The New Criterion

March 2021

A monthly review *edited by Roger Kimball*

Volume 39, Number 7, $7.75 / £7.50 / C$9.75

The New Criterion *March 2021*

Contributors to this issue

Brooke Allen writes frequently for *The New Criterion* and other publications. A former Professor of Literature at Bennington College, she now teaches in its Prison Education Initiative.

Jeremy Black's map books include *Maps and History* (Yale), *Metropolis* (Conway), and the forthcoming *Maps of War* (Osprey).

James Bowman is a Resident Scholar at the Ethics and Public Policy Center and the author of *Honor: A History* (Encounter).

Anthony Daniels is a contributing editor of *City Journal*.

Paul Dean is a freelance critic living in Oxford, U.K.

John Steele Gordon is the author of *An Empire of Wealth: The Epic History of American Economic Power* (Harper Perennial).

Marco Grassi is a private paintings conservator and dealer in New York and the author of *In the Kitchen of Art*, forthcoming in April from Criterion Books.

Jacob Howland is a Senior Fellow at the Tikvah Fund.

John Kekes's most recent books are *Wisdom: A Humanistic Conception* and *Hard Questions*, both published by Oxford University Press.

Karl Kirchwey is the author of seven books of poems. He teaches in the MFA program at Boston University.

Steve Morris is a parish priest and the author of *Our Precious Lives* (Authentic Media).

Mario Naves teaches at the Pratt Institute.

Jay Nordlinger is a senior editor at *National Review*.

James F. Penrose lives in Paris.

Frederic Raphael is the author of more than fifty books and seven volumes of journals.

Kyle Smith is the critic-at-large for *National Review*.

Amy L. Wax is the Robert Mundheim Professor of Law at the University of Pennsylvania.

Karen Wilkin is an independent curator and critic.

The New Criterion. ISSN 0734-0222. March 2021, Volume 39, Number 7. Published monthly except July and August by The Foundation for Cultural Review, Inc., 900 Broadway, New York, NY 10003, a nonprofit public charity as described in Section 501 (c) (3) of the Internal Revenue code, which solicits and accepts contributions from a wide range of sources, including public and private foundations, corporations, and the general public. Subscriptions: $48 for one year, $88 for two. For Canada, add $14 per year. For all other foreign subscriptions, add $22 per year. Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY, and at additional mailing offices. Postmaster and subscribers: send change of address, all remittances, and subscription inquiries to The New Criterion, P.O. Box 3000, Denville, NJ 07834. Notice of nonreceipt must be sent to this address within three months of the issue date. All other correspondence should be addressed to The New Criterion, 900 Broadway, Suite 602, New York, NY 10003. (212) 247-6980. Newsstand distribution by CMG, 155 Village Blvd., Princeton, NJ 08540. Available in microfilm from University Microfilms, 300 N. Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106.
Internet: www.newcriterion.com Email: letters@newcriterion.com

Newsstand & bookstore sales: JM Cappello Associates. Telephone: (610) 525-6236; Email: john@jmcappello.com.
Advertising: Telephone: (212) 247-6980; Email: advertising@newcriterion.com.
Subscriptions: To subscribe, renew, or report a problem please call (800) 783-4903.

Notes & Comments: March 2021

Canceling classics

So *The New York Times* has finally caught up with Dan-el Padilla Peralta. Last month, the paper's Sunday magazine ran a long, fawning story by Rachel Poser called "He Wants to Save Classics From Whiteness. Can the Field Survive?" The "he" in question is Padilla, this week's poster child for petulant academic fatuousness, department of minatory wokeness. According to Poser, Padilla, who teaches classics at Princeton University, is "a leading historian of Rome." This is not true. He has published only one academic book, a version of his dissertation, which is about Roman religion in the middle years of the republic. His only other book is a whiny, self-indulgent memoir called *Undocumented: A Dominican Boy's Odyssey from a Homeless Shelter to the Ivy League*. Nevertheless, the thirty-something academic already has tenure at Princeton. Do you wonder why?

Attentive readers of *The New Criterion* are acquainted with Dan-el Padilla Peralta. He has cropped up in our pages a few times, most recently in "Decline & fall: classics edition" (March 2019), a column about how the academic study of classics has increasingly succumbed to the imperatives of identity politics. Padilla is at the forefront of the racial side of this enterprise. Traditionally, one abiding attraction of the classics was the universal appeal it exerted. It didn't matter if you were male or female, Spanish or Somali, rich or poor, black or white: the hexameters of Homer, the arguments of Aristotle, the cadences of Catullus had a timeless and cross-cultural appeal that spoke to our humanity, not our tribal affiliation.

Woke academics like Padilla want to cancel all that. All classics scholars, he has insisted, have a "responsibility . . . to *race* the discipline." Martin Luther King, Jr., taught that what matters is not the color of your skin but the content of your character. Padilla joins with the Black Lives Matter crowd in reversing that dictum. He is, as we put it in 2019, an "apostle of all race all the time."

Among other things, this means that he is for racial preferences, just so long as blacks are the beneficiaries. It's a delicate matter, however. He claims to have been outraged when, during a question period after his presentation at a conference sponsored by the Society for Classical Studies, an independent scholar named Mary Frances Williams suggested it was possible he got his job because of his race. Williams was ritually shamed and ejected from the conference for that impolitic observation. But the irony is that Padilla not only agreed with the substance of Williams's comment, he also thinks it is a good thing that he was hired because of his race. Here is how he put it:

> Seeing as no one in that room or in the conference corridors afterwards rallied to the defense of blackness as a cornerstone of my merit, I

> will now have to repeat an argument that will be familiar to critical race scholars of higher education but that is barely legible to the denizens of #classicssowhite. *I should have been hired because I was black* [emphasis his]: because my Afro-Latinity is the rock-solid foundation upon which the edifice of what I have accomplished and everything I hope to accomplish rests.

