could drop the beginning, the end, or anything in between, and still have an Ashbery poem—campy, entertaining, slightly deranged, but hardly ever meaning anything but what the reader forced upon it. Lerner calls Ashbery "American poetry's Scheherazade," which is true only in the most tortured sense—he never told stories, but whatever he did tell seemed to break off *in medias res*, having started *in medias res*, too.

Ashbery was like a man drugged or daydreaming and spouting whatever popped into his head, goofy oddments mixed at times with the darkly philosophical. He was an Automat poet—you popped in a quarter and out came a freshly baked poem. At worst it was childish nonsense:

Would Siamese persons
now curly wrinkles blend
summon to an earthshower
the woken dresses?

Good luck sussing that out. The best had a lot of charm, however:

Only children and dinosaurs like endings,
and we shall be very happy once it all gets
broken off.

The others, then—no, no, you missed the
turnoff
into the driveway.

Ashbery was a poet of hit and miss, or miss and miss and miss once more. His genius was for suggesting meaning where none existed—or only a little. Born in another time, he'd probably have been asked to read bird entrails, weird clouds, or mud patties. He could have interpreted dreams at least as well as Joseph for Pharaoh. A much later Joseph, Joseph Cornell, was the poet's kindred spirit, and many Ashbery poems seem like Cornell boxes, made of scrap wood, pretending to be games or miniature panoramas, full of teasing implication.

I suppose it was inevitable that Ashbery's posthumous poems would be overburdened with a foreword and introduction more than fifty pages long, as well as nearly a hundred pages of notes, photographs, and reproductions of drafts. The apparatus is longer than the work itself. Of the five abandoned poems

in *Parallel Hands*, the most convincing are *The History of Photography* and *The Kane Richmond Project*, the latter based on Thirties and Forties movie-serials and the minor actor Kane Richmond. None of the poems, unfortunately, begins to compare with Ashbery's masterpiece, *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (1975), which has the focus and concentration his work never again possessed.

Edited by his former assistant, Emily Skilling, these unpublished poems, apart from one left undated, were written between 1993 and 2007. Her notes are thorough, especially about Ashbery's sources and the confusion—really, dog's dinner—of drafts he left. I have some questions about the texts: did he really intend to write, "I said your coming over/ throw money at the rat" (instead of, say, "you're," with a comma or semi-colon after "over") or "Nobody can go in./ This are is off limits"? Surely he meant to type "area" instead. Ashbery left file drawers and boxes of unpublished and uncollected work. Several more books are threatened.

Forthcoming in *The New Criterion*:

A debate on common-good conservatism: a special section in January
with essays by Ryan T. Anderson, Josh Hammer, Kim R. Holmes,
Charles R. Kesler, Roger Kimball, Daniel J. Mahoney, James Piereson,
Robert R. Reilly & R. R. Reno

Western civilization at the crossroads
with essays by Victor Davis Hanson,
Andrew Roberts, James Piereson & others

The Soviet demise *by Gary Saul Morson*
Botticelli in Paris *by David Platzer*
Hornblower at the helm *by John Steele Gordon*

Books

A new three-decker

by *Simon Heffer*

How much history from the nineteenth century do we still read *as* history, rather than as an exercise in understanding historiography? In their way, Motley's *Dutch Republic*, Macaulay's *History of England*, and Froude's accounts of the reigns of the Tudors are thorough, artistically written, and informative, but in the century and half since they were published, research has been deeper, understanding more nuanced, and contexts broadened. Nobody would wish to base his or her understanding of these particular subjects on those texts alone.

Yet if the only book you were able to read on the events of the French Revolution was Thomas Carlyle's breathtaking, expansive, and, in stylistic terms at least, revolutionary 1837 account of them, you would not be too gravely handicapped. Carlyle's sources were exhaustive. He read every printed work he could find on the subject, every eyewitness account, every contemporary report that could be traced. His level of accuracy was remarkably high. If history is ultimately to be about truth—and it is not a bad aim if it is—then Carlyle hit the target. What his critics, at the time and since, did not like was the way in which he did so.

An extensive description and analysis of the quality of his sources is but one part of the critical apparatus contained in a stunning three-volume edition of Carlyle's masterpiece, published by Oxford University Press and edited by Mark Cumming and David R. Sorensen; the text has been edited separately by Mark

Engel and Brent E. Kinser.¹ The responsibility of the last two scholars was to compile a definitive text from the various editions that were prepared in Carlyle's lifetime. He lived for forty-four years after its publication and made corrections and changes to all of them. His various emendations are also noted, from the proof stage of the first printing onwards.