That's not all. Padilla also believes that "white men will have to surrender the privilege they have of seeing their words printed and disseminated; they will have to take a backseat so that people of color—and women and gender-nonconforming scholars of color—benefit from the privilege of seeing their words on the page."

And if that doesn't happen? Then the discipline of classics might have to be destroyed: "the demolition of the discipline itself," he wrote, might have to be part of a new program for "reparative intellectual justice."

The idea that various traditional disciplines, including classics, should be destroyed in order to purge them of the sin of "whiteness" is all the vogue. Sarah Bond, a history professor and director of undergraduate studies at the University of Iowa, suggested in a tweet that such disciplines be "dismantled and burned so that . . . white supremacy can be smothered." Nor is the fad confined to colleges. Heather Levine, a teacher at Lawrence High School in Massachusetts, recently bragged about how proud she was that "we got *The Odyssey* removed from the curriculum this year!" Levine is part of a movement, epitomized by the hashtag #DisruptTexts, whose goal is to cancel classic texts from Homer and Shakespeare down to the present day and replace them with "young adult" books that mirror the pieties and attitudes of woke commissars of correctitude.

Naturally, *The New York Times* is a champion of all such initiatives. The 1619 Project, its infamous exercise in racially aggravated historical mendacity, is part of this effort, as is this eight-thousand-word encomium to Dan-el Padilla Peralta. As a piece of intellectual history, Poser's essay is embarrassingly inept. In her eagerness to puff Padilla and exhibit her own credentials as a warden of wokeness, she has produced an incoherent goulash in which big names jostle with empty abstractions to produce a foul aroma of bloviating intellectual wind. "Figures like Diderot and Hume," she writes, "derived some of their ideas on liberty from classical texts, where they found declarations of political and personal freedoms." You don't say; or, rather, so what? She follows this with a pointless snippet from Pericles' Funeral Oration, and then says that in the Enlightenment "admiration for the ancients took on a fantastical, unhinged quality, like a strange sort of mania." Then comes a little gibberish about the art historian Winckelmann, Hegel's *Aesthetics*, and Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn," dragged in, we feel certain, because of the word "Grecian" in its title. "Historians," Poser writes, "stress that such ideas [which ideas?] cannot be separated from the discourses of nationalism, colorism and progress that were taking shape during the modern colonial period. . . . Enlightenment thinkers created a hierarchy with Greece and Rome, coded as white, on top, and everything else below." To which we can only say, no they didn't.

Poser, like Padilla, Sarah Bond, and many of the academics she quotes in this flaccid piece of thru-text, seems titillated by the prospect of destroying the discipline of classics. To some extent, of course, it is just playacting. Most of these would-be revolutionaries have tenure, and there is zero chance that they won't be cashing their checks. But there are some dark sides to this drama. One has to do with character. It is clear that Padilla, clever as he is, has throughout his life been immensely lucky in finding teachers who have taken an interest in helping him. His is a poignant story. But as he became increasingly radicalized, he also became increasingly ungrateful. We suspect that is true of many other tenured radicals who want to destroy the thing that nurtured them and now supplies their livelihood.

Which brings us to another dark side of this story: the faltering confidence in the larger

project of Western civilization. That phrase—"Western civilization"—is routinely held up for ridicule by academics whose education and leisure have depended upon its achievements and largesse. It is, let us remember, the civilization that bequeathed us such ideals as individual liberty, free speech, equality before the law, and limited government, not to mention the engines of technological progress and free-market prosperity. The irony is that such rancid philistinism should have been launched from within institutions entrusted with preserving the riches of the traditions that these new barbarians seek to destroy.

George Orwell once observed that some ideas are so asinine that only a member of the intelligentsia could believe them. The idea that the classical legacy, being instinct with racism, is "one of the most harmful stories we've told ourselves" eminently qualifies as an asinine idea in Orwell's sense. It is sad that these self-infatuated poseurs (and Posers!) have deprived themselves of this fertile source of wisdom and aesthetic delectation, sadder still that they have deprived their students of it.

French rejection

The truth about wokeism seems to be invisible to the denizens of that madhouse. Take a step outside, though, and its preposterousness, as well as its malevolence, is shatteringly obvious. This is something we were reminded of recently when the French President, Emmanuel Macron, took a forthright stand against that toxic American import. There is some irony in this, since the flow of that ideological *cloaca maxima* had for decades moved in the opposite direction, from France to the United States. Sartre, Derrida, Foucault: the very names of those forerunners of wokeism should send a shudder down the spine of any sensible person. Who knows how many American minds they corrupted? But now the garbage scows steam mostly from West to East, hauling a smelly cargo of poisonous race- and gender-obsessed clichés. As a story in *The New York Times* put it, the French regard wokeism as an "existential" threat: "It fuels secessionism. Gnaws at national unity. Abets Islamism. Attacks France's intellectual and cultural heritage." Indeed. Macron's education minister zeroed in on the source of the problem. "There's a battle to wage against an intellectual matrix from American universities."

Wokeism reduces every subject, no matter how complex, to a few ideological formulae about race or gender. "For academics playing word games," as the commentator Glenn Harlan Reynolds says, deploying wokeism can be "fun." Among other things, it imbues one's activities with a seductive draught of self-importance and power. After all, the business side of being woke is canceling all that is unwoke. It's snotty students screaming at their housemasters (oops, can't say that) about Halloween costumes, *New York Times* editors firing columnists for uttering a *verboten* word, department chairs or college presidents dismissing professors for trespassing against some article of an always shifting orthodoxy. Reynolds is right:

> But if you're Macron or any sensible European observer, seeing a United States in which playing the national anthem or displaying the flag is deemed "offensive" and "problematic," in which professors are suspended or threatened for quoting Supreme Court opinions verbatim when they contain unapproved language and which has seen months of urban riots tearing apart some of America's biggest cities, how could you *not* say "no thanks"?

This may actually be good news, since American academics, and the people they train, still have a residual inferiority complex regarding cultural and intellectual matters vis-à-vis France and the United Kingdom. Whether that is justified is a question we are not prepared to answer. But Emmanuel Macron's sudden bout of patriotic common sense is a reassuring reminder that the instinct for self-preservation has not been entirely bred out of the French. And if that is so, there is hope for the rest of us, despite the preening tergiversations of protected-class academics like Dan-el Padilla Peralta.

"Demons" at 150
by Jacob Howland

A disillusioned romantic in Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* offers this parable:

> In a theater, it happened that a fire started offstage. The clown came out to tell the audience. They thought it was a joke and applauded. He told them again, and they became still more hilarious. This is the way, I suppose, that the world will be destroyed—amid the universal hilarity of wits and wags who think it is all a joke.

That's just how it is in Dostoevsky's *Demons*, in which a band of young nihilists and socialists unleashes murder, riot, and arson in a provincial Russian town. Despite their ugly pranks, scandalous libertinism, and incendiary radicalism, they are until the apocalyptic denouement indulged and flattered by their elders: liberal elites who suppose that proximity to the "new ideas" will get them noticed in the highest social circles of progressivist Petersburg. This suicidal clownishness is characteristic of late modernity since the French Revolution, an epoch in which convulsions of ideological insanity have periodically torn apart physical and political bodies across the globe. The United States has long avoided such fits, but it seems our hour has come round at last. At its sesquicentennial, Dostoevsky's novel is as fresh and urgent as it was in 1871.

Demons is a theater of societal decay. On the way to visit a notorious "holy fool," some bored young ladies and gentlemen and their entourage of buffoonish low officials and petty clerks stop their horses at a hotel to gape at the corpse of a nineteen-year-old village boy who has shot himself. A jokester filches grapes from the dead boy's plate; a lady insists that "there's no need to be punctilious about entertainment, as long as it's diverting." (I quote from the 1994 Knopf translation by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky.) Sent to town to buy items for his sister's trousseau with money saved up for decades and entrusted to him with "exhortations, prayers, and crosses," the boy had blown it all on gambling, Gypsies, cigars, and Château d'Yquem. In this he imitates the immediately preceding generations of educated and influential Russians, who have self-indulgently squandered the moral and spiritual inheritance of more than two millennia. As one reveler unpopularly observes, it's "as if we'd jumped off our roots."

At the merchant's home where the holy fool resides, the group sits with a crowd of kneeling petitioners behind a railing, watching the great man with "lorgnettes, pince-nez, and even opera glasses" as he dines. Puffy and sallow, with narrow little eyes and a twisted mouth, the man is attended by scurrying servants and a monk who exists solely to collect donations in a tin cup. The "blessed man and prophet" eats potatoes and ignores his guests, except to issue arbitrary and humiliating orders. An exceedingly wealthy merchant is forced to drink a thick syrup of sugar and tea and is later awarded a gold florin. A widow who seeks advice about how to deal with "cannibals"—her children sue her, drag her into a fire with a rope, and place a dead cat in her trunk—is sent "Out,

out!" with four loaves of sugar, one of which is snatched back at the last second. When the great man shrieks "F— you, f— you!" at one provocateuse who importunes him to "'utter' something for me," her companions shriek with glee.

This grotesque little dictator is not the only contemptible person to whom fools bow down in *Demons*. The horseback ironists love the inside joke and delight in the pornography of spiritual decadence; one of their more pedestrian followers disgraces a Christian woman by slipping dirty photographs into the Gospels she is selling. But the joke is on them, and ultimately on us. The holy fool is a not-so-funny anticipation of monstrous tyrants raised up in years to come by the very elites that despise him and his deluded followers. The "Homeric laughter" with which the revelers depart is not that of the merry Olympians, but the ghoulish and hysterical mirth of the doomed suitors of Penelope: would-be kings maddened to tears by some avenging god.

Demons is a deeply, mordantly funny book. In *Merci*, a public farewell to literature by the famous writer Karmazinov, a pea of ice reminds the author of a tear "that rolled from your eye as we sat beneath the emerald tree and you exclaimed joyfully 'There is no crime!' 'Yes,' I said through my tears, 'but, if so, there are also no righteous men.' We wept and parted forever." When a socialist has an extramarital affair "on principle," her cuckolded husband tells her, "My friend, up to now I have only loved you, but now I respect you." Respect is otherwise scarce in their circle. In Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons*, the character of Bazarov explains that nihilists "confine ourselves to abuse" and otherwise undertake nothing; Karmazinov—Dostoevsky's wicked caricature of Turgenev—observes that the revolutionary idea consists fundamentally in "an open right to dishonor." *Demons*' famous central chapter, "With Our People," describes a meeting of furious socialists and confused sympathizers, like the innocent, avuncular army officer who would definitely inform on men who rob and murder, unless they did so for political purposes. The intense rivalry between a glum schoolboy ("There's no such thing as moral or immoral!") and the major's bullying niece, a university student ("I knew that, mister high-school student, way before you were taught such things"), captures the peculiar attraction of radical intellectual reductivism to "the type of noble amour-propre crushed to the point of bile."