The OUP critical edition is, like the original, what the Victorians termed a "three-decker"—a three-volume edition that was the standard form for the great histories written in that era, for a market that was increasingly thirsty for them at a time when industrialization was rapidly changing Britain and the world. Carlyle strove consciously to make his writing of history radically different from that of other historians, whom he dismissed in his satirical writings as "Dryasdust." Once he had imbibed all the sources that he had accumulated, Carlyle wrote an account of the events of the years after 1789 that often reads like a screenplay. He writes in the present tense and in the first person, he makes his reader feel as though he or she is there, and he does so in his unique style, derived from the tone of the monologues with which he was wont to harangue, and entertain, his audiences around his hearth in Chelsea and in the salons to which he was invited, initially at least, as a matter of curiosity.

1 *The French Revolution: A History*, by Thomas Carlyle, edited by Mark Cumming, David R. Sorensen, Mark Engel, and Brent E. Kinser; Oxford University Press, 2,240 pages, \$455.

Take, for example, his account of the storming of the Bastille, so difficult to describe that he wonders whether the task “perhaps transcends the talent of mortals.” He writes:

Paris wholly has got to the acme of its frenzy; whirled, all ways, by panic madness. At every street-barricade, there whirls simmering, a minor whirlpool—strengthening the barricade, since God knows what is coming; and all minor whirlpools play distractedly into that grand Fire-Mahlstrom which is lashing round the Bastille.

Shortly after, he says: “Blood flows; the ailment of new madness. The wounded are carried into houses of the Rue Cerisaie; the dying leave their last mandate not to yield till the accursed Stronghold fall.” Carlyle does not present an account to his readers; he conducts a conversation with them, but one in which they remain silent because of the force of his speech.

In an extensive introduction running to over a hundred pages, the editors explore the reasons why Carlyle chose to write about these events. The revolution, of course, had been of fascination to Britons since it happened: Burke’s *Reflections* was published while the blood was still flowing in 1790 and served as a warning to the British ruling class not to provoke the sort of trouble that was raging in France. But then there was no real danger of that: England had issued its admonition about monarchy that lurches into tyranny in 1649, when it had cut off Charles I’s head after its Civil War. The monarchy was restored in 1660, but when Charles’s younger son, King James II (otherwise James VII of Scotland), decided to ignore the fact of the Reformation and to do so in what rather too many of his parliamentarians considered a tyrannical fashion, no civil war was necessary: Parliament invited James’s brother-in-law William of Orange to come to England, depose James, and set up on the throne in a joint monarchy with the deposed king’s sister Mary.

The lesson of constitutional monarchy was learned and not forgotten. During William’s reign, in 1695, freedom of the press was established. After the Hanoverian succession in

1714, a Germanophone king stopped attending the cabinets of his ministers, and in 1721 the post of prime minister (not defined under Britain’s unwritten constitution until 1905 because it worked perfectly well undefined) arose, accelerating the process of putting the monarch out of politics. By the time of the French Revolution, William Pitt the Younger ran His Majesty’s Government, and His Majesty did what Mr. Pitt advised. France, by comparison, was stuck in a particularly decadent version of the Middle Ages, one in which the ordinary French were treated with a contempt probably not seen in England since the time of King John at the dawn of the thirteenth century. But then England had an agricultural working class from long before the Civil War, not a peasantry, the difference being that the ruling class had an idea of the liberties of the ordinary people and respected them. This was not the case in France.

Carlyle was no democrat—in perhaps his finest work of polemic, *Past and Present* (1843), he talked of “democracy, which means despair of finding any heroes to govern you.” He did not believe that the French Revolution should have established such a rule in France any more than he wanted one in England: when Disraeli and Derby extended the franchise to the urban working class after mild agitation in 1867, Carlyle railed against it, denouncing Disraeli as a “superlative Hebrew conjuror.” But this was not an echo of Burke’s conservative view that a traditional and legitimate authority had been usurped, and that this was monstrous. The events in France, as the editors note in their introduction, provided Carlyle with a different motivation: he “had no interest in presenting either a ‘conservative’ attack on the Revolution or a ‘radical’ exoneration of it.” What made this work so compelling to reviewers and to the public was that Carlyle felt the revolution had been entirely necessary because of the appalling misgovernment of France by the Bourbons and their debauched, effete, and fundamentally selfish aristocracy—he calls the court of Louis XV a “strumpetocracy.” The revolutionaries were almost a “divine” instrument assisting in “the cleansing of a Europe that had grown false

and corrupt.” Burke would have been horrified by Carlyle’s assertion that God and the revolutionaries were on the same side, but Carlyle was no booster of the violent mobs. In his view the revolutionaries were unable to create the stable society that should have completed the revolution, because their society was “founded on a lie.” They too became prey to the corrupting forces that power, once it is obtained, brings.