Dostoevsky announces his satirical intentions on the first page of *Demons*, where he compares the self-perception of the fifty-something liberal idealist Stepan Verkhovensky—a romantic dreamer, failed professor, and sincere poseur who passionately inhabits the "civic role" of a persecuted intellectual giant racked with grief over social ills—to that of Gulliver on his return to London from the land of the Lilliputians. Thinking he is still surrounded by homunculi, Swift's hero warns people to get out of his way lest he crush them, earning him laughter, abuse, and whips from passing coachmen. Lapsing constantly into French and given to parroting German philosophy ("I believe in God, *mais distinguons*, I believe as in a being who is conscious of himself in me"), Stepan regards himself as a "standing reproach" to his backwards fatherland—although, as the narrator wryly observes, he "would often recline."

But Stepan is not wholly to blame for his shortcomings. His wounded pride, not to mention his gambling and drinking, are nourished by his longtime patron, Varvara Stavrogin. A wealthy landowner whose progressive ideas include living with her young ward and former serf Darya "on the most noble footing," Varvara treats Stepan as her creation, and even devises a "costume" for him that suits her fantasy of being attended by an esteemed scholar and poet of the most liberal and open mind. But their relationship is fraught; he bridles at his servitude, while she cannot forgive his studied poses and mocking arrogance.

Matters come to a head after Varvara separately informs Stepan and Darya that they must marry, a deal worked out to cover her son's sins (a rumored relationship with Darya) and Stepan's (he's sold off assets held in trust for *his* son in order to pay off gambling losses). This unstable mixture of pride and humiliation, love and hatred, is fertile soil for noxious growths. Small wonder that the most vicious

and destructive characters in the novel are Stepan's son Pyotr (hereafter "Verkhovensky"), abandoned by his father as a little child and raised by distant aunts, and Varvara's son Nikolai (hereafter "Stavrogin"), tutored for years by Stepan. (The boy's twisted sentimental education included being regularly awakened at night so that his teacher might "pour out his injured feeling in tears" before him.)

An early episode in *Demons* warns of trouble in a way that cuts close to the bone today. Vaguely remembered as an "exiled martyr" when radical ideas flood Petersburg shortly before the emancipation of the serfs in 1861, a "resurrected" Stepan sets out for the capital to "join the movement and show his powers," and Varvara to "remind the world of herself." Varvara holds evenings and is astonished to see literary celebrities shamefully flattering the "new rabble," who wish to abolish inheritance, the family, children, and priests. People flock to her when she announces her intention of publishing a magazine, yet they also denounce her as a capitalist and exploiter of labor. Stepan concedes in a public speech that "fatherland" is a useless and comical word and that religion is harmful, but his heartfelt assertion that boots are nevertheless "lower than Pushkin" is hissed so mercilessly that he bursts into tears. A newspaper finally exposes Varvara for not throwing out an old general who tells an insulting but famous young man that he is "a brat and an atheist"; an illustrated magazine subsequently caricatures her, Stepan, and the general as retrograde cronies. Having been canceled for failing to stand against reactionary oppression, Varvara is informed of a decision made by some complete strangers: after founding her magazine, she is to turn it and the capital over to them in exchange for a sixth of the yearly profits. "Everything," the narrator observes, "burst like an iridescent soap bubble."

No one understands late-modern liberal oligarchs and their nihilistic children better than Dostoevsky. Turgenev attempted to do so in *Fathers and Sons*, a fine little European novel that portrays the old liberals and young radicals of the early 1860s as exhausted, ineffective opponents. In that book, Pavel Petrovich defends personal dignity, individual rights, duties, faith, and the painter Raphael. He challenges his nephew's friend Bazarov to a duel, but his shot goes wide. For his part, the young nihilist only wounds Pavel and dies of an infection from dissecting a corpse not forty pages later. Although Stepan justly complains that "Bazarov is some sort of false character, who doesn't exist at all," Dostoevsky metafictionally acknowledges his debt to Turgenev in amusing ways. Told that the radicals are "a force," Pavel dismisses them as a mere "four men and a half"; Dostoevsky's Verkhovensky makes a revolutionary cell of "just three men and a half." But in depth of understanding and literary power, *Demons* devours *Fathers and Sons*.

Dostoevsky grasped what is painfully obvious today: as authority collapses, institutions implode, and intellectual and moral anarchy predominates, the liberal elite is apt to combine with revolutionary ideologues to unleash destructive forces that neither group can control. The public lives of Varvara, her rival Yulia von Lembke (the unfortunate governor's fatuous wife), and Karmazinov are indeed bubbles: shimmering films inflated by ambition and sustained by the tension of enclosing volumes of nothingness. These climbers and strivers fawn over "progressive young men" because they fear intellectual exile and crave advancement: knowledge of the new ideas, Varvara complains, puts Yulia "a hundred miles ahead of me"—in the direction of Petersburg.

And what men they fawn over! Verkhovensky, who secretly admits to being "a crook, not a socialist," nevertheless endorses lopping off "a hundred million heads," an eerily accurate prophecy of the total number done in by political repression in the Communist regimes of the twentieth century. Verkhovensky regards mass murder as a necessary prelude to the "final solution" of the social formula advanced by the gloomy theoretician Shigalyov—admittedly "somewhat fanatic in his love of mankind"—in which one-tenth of mankind enjoys personal freedom and unlimited rights over the remaining nine-tenths. Shigalyov's arresting articulation of the practical consequences of revolutionary theory is unsurpassed in concision and accuracy: "Starting from unlimited free-

dom, I conclude with unlimited despotism." As Solzhenitsyn observed, many greeted the twentieth century as one "of elevated reason, in no way imagining the cannibalistic horrors that it would bring. Only Dostoevsky, it seems, foresaw the coming of totalitarianism."

Verkhovensky's fantastic dream of tyranny is the apotheosis of the social game, which he plays more coldly and cleverly than the oligarchs, and for bigger stakes. Allowing everyone wrongly to infer that he is intimately connected with some mysterious center of worldwide revolution, he bullies his "foursome" of reluctant conspirators into committing murder while he adopts in drawing rooms and clubs the persona of a giftless muddlehead too stupid to pose a serious threat to the established order. Masterfully using vanity, shame, and fear to advance his objectives, he punches down at his foot-soldiers while puffing up Yulia and Varvara, all the while intending to demonstrate his power by betraying and destroying everyone.

All bubbles burst spectacularly at a charitable literary matinee and evening ball hosted by Yulia to advance "universal human goals" (the education of governesses) but engineered by Verkhovensky for maximum embarrassment and chaos. The "goal and crown of her politics," Yulia's fête is open to all comers. Even the town's poorest officials pawn their possessions to purchase tickets and dress their daughters "like real marquises." But agitators and drunken rabble are smuggled in to abuse the speakers and to whip up indignation at the absence of the expected buffet and champagne. Preceded by a surprise reading of some nasty doggerel about the governesses ("You teach our snot-nosed children French," etc.), Karmazinov, the jewel in Yulia's crown, is jeered as he recites *Merci*. He's followed by Stepan, who bursts into tears after feverishly proclaiming to "you short ones"—the Lilliputians of progressivism—that Shakespeare and Raphael are "higher than the emancipation of the serfs." A maniacal fist-pounding little Lenin type finally unleashes pandemonium when he runs out to the platform to denounce the incomparable corruption and despotism of Russia. Yulia is abused and insulted at that evening's crude "quadrille of literature," a drunken and disorderly affair; some of Verkhovensky's men simultaneously incite factory workers to burn down the modest wooden houses of Zarechye, home to more than half of those at the ball, so that they might cover up a triple murder. Here comedy and pathos reach a pitch unsurpassed in any other modern novel.

Like characters in a Kafka story, the oligarchs and conspirators of *Demons* tremble before distant centers of authority and power from which they expect to receive some final judgment. The filaments of imagination that bind them to these mysterious centers are vanishingly thin, spun from their own slavish instincts and fantastic desires—that is, from nothing—but strong enough to make them feel "caught like flies in the web of a huge spider." That spider is Verkhovensky, who is everywhere and nowhere in *Demons* (Joyce Carol Oates aptly compares him to the chaos-dealing Dionysus of Euripides' *Bacchae*), and who vanishes into thin air on the Petersburg train once his bloody work is done. A "wise serpent" whose tongue the narrator imagines to be "unusually long and thin, terribly red, and with an extremely sharp, constantly and involuntarily wriggling tip," Verkhovensky has "dropped from the moon." Dostoevsky makes him both a fully realized human character and the embodiment of a mythical specter—one that haunts us to this day and that cannot be exorcised, as Marx observed in the *Communist Manifesto*, by any holy alliance of earthly powers.

But the "worm" Verkhovensky is merely the imitator of another wise serpent, his "main half": the Siegfried of his Russian *Götterdämmerung* fantasy, the "sun" he needs and envies and plans to eclipse. Dostoevsky wrote in a note to himself that "*Stavrogin is everything*." As Vyacheslav Ivanov makes clear in his brilliant book *Freedom and the Tragic Life: A Study in Dostoevsky* (Noonday Press, 1959), this must be understood not just socially and psychologically, but religiously and metaphysically. Stavrogin is the most charismatic and complete of Dostoevsky's Antichrists. His name comes from *stauros*, the Ancient Greek word for "cross." But the image of the cross is inverted in him,

as when his follower Shatov rebukes him for "boldly fly[ing] down headfirst" into the abyss of sensuality. He appears to his followers in the guise of a savior, a man-god who could achieve by towering will what the Christian God-man could not by incarnational love. "Only love can say 'Thou art,'" Ivanov writes; in *Demons*, Dostoevsky explores the general insanity and destruction that ensues when a gifted and captivating personality says to God "Thou art not."

Stavrogin has charisma. People are drawn into his orbit like planets forming around a star. This is partly due to behavior that embodies the nihilistic ideal of sheer antinomian willfulness. Rumors of his scandalous love affairs (he is very handsome), and of duels in which he has killed and crippled his opponents, cause the ladies to lose their minds in adoration or hatred. Stepan compares such behavior to the youthful indiscretions of Shakespeare's Prince Hal. But the circle that forms around Stavrogin in Petersburg five years before the main events of the novel knows of more serious expressions of the "right to dishonor." There he seems to live by the words of Philip Roth in *Sabbath's Theater*: "For a pure sense of being tumultuously alive, you can't beat the nasty side of existence." He slums in "a most terrible Sodom," stealing, brawling, and carousing with his Falstaff, Lebyadkin—a transient and a drunk whose lame and half-mad sister Marya he secretly marries on a bet for wine. He also rapes a young girl, driving her to suicide. Such deeds arouse in him both "boundless wrath" and "unbelievable pleasure."

Yet Stavrogin's original gravitational attraction sprang as much from noble passion as outrageous license, as when he accidentally shook Marya's innocent heart by throwing a clerk who was mistreating her out a second-story window. His earliest and most dedicated followers were Darya's brother Shatov (also Varvara's former serf) and the engineer Kirillov. Both traveled to America to work as laborers, and so experience "the condition of man in his hardest social position." To these ardent and big-hearted men, Stavrogin seemed to promise new births of goodness and happiness: for Shatov, the moral and spiritual regeneration of the Russian nation; for Kirillov, the disappearance of time in human experience through its willful, proto-Nietzschean transformation into eternity.

But it is an astronomical fact that the biggest and brightest stars burn out most quickly. Upon returning from Petersburg, Stavrogin drags one old gentleman by the nose and bites the ear of another, the provincial governor. He then falls into "brain fever" and spends two months in bed. Just before his breakdown, his face looks like "a mask"; home from abroad four years later, he resembles "an inanimate wax figure," like some pagan totem. By the time the narrator's chronicle begins in earnest, evil—or rather, an abysmal indifference to both evil and good—has consumed his living core.