Carlyle began the work in earnest when he came to London in 1834, after the publication that year of *Sartor Resartus* and as he was making his name as an essayist in the reviews. John Stuart Mill had been planning to write a history of the French Revolution for Chapman & Hall but was diverted elsewhere, and he recommended Carlyle as a possible author instead. That was not, as is well known, the end of Mill’s involvement in the matter. Once Carlyle had finished the first volume, he gave Mill the only copy of his manuscript to read, and it was apparently burned by Mill’s housemaid. Mill prostrated himself before Carlyle, compensated him handsomely in the financial sense, and sent him large amounts of books as source materials. They later ceased to be friends, but that was because of Mill’s distaste at Carlyle’s increasingly anti-democratic thought system: in *Past and Present* in 1843 Carlyle set out his vision of the “perfect feudal times,” of obligation by the rich towards the poor and of consequent deference by the poor towards the rich. In 1835, when Mill lost the manuscript—one suspects because of a preoccupation that particular evening with the needs of his mistress—he and Carlyle both behaved exceptionally well over the matter. And one can only surmise that the second draft, which Carlyle rapidly rewrote while it was at the front of his mind, ended up better than the first.

This magnificent edition is a worthy monument to Carlyle’s genius. Its scholarship appears faultless. There is just one problem: the exhaustive and superb footnotes, which not only gloss people but also expressions that may be unfamiliar today, are tucked at the back of each volume, and looking them up soon

becomes a tedious process. It would not have been beyond Oxford’s wit to put the notes on the page, and it would have made the near-perfect perfect. This edition also makes us realize just how worth reading the book still is—it remains vivid history, despite the passage of 185 years, for its near-eyewitness quality. And it got Carlyle what he so badly craved: an acclaimed place in London literary society, and the means for at least the next thirty years to alter the intellectual weather.

Octopodes, not waitrons

Arika Okrent

Highly Irregular: Why Tough, Through, and Dough Don’t Rhyme—And Other Oddities of the English Language.
Oxford University Press, 272 pages, \$19.95

reviewed by Kelly Scott Franklin

In 1909, Ambrose Bierce was tired of people abusing the term “literally.” In his book *Write It Right*, the Civil War veteran and satirist drew up an alphabetical list of linguistic sins, then put each one out of its misery with the stiletto humor that would make his *Devil’s Dictionary* (1911) an American classic. Of using “*Literally for Figuratively*” (“The stream was literally alive with fish,” and “His eloquence literally swept the audience from its feet.”) Bierce wrote, “It is bad enough to exaggerate, but to affirm the truth of the exaggeration is intolerable.” If he hadn’t literally vanished in Mexico in 1913, he might have found the present state of our language difficult to bear.

We have a long tradition of grouching about the vulgar errors of English-as-she-is-spoke, but the linguist Arika Okrent is interested by the burrs in the very fabric of our language—the irregular verbs, synonyms, and spellings that make English so hard for non-native speakers to master. Some of these quirks come from common errors long ingrained by habit among the speakers of the language; ironically, others come from critics—Okrent calls them “snobs”—in the school of Bierce. In the readable, bite-sized chapters of *Highly Irregular*,

Okrent tells the story of how English became such a mess, assuring us that “there is plenty of blame to go around.”

We can blame the barbarian invaders who brought the Germanic tongue to what became England. They gave us the vowel gradations in the verbs we call irregular—as when “sing” becomes “sang” in the past tense. Old English had different rules of inflection for different classes of verbs, and the rule that added “-ed” (“walk/walked”) became the dominant one, likely because it accommodated the arrival of French words after the Norman Conquest. The vowel-gradation rule fell away, but the stubborn holdovers survive as our irregular verbs. They endured, Okrent posits, because “words like *ate*, *drank*, *took*, *found*, *knew*, and *spoke*” are such fundamental parts of daily life that their frequent use made them resistant to change. Okrent laments that “chode,” the past tense of “chide,” was lost forever, and I agree.