Dostoevsky lets us see Stavrogin's collapse through the eyes of love and faith. Shatov, who publicly slaps Stavrogin "for your fall . . . for the lie," tells him that "there was a teacher uttering immense words, and there was a disciple who rose from the dead. I am that disciple and you are the teacher." Marya (Mary), a virgin who "lived like the birds of the air" in Petersburg (cf. Matthew 6:26) and who kisses and waters the earth with her tears when she prays, is similarly aroused. An embodiment of mythical mother Russia, she awaits Stavrogin, Ivanov writes, as "the God-bearing hero in whose person . . . [she] expects to behold the Prince of Glory." Appalled by the contrast between her former "bright falcon" and the "barn owl" who turns up after five years, Marya dismisses him with a curse, "Griska Otropev, anathema!"—referring to a defrocked monk who pretended to be the lawful heir to the Russian throne. All that remains of Stavrogin's unfulfilled promise are mocking echoes in the mouths of base men. The murderous criminal Fedka, a Christian, compares him to the "True One"; Lebyadkin waits for his "Benefactor" as for "the sun"; Verkhovensky calls him an "idol" and proposes to use him precisely as an impostor, bringing him forth after widespread revolutionary conflagration as the legendary Russian hero Ivan the Tsarevich.

The first epigraph of *Demons* is Pushkin's poem "Demons," in which a sleigh-driver, his master, and their frenzied horses lose

their way in a nighttime blizzard that rages and shrieks around them like a horde of malevolent spirits. The second is Luke 8:32–36, where Jesus encounters a wild, naked man of the Gadarenes and commands the demons that possess him—their name "is Legion, for they are many"—to leave. They enter a herd of swine, which then rush into the Sea of Galilee and drown. The people find the man sitting at Jesus's feet "clothed and in his right mind"; in fear and awe, they tell how he has been healed.

Dostoevsky's characters, too, squirm with wild thoughts and uncontrollable passions. But what *are* the novel's demons—the ones that drive an entire town to madness and finally lure the troika of Russia itself onto the frozen wastelands of communism? Pevear helpfully suggests that they "are ideas, that legion of isms that came to Russia from the West: idealism, rationalism, empiricism, materialism, utilitarianism, positivism, socialism, anarchism, nihilism, and, underlying them all, atheism." Fervently embraced as creeds and dogmas of a secular religion—"half-science," as Shatov remarks, "a despot with its own priests and slaves"— such ideas promote violent lunacy, like that of the soldier who chops up icons, keeps wax church candles burning before some bibles of materialism, and savagely bites his commanding officer. The language of ideological despotism spreads like a mimetic contagion through Verkhovensky to Yulia, Varvara, and even the narrator, a decent young gentleman of "classical upbringing."

But Dostoevsky's novel is haunted by other demons besides prefabricated isms. Here, too, Stavrogin is everything. The only demons identified by name in the book are pride and irony. Both are said to afflict Stavrogin, and both are reflected in his detachment from his own deeds and thoughts.

When Shatov—"a magnanimous, all-forgiving champion of the feminine soul in its sin and humiliation," as Ivanov writes—asks "Is it true that the Marquis de Sade could take lessons from you? Is it true that you lured and corrupted children?" Stavrogin replies "I did speak those words, but it was not I who offended children." In four years at a German university, Stavrogin absorbed more than just the teachings of Karl Marx; his bad faith is nourished by the proud philosophies from which those teachings sprang. He effectively identifies himself with the pure *I* of the absolute idealism of Johann Gottlieb Fichte (a German Jacobin)—with the sheer potentiality of freedom, rather than any actual free choices and deeds. Transcending all concrete reality, his metaphysical self observes his empirical self from a great distance, like a man looking at the moon through a telescope. The being of this abstract self can be expressed only hypothetically, in the subjunctive and optative moods; on the verge of committing a "boundless outrage," Stavrogin affirms that he *could* stop at any point—but *in fact* he does not. His schizophrenia exemplifies the poisonous phenomenon of late-modern irony.

Stavrogin does not live and die by ideas; rather, he entertains them, and they him. The ideas that "crushed" Shatov and "ate" Kirillov are mostly those of Hegel, somehow mingled in their minds with the Apocalypse of John—a text whose importance Stavrogin seems to have impressed on both men. Hegel claimed that history is a rational and providential process, driven by *Geist* or Spirit, that moves ineluctably toward the goal of human freedom. This myth, a philosophical version of divine history and Christian apocalypticism, paved the way for Marx's materialistic recapitulation and revolutionary intensification of the same. It also absolved from moral condemnation "world-historical" individuals, agents of history who bring into being new modes and orders of human existence. Shatov's reservations about Stavrogin's low character were doubtless mitigated by the consideration that a national savior cannot be fairly judged by the standards of his day.

Crushed by Stavrogin "but not crushed to death," Shatov is left writing in spiritual agony. Yet in the end he breaks free of his former master. While spilling his heart and "dancing naked" before Stavrogin, Shatov remarks that he could not tear himself away "from what I had grown fast to since childhood, to which I had given all the raptures of my hopes and the tears of my hatred . . . . It is hard to change gods." But the point is that he *does* dance, like the mad Gadarene who danced in his chains

before Jesus. He spews his demons from his mouth in a last outpouring of love and hatred. Little wonder that he tells Stavrogin to visit the retired bishop Tikhon. He has changed gods.

While Shatov placed his faith in Stavrogin, Kirillov—whose name derives from the Ancient Greek *kurios*, "lord" or "master"—places it in the courage of his own convictions. He believes that "there will be entire freedom when it makes no difference whether one lives or does not live." He who overcomes his fear of the "other world" and of the pain of death "will himself be God." Then all will be new: "Man will be God and will change physically. And the world will change, and deeds will change, and thoughts, and all feelings." Even time will cease; "it will die out in the mind." The "whole salvation for everyone is to prove this thought to them all," which Kirillov intends to achieve by committing suicide.

Kirillov's monomania is Christian eschatology refracted through the prism of German idealism. When individual self-consciousness appears in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, it effectively takes itself to be God. It is certain that it alone is essential and independent, and that all else, including the body to which it is attached, is inessential. It seeks to confirm this certainty by staking its life in mortal combat with another, equally certain self. Kirillov takes this idea to its logical conclusion: only in dying by my own hand can I truly prove my independence of everyone and everything else. Through suicide "without any reason, simply for self-will," the man-god will triumph over the God-man. But Kirillov's suicide is not without reason. Like the proletarian revolution, it is intended to give birth to a "new man" and so bring happiness to all mankind. In fact, his miserable death proves nothing apart from the identity of socialism and nihilism.

Kirillov's tragedy is that he already experiences the unity of eternity and time and the eternal harmony that is the promise of Christianity, and that he hopes to achieve for all human beings through his suicide. He loves children, delights in sticky green leaves, and prays his thanks "to everything," because "everything is good." "Man is unhappy," he tells Stavrogin, "because he doesn't know he's happy, only because of that." Stavrogin jokes that "since you don't know yet that you believe in God, you don't believe," but what he intends as mockery is exactly right. Kirillov does not change gods, although he should have.

Stavrogin finally squirms no less than Shatov. The chapter "At Tikhon's," which was suppressed when *Demons* was first published, describes a failed exorcism. Stavrogin comes to Tikhon "looking as if he had resolved upon something extraordinary and unquestionable but at the same time almost impossible for him." Tikhon's enigmatic gaze almost makes him jump, and, although he is mostly angry and irritable, "wild and incoherent" revelations and astonishing confessions spill from him in spasms of unaccustomed sincerity.

But Stavrogin is too ironic to despair and too prideful to be saved. He ends his life hanging from a rope in an attic, near a note bearing only the proud words "Blame no one; it was I." In this he follows Kirillov, who agrees to take the blame for Shatov's murder because "it makes no difference," and who, as Verkhovensky dictates his suicide note, shakes "as if with a fever," dissolves in laughter, and proposes to draw a face at the top of the note "with its tongue sticking out." As insensate and immovable in his last minutes as "stone or wax," Kirillov savagely bites Verkhovensky's finger just before he shoots himself. His apotheosis as man-god is complete: he has become Stavrogin.

Yet in the epigraph from Luke, the formerly mad Gadarene sits healed at Jesus's feet. To whom do these words of salvation refer?

Two characters in *Demons* are spiritually healed on the threshold of death. One is Shatov, who is filled with tender forgiveness and joy when his wife, an ill-tempered socialist who left him long ago, returns to give birth to Stavrogin's child. He rejoices at "the mystery of the appearance of a new being" and experiences unconditional love as the greatest of all goods. Shatov tells his wife, another Marya who curses Stavrogin, that "I preach God," and he tells himself that "We're all guilty, we're all guilty, and . . . if only we were all convinced of it!"

The other healed one is Stepan. After standing up at Yulia's fête to declare his fealty to beauty, he sets forth over the fields with a suitcase, umbrella, and cane, like some Quixote or comic Lear. His feverish "peregrination" turns into a pilgrimage when he falls in with the Gospel seller whose Bibles were salted with pornography. "*Je prêcherai l'Évangile*," he tells her, "I shall preach the Gospel." She nurses him in his sickness and reads to him the words of the Amen in the Apocalypse and, at his request, the story of the Gadarene swine. It's "exactly like our Russia," he observes, "all the sores, all the miasmas, all the uncleanness, all the big and little demons accumulated in our great and dear sick man, in our Russia, for centuries, for centuries!" Having once said that God "is conscious of himself in me," Stepan finally becomes conscious of himself in God. He receives the Holy Sacrament and dies peacefully after declaring that love "is higher than being, love is the crown of being," and that God is necessary for him "if only because he is the one being who can be loved eternally."

Dostoevsky makes it possible to infer everything he wants to communicate in *Demons*, but it must all be dug out. Those who are patient enough to do so—and the present essay has only turned the surface of this deep and rich book—can expect to be rewarded with despair. For what else can one feel as the old liberal elites hoist the banner of today's young nihilists and socialists—a sordid band of intellectual hacks, political opportunists, virtue signalers, swindlers, sociopaths, and true believers who seem to have stepped directly from the novel's pages? Dostoevsky uniquely deduced the political horrors of the twentieth century from the ideological viruses of the nineteenth. He also has his finger on the pulse of our own epoch, and the prognosis is grim. The demons must run their course: we are headed off a cliff, and there is nothing to be done about it. Yet he leaves us with the consolation that despair is possible only for those who are capable of love, which is all that is left after the bloody, inevitable catharsis—but which is more than enough to begin anew, if only because it must be.

The morality of the fat Owl
by Anthony Daniels

An educative advantage of writing regular columns for publications in distant countries (an educative advantage for me, that is, not necessarily for the distant countries) is that it encourages me to learn at least a little about them, which I might otherwise not do. I try to make some slight or passing local reference in what I write for them, bearing in mind how easy it is in journalism to appear to know much more than one does.

The latest national beneficiary, or victim, of my technique is Brazil. Recently I retrieved from the recycling bin of my memory the fact that, as a child, I read a book titled *Billy Bunter in Brazil*, by Frank Richards. It was published in the year of my birth, 1949, and I read it when I was ten. Until I came across *Exploration Fawcett* a couple of years later, it was my only source of knowledge of Brazil, and between these two books I gained the impression that Brazil was a land teeming with jaguars, bandits, and anacondas, the latter up to eighty feet long and with a poisonous breath that it was death to inhale. My knowledge of Argentina at the time was, by contrast, entirely derived from postage stamps, with the result that I thought Eva Perón was the most beautiful woman who had ever lived.