We can also blame the people of France, an activity which has become a national pastime for English speakers. After the Battle of Hastings brought Norman rule to England in 1066, French became the language of power and administration, giving us legal, political, and economic terms like “court,” “govern,” “appeal,” and “tax.” The English lexicon swelled. The two languages lived cheek-by-jowl, spawning synonym pairs that sometimes reflected the class divide between peasants and elites. The animals that Anglo-Saxon farmers called “calf” or “pig,” both Germanic words, became known under the Latin-derived French terms “veal” or “pork” when Anglo-Normans ate them. This distinction lives on today, when the same creature takes a different name, depending on whether we find it in a field or on our fork.

The printing press muddied the waters too. When William Caxton planted the first one on English soil in 1476, it began to ossify English spelling, even as pronunciation was undergoing the huge change apocalyptically called the “Great Vowel Shift.” Okrent writes that, when the dust settled, the written language still contained “spellings that represented pronunciations that were sometimes hundreds of years out of date.” English speakers originally

pronounced “food” and “blood” the same way, something like “foad” and “bload.” But the dissemination of printed texts froze the spelling before the vowel sounds landed where they are today. Even Caxton’s staffing decisions shaped our language. He employed Flemish typesetters who sometimes applied Flemish spelling to English words, as when they added the ‘h’ to the word “ghost.”

We should also blame the snobs. The English we speak and write today bears the fingerprints of satirists in the vein of Bierce, dictionary makers like Samuel Johnson or Noah Webster, and countless pedants, columnists, academics, and teachers. Renaissance scholars enamored of Latin roots added the now-silent consonants to “salmon,” “doubt,” and “debt,” English words that had already come in through the French without that orthographic baggage. Nineteenth-century grammarians further shamed English-speakers into Latinate plurals: up to that point, the plural of “fungus” was “funguses.” And with the characteristic social insecurity of our human species, we overcompensated. “Octopus,” whose ending looks deceptively Latinate, is actually Greek, and should therefore be pluralized not as “octopi” but as the delightful “octopodes.” Okrent concludes that “*Octopuses* is perfectly fine.”

The author draws some of the book’s material from her successful video series for the online publication Mental Floss about the tics of language, with synchronized whiteboard drawings by the illustrator Sean O’Neill. O’Neill’s cartoons are better live than in print, and I wish the author and illustrator had included their hilarious take on the history of the American word “dude.” Might we get a follow-up book on the strangeness of English in the United States?

We must finally blame ourselves, Okrent concludes. For it is always individual human beings who make linguistic choices in real time, even when influenced by geopolitical shifts or grammarian snobs. We make these decisions in a marvelous tension between habit and innovation that makes language less like a steered vessel and more like Dr. Dolittle’s fabu-

lous pushmi-pullyu, with heads at both ends, tugging in opposite directions. A language too static becomes a fossil, failing to express our experience of the real—but innovate too far and you won't get buy-in from English speakers on the ground. So when things were getting stuffy we got Walt Whitman's "barbaric yawp." But when language ideologues pushed their luck with the gender-neutral "waitron" in the 1980s, nobody, and I mean nobody, would use it. Literally.

School subjects

Thomas Sowell

Charter Schools and Their Enemies.

Basic Books, 288 pages, \$30

reviewed by Robert Garrow

America's largest teachers union, the National Education Association, supplies the "professional educator" with a Code of Ethics, which includes the stipulation that he or she "shall not assist a noneducator in the unauthorized practice of teaching." In the normal world that we all inhabit, teaching happens all the time, so it takes quite the presumption to claim that any of it, except what is done against parents' wishes, is "unauthorized." But that is the issue at the heart of the fight over charter schools: the power to decide who may teach what to which children, the power to ennoble or corrupt them, now in large measure lies with education bureaucracies. Left out of these decisions are well-intentioned, caring adults who have a better idea of what these children need—be they the unlicensed teachers with advanced degrees who have found a home in top charter schools, or even those parents who, in homeschooling their children or in selecting a non-government school for them to attend, "engage in the unauthorized practice of teaching."

At root of this strange ethic is the belief that a child belongs first to the state, or at least to its temporary surrogate, the education system. The school is determined in advance by the family's neighborhood, the funds that

are allocated based on the child's attendance belong to the district, and the responsibility for teaching him or her everything from reading to advanced physics to questionable elements of political ideology lies with the system's so-called experts, who are granted credentials in such a way as to prevent entrepreneurial entry into the market. Parents, who by right have the authority and responsibility to direct the education of their own children, are expected to be the grateful recipients of whatever cake results from this mixture.

Thomas Sowell does a service in his new book *Charter Schools and Their Enemies* by cutting straight to this point: education as it is designed and implemented today begins in precisely the wrong place, with decisions made to advance pre-existing adult interests rather than what is good for children and their parents who know them best. And those adult interests are not the reasonable concerns we all have in the proper and patriotic formation of future citizens, but crass sinecurism and self-plumage. As Sowell makes plain, when districts refuse to sell vacant buildings to charter schools with waitlists, or refuse to negotiate with charter schools and slow-walk the process so that interest in a new school wanes, or when buildings are sold to bidders who offer less than charter schools offer, and who receive the building on condition that they won't use it for educational purposes, we know that it is not "for the good of children." Watching Sowell wade through this morass gives you a sense of what Alexis de Tocqueville meant when he wrote that administrative tyranny "does not destroy, it prevents things from being born."

Sowell begins with a necessarily dry but careful comparison of select charter schools and their government competition. Given that the variables involved in any such comparison are complex and highly contested (see chapter 5 on student differences), he reviews only those charter schools in New York City that share buildings with and have similar student demographics as government schools. With this narrow focus, what Sowell loses in broad applicability he gains in precision and reliability. And his approach better

reflects the actual choices that parents face when selecting schools. They do not look at charter and government schools broadly, but rather at this school here against that one there. Country- or even state-wide comparisons offer little value to parents in their local markets, where children must get to school in the morning, on time.

By respecting the marginal decisions that parents must make, Sowell establishes the proper framework for studying charter schools and their effects. Broadly measuring charter schools against government schools is not a comparison of apples to apples, or even apples to oranges. Charter schools as such and government schools as such are both baskets full of a variety of fruits, and a fair assessment needs to remove just the apples (or oranges, bananas, etc.) from each before comparing them. That is precisely what Sowell does, while also making the broader statistical case that, if it hopes to shed light on the incredibly diverse models and circumstances that shape America's charter schools, work in this field needs to be much better controlled.

The charter schools that Sowell chose mostly outperformed their counterparts on state tests, in some cases crushing them. The seventy-plus pages of statistical tables that grace the appendices are, for all their aridity, elegant demonstrations of that fact, which anyone can freely access and consider. Where charter schools underperform, Sowell is honest about it, which makes his case for those charter schools that truly improve educational outcomes all the stronger.

It is worth noting that some friends of charter schools would dispute an analysis that reduces school success to state tests, as Sowell does—especially in the case of arts-focused schools, or others designed with a niche educational goal in mind. This isn't just a question of skirting a metric by which one would be judged poorly, but rather a key point about charters. As Corey DeAngelis argues in his contribution to the debate, *School Choice Myths: Setting the Record Straight on Education Freedom* (2020), it's not that charters uniformly do better on state tests than similarly situated district-run schools, but that their whole pur-

pose might be broader, or deeper, or just plain different. And the result of that diversity is a richer civic culture that promotes parental freedom, which in turn fosters diversity.

Yet and still, the greatest service Sowell provides is to underscore the striking and borderline criminal neglect of children's best interests by many charter school enemies. For those who are less concerned about test scores as a metric of success, chapters 3–6 are worth the price of entry in trawling up widespread and repeated acts of neglect, distrust, and seeming hatred toward charter schools and the parents who build and choose them.

Perhaps the most striking example is of the hundreds of incompetent teachers in New York City, protected by their union contracts, who spend years in dedicated “rubber rooms,” earning a paycheck, tenure, and retirement for *not* being around children. Sowell asks, *cui bono?* When parents and fellow citizens strive to provide a good school for their children and are kept out of the game by a hostile or closed system of credentialing, the answer is not “the children.”

And there is no more serious consequence than the disadvantage at which this system places minorities. Several of the charter school networks that Sowell highlights in chapter 2 are so dominant across every measurable category in state testing, for all demographics, that one should rejoice in having found a promising solution to the doggedly persistent achievement gap. Charter schools may very well be the dagger to thrust in the heart of a discriminatory education system that legally compels minorities (and everyone, really) to attend schools they may prefer to avoid. Charter school enemies are unwilling to wield that dagger, which raises the question again—*cui bono?*

The larger point of Sowell's analysis is already well established: that district boards, unions, many elected officials, and other charter school “enemies” have no business acting as they do. What is crucial is to have someone of Sowell's acknowledged caliber and stringent economic thinking arrange the arguments under a controlled and compelling statistical analysis, place them in the context of a wide-ranging survey

of hostile actions against charters, and then suggest a way forward.

Indeed, if there is anything that the politically disposed reader could take from *Charter Schools and Their Enemies*, it is Sowell's final structural suggestion. While competition among credentialing bodies would be a great improvement, Sowell recommends in addition that the oversight of existing charter schools be removed from the care of school districts and be placed in a separate chain of command. He recommends the judiciary for this role, which is already structured to be impartial—and may be *more* rigorous and demanding than the bureaucracy currently in charge of affairs, which is merely stifling. The result would be oversight that begins where schools ought to begin: with the well-being of children.

This is the crux of the matter, and few things would do as much to liberate our compulsory school system from cartelism than this. If schooling truly ought to be for our children, then there is now a compelling case and the outline of a roadmap to make it so.

Infinitely ordinary

Emma Rothschild

An Infinite History:
The Story of a Family in France over
Three Centuries.
Princeton University Press, 464 pages, \$35

reviewed by James F. Penrose

The century and a half from 1756 to 1906 was an era of profound change in France. It spanned the Seven Years' War, the end of the ancien régime, the Revolutionary and Napoleonic periods, and the nineteenth-century development of France into a dominant industrial power. These periods have been the subject of intense “top-down” histories, almost from their inception. According to some scholars, however, the flaw in the “top-down” approach is that it takes little account of how ordinary people are affected by historical forces. Carlo Ginzburg, for example, in a series of articles in *Quaderni Storici* and *Critical Inquiry*

in the 1970s, argued that accounts based on the experiences of individuals and groups can offer important perspectives in illuminating the past.

The economic historian Emma Rothschild tells us how in her student days in the early 1980s she happened upon one of Ginzburg's articles in a Florence bookstore. Judging from two of her books, she took Ginzburg's approach to heart. Her *Inner Life of Empires* (2011) described the fortunes of a prominent Scottish family during the British Empire's formative years and showed how their ambitions and methods reflected the spirit of the times. In her new book, *An Infinite History*, Rothschild shifts her gaze to France. Based on extensive research in the parish and municipal records of the southwest town of Angoulême, *An Infinite History* tells the stories of Marie Aymard, a seamstress living during the reign of Louis XV, and her descendants down through the midway point of the Third Republic. It is, Rothschild explains, an experiment in “the history of contiguity”—an effort to assemble “the individual and the collective, the economic and the political history from below and a history of the largest events of modern times.” The starting point for the ninety-eight stories comprising the book is a pair of documents, a power of attorney and a marriage contract, that Rothschild discovered in Angoulême's archives.

In a manner illustrative of Rothschild's way of working, these two documents form the backbone of Rothschild's first story, the description of Marie Ferrand (née Aymard). Monsieur Louis Ferrand, to provide for his family, indentured himself to a local property owner with holdings in the Caribbean and set off to work in the French colony of Martinique, leaving Marie to raise their children. After Louis' death a few years later, rumors reached Marie that Louis had deposited “a small fortune” with a Martinique shipowner, and, in October 1764, she granted a power of attorney to a young *angoumois*in naval officer headed for the region to inquire about Louis' possible estate. Two months later, Louis and Marie's daughter, Françoise, entered into a prenuptial agreement witnessed by eighty-three family members, friends, and acquaintances.

The power of attorney and the prenuptial agreement were deposited in Angoulême's records, where Rothschild discovered them two centuries later.

Despite its promising subject matter, *An Infinite History* is not an easy or for that matter enjoyable read. In part, this is because the reader quickly loses touch with individual characters appearing over the book's long time-horizon. They appear curiously bloodless—as ordinary people of the time, they left little in the way of correspondence, diaries, or memoirs, and so Rothschild has only vital statistics and official records with which to reconstruct their lives. She admits that the book has “no sense of destiny or . . . development and character over time” and, seemingly to address this, occasionally goes into distracting detail—her descriptions of a notary as a bad character and a young proselyte wearing a wax taper on his head being two throwaway remarks in the early pages. More importantly, we find that the multiplicity of characters obscures Rothschild's main theme—how they and Angoulême itself were transformed by, and in turn helped transform, those remarkable times. Rothschild likens her story to Sterne's *Sentimental Journey* (1768) and Zola's *Rougon-Macquart* (1871–93), but the comparisons are specious—Rothschild's efforts notwithstanding, Marie and her descendants have little of the panache of those works' personalities.

Of course, there are exceptions. Take Jean-Alexandre Cazaud, the slave-owning planter who hired Marie's husband to work in Martinique. He emerges as a slippery, litigious adventurer. A man of flexible morals, he changed his name and citizenship when the opportunity arose and ended life as a member of the Royal Society. Marie Aymard's great-great-grandson Charles Martial Allemand Lavigner was a priest, historian, Sorbonne lecturer, the Cardinal Archbishop of Carthage, an anti-slavery campaigner, and, due to his fundraising efforts on behalf of the Church, an alleged millionaire. But despite these and a few other characters, *An Infinite History*, a book about ordinary people, leaves us with

little sense of change and never really rises above the ordinariness of their lives.

Unscrupulously epic

Fiona Sampson

Two-Way Mirror: The Life of Elizabeth Barrett Browning.
W. W. Norton, 336 pages, \$27.95

reviewed by Sunil Iyengar

Fiona Sampson's new biography has nine chapters, or “books”—in imitation of her subject Elizabeth Barrett Browning's masterpiece, *Aurora Leigh* (1856). At the top of the ninth, Sampson writes: “Now things begin to speed up.” To which the reader replies, “At last!” After the somnolent pace of the preceding chapters of *Two-Way Mirror*, this one downright hums. It covers the final eight years (1853–1861) of Barrett Browning's eminently Victorian life, a period in which she wrote and published her verse novel to wide acclaim, dallied with séances, watched Robert Browning rise in literary esteem, bore the vicissitudes of Italy's struggle for independence, and mourned the successive losses of her beloved spaniel, her estranged father, and her former mentor Mary Russell Mitford. By the time we get to Barrett Browning's own death in 1861 at fifty-one, in the arms of her husband Robert, even students of her poetry will feel they have only begun to know her—so long has it taken for Sampson's subject to come to life. By combining in a single chapter so many matters of personal, political, and literary import, Sampson at last allows actions and not reflections to prevail. This choice makes for a more arresting narrative than in previous chapters, and it allows her to get away with statements that would be risible had they appeared earlier, strewn among the indulgent asides that characterize the rest of *Two-Way Mirror*:

Sometime after 4 a.m., Robert asks her if she knows him and she reassures him, “My Robert—My heavens, my beloved?” “Our lives are held by God,” she tells him. He lifts her and she kisses

admirer, Romney Leigh, for France, Italy, and the companionship of young Marian Erle—a rape victim who has been wronged by Lady Waldemar, herself in pursuit of Romney. The challenge of reading Sampson’s biography is that while, in her words, “*Aurora Leigh* frames this book,” the comparable virtues or flaws of the rest of Barrett Browning’s oeuvre, or of individual poems therein, are not much discussed. Although *Two-Way Mirror* is replete with welcome facts and anecdotes, ranging from her family’s slaveholding heritage and her precocious classicism to her chronic health problems and her dream of Italian unification, a commensurate attention to Barrett Browning’s poems would help to discover whether and why she is necessary to poets and readers today. For some purchase on these questions, one should consult Angela Leighton’s critical biography of 1986, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, a source missing from Sampson’s list of references.

The demands of literature

Cathy Curtis

*A Splendid Intelligence:
The Life of Elizabeth Hardwick.*
W. W. Norton, 400 pages, \$35

reviewed by Carl Rollyson

Cathy Curtis begins her new biography of Elizabeth Hardwick with an author’s note meant to head off trouble:

This biography of Elizabeth Hardwick includes only as much information about her famous husband, the poet Robert Lowell, as is necessary to tell the story of her life. Anyone looking for additional details can consult the three full-scale Lowell biographies by Ian Hamilton (1982), Paul Mariani (1994), and Kay Redfield Jamison (2017).

In response to my letters, Elizabeth’s daughter, Harriet Lowell, wrote that she is “a very private person” and declined to be interviewed. After Harriet came of age and lived independently, Elizabeth rarely mentioned her in letters to friends. For those reasons, she appears more frequently in this biography during her early years.

In short, dear reader, take *A Splendid Intelligence: The Life of Elizabeth Hardwick* on its own terms. Don’t complain that Lowell, even though his marriage to Hardwick lasted twenty years, is never really the center of attention, except when his intermittent bouts of madness left Hardwick no choice—as far as she could see—but to make the restoration of his health her main job. The old-fashioned term “madness” seems apt for a poet who in his mania expressed admiration for Hitler and was perfectly capable of assaulting anyone who got in his way. Curtis, of course, has to explain why Hardwick put up with a madman, so the biographer quotes Hardwick, who believed that Lowell was not only a great poet but also a lovable man, never boring his delightfully intelligent wife who did not suffer bores. During long peaceful periods, the poet provided Hardwick with an inspiring example of what it meant to be a great writer.

But there is another reason, literary in nature, that accounts for Hardwick’s long-suffering acceptance of spousal betrayal—her husband’s frenzied infatuations and obsessive affairs with women, usually younger than Hardwick, and his cruel renunciations of their profound marital bond. Curtis points to a passage Hardwick wrote about “witty Jane Carlyle, browbeaten by her literary husband”; Jane did not sufficiently appreciate his “raging productivity” and took comfort, instead, in the attentions of her servants. For Hardwick, Curtis observes, “genius is not to be gainsaid by the needs of others.” The Lowell–Hardwick marriage had a grandeur and purpose that had to be honored no matter how many times her husband dishonored it, including his verbatim use of her letters in *The Dolphin* (1973), which he mixed with inventions of things she did not write. In the end, even with the marriage dissolved and Lowell lolling about with other women and then a new wife, Caroline Blackwood, Hardwick overcame her anger at him and resumed contacts that included his visits to her. Curtis comments that Hardwick’s “stance is an attribute of the noble woman whose stoic silence transcends the pull of ordinary passions. It is a romantic ethical standard,

in thrall to the power of literature and the unassailable stature of a character who embodies a self-sufficient valor.” What a beautiful and harrowing conception of the demands of literature as well as a demonstration of the biographer’s devotion to her subject!

Here is where Harriet Lowell’s witness might have added to the biographer’s perceptions. It is a loss to this biography that the daughter is not present to comment on her parents—as was Jill Faulkner, for example, whose testimony provided, when I was researching for my biography of William Faulkner, a clarifying perspective on his marriage to Estelle that neither husband nor wife could have offered. But the biographer has to press on, working with the available and discoverable evidence. Curtis does this with vigor and aplomb, including snapshots of Lowell during various later stages of Hardwick’s career, since most of her earlier friends and lovers are deceased. Note to critics who disparage biographies of living figures: getting important witnesses to talk before they die will yield extraordinary benefits for those biographers who come afterwards. Robert Silvers, Mary McCarthy, and Alfred Kazin—to name just three important sources—had gone to their graves before Curtis arrived.

Curtis presents an Elizabeth Hardwick virtually created out of the literature she wrote—short stories and novels—and out of the literary criticism that revealed an acute sensibility which immersed readers in the life of literature, the only life Hardwick ever wanted. The rest of life was the province of the biographers she so scorned. Even when she wrote a “biography” of Herman Melville, it was no such thing, her editor James Atlas noted, but instead a topical book focusing on the work and from time to time serving up sidelights on the man.

Like her friend Susan Sontag, Hardwick left her native grounds—in her case Lexington, Kentucky—for New York and the literary life as soon as possible. Some of Hardwick’s fiction deals with her Southern upbringing, but most of it occurs in New York City, the place where the new, as she said in an essay, is repeatedly

replaced by the newer. She was bound by no tradition except that of the literature she taught at Barnard College, which remained the locus of her identity, the center of her creation. What bothered other Southerners in New York, like Willie Morris, was exactly what Hardwick embraced: the “harsh, cliquish, nervous” literary world of “extravagant claims and exaggerated dismissals.” Hardwick, one of the founders of *The New York Review of Books*, specialized in the hatchet job, and relished, for example, taking down Lillian Hellman and the revival of her signature play, *The Little Foxes* (1939). Hardwick’s theater criticism had special targets, such as the popular Edward Albee. She preferred the somewhat neglected experimental work of playwrights like Edward Bond.

Hardwick published several collections of literary criticism, which had much more impact than any of her fiction, notwithstanding the high praise for her last, semi-autobiographical novel, *Sleepless Nights* (1979). Like many female writers of her generation, she did not fit easily into the second wave of feminism, even though she attended to it in *Seduction and Betrayal* (1974). Curtis pinpoints a passage that explains a good deal about a literary woman’s literary marriage, and why what counts in the end is the work, the masterpieces, the authority of the singular artist:

Elizabeth—who had yet to experience the appropriation of her own letters in *The Dolphin*—wrote, “It does not seem of such importance that [Zelda Fitzgerald’s] diaries and letters were appropriated [by F. Scott], the stories wrongly attributed for an extra \$500.” She failed to credit the pain this caused, and the brutality of the deed for someone with such a fragile sense of self. She insisted that only one member of the couple was “real as an artist, as a person with a special claim upon the world.” That person was not Zelda.

So it was for Hardwick: the poet she had married had the paramount position, no matter the suffering he had caused her. Lowell respected his wife’s work and often complimented her on her prose, but both knew it was his poetry that counted most and gave him pride of place in the pantheon.