Billy Bunter was a character in a long-running series of stories (from 1908 to 1961), first in a weekly magazine called *The Magnet* and then in a large number of books about the boys and teachers at a fictional boarding school called Greyfriars. In half a century, the boys never grew up, nor did the teachers change their ways. No new pedagogical theories for them! The blackboard and chalk, rote learning and the cane were all they needed in the thankless task of educating the eternally fourteen- and fifteen-year-old boys of Greyfriars School. My father read these stories as a boy forty years before I did so, and with the same pleasure. I doubt that any boy reads them now.

William George Bunter was by far the most memorable creation of his author, Frank Richards, one of the twenty or more pen names employed by Charles Hamilton (1876–1961). Hamilton is said to have been the most prolific author in human history, with an output estimated at 100,000,000 words—and this before the arrival of that most efficient of drivel-generators, the word processor. In contrast to the computer slaves of today, Hamilton had only his old Remington typewriter to assist him.

Hamilton was an intriguing and enigmatic figure. He wrote almost exclusively for children, except for his autobiography, published in 1952, which was written under the best-known of his pen names, Frank Richards. He wrote it in the third person: he refers to himself as Frank Richards, and so it is an autobiography entirely without an *I*. It contains almost nothing of an emotional nature. There is nothing, for example, about his childhood or his school days; no human attachments are described that are stronger than those of pleasing but not very deep friendships, and this seems to have been an accurate depiction of his affective life.

His father, a journalist, died of the consequences of alcoholism when Hamilton/

Richards was eight. Such was his father's unpredictability in drink that his death apparently came as a relief to the boy, but it is possible to infer from his writings that it was also—understandably—a great and enduring sadness to him. Hamilton started to earn his living by the pen at the age of seventeen and never earned a penny any other way.

His closest relations were with his sister, his niece, his housekeeper, his cats and dogs, and his fictional characters. He said that his stories came to him virtually without conscious effort: it was as if he were writing a report on what was happening before his eyes. He lived several hours a day in his fictional world, which, while he was creating it, was more real to him than the real world. He set a number of stories in the wilds of Canada and the South Seas, of which his descriptions are said to have been notably accurate despite the fact that he had never set foot in either region.

One of his most surprising traits was his addiction to roulette. He might have been a very rich man had he not for years wasted much of his substance at Monte Carlo, which—even more surprisingly—he did not in the least regret having done. He was also careless in the matter of paying income tax, which several times landed him in financial difficulties. He seems to have cared little for material wealth and overall gives the impression of having glided through life in a detached way rather than having fully participated in it, as if nothing good could have come from doing so and avoidance of involvement were the key to a tolerable existence.

Billy Bunter is—one cannot speak of him in the past or the future, for he is eternally fixed in the present—in the school class called the "Remove," that is to say a class for the transition from junior to senior. He is known as the "fat Owl of the Remove," first because he is fat and second because he wears round, thick-framed, thick-lensed, owlish spectacles, through which he peers blindly, seeing very little except when food is about, when he becomes conspicuously more eagle-eyed. The proverbial wisdom of the owl plays no part in his sobriquet.

There is no mystery as to why he is fat, and no exculpatory physiological, psychological, or sociological explanations are offered. The fat Owl is fat because he is gluttonous and eats as much as he can. He will, for example, cut a small slice from a cake and eat the rest, leaving the small slice for everyone else. If possible, he will eat several meals on the trot, even if they belong to other people. Apart from eating, his favorite activity, if such it can be called, is sleeping. Of course, he snores.

Bunter is lazy, mendacious, light-fingered, cowardly, and stupid. He never learns. When his form-master, the wonderfully named Quelch, asks him to translate "*Magna est veritas et praevalebit*," Bunter always offers "Great is the truth and it will prevail a bit," and is suitably chastised for his idiocy.

William George Bunter is also self-centered, boastful, vainglorious, and a sponger. His classmates, by contrast, are all clean-living, fine, upstanding young boys, except for Vernon-Smith, who is a cad and a bounder, being the son of a millionaire, though he is also intelligent and intellectual. Bunter's classmates are of a higher social class than he, though he tries to impress them with his status by calling his parents' very ordinary suburban home (to which none of his friends is ever invited) "Bunter Court."

Bunter is always expecting money to arrive by post and tries to borrow on his expectations, but of course the money never arrives. He even owes his sister, the equally fat and greedy Bessie Bunter, five shillings, which he never repays.

In the days when Richards wrote, fat children were few, progress in the form of mass obesity not yet having taken place, and someone like Bunter would have stood out. But Bunter insists on making himself even more conspicuous because, unlike his fellow pupils who wear the regulation school uniform, he insists on wearing a spotted bow tie and loud check trousers. There is a curious psychology at work here, which Richards intuited: you try to make yourself inconspicuous by drawing attention to yourself. It is curious how obese people often squeeze themselves into tight clothes of bright colors, as if challenging

you, while noticing them, not to notice that they are extremely fat.

Bunter is not popular among his classmates, and when he approaches them with the words, "I say, you fellows . . ." they invariably try to escape. Yet in a strange way they are protective of him. No matter how disgracefully he behaves, they never reject him once and for all; he is at the same time one of them and an outsider.

Perhaps the highlight of Richards's literary career, if a career writing tens of thousands of largely ephemeral stories for children can be called literary, was the stinging attack on him by George Orwell in Cyril Connolly's magazine *Horizon*, in a famous essay published in 1940 titled "Boys' Weeklies." It conferred on Richards such literary immortality as he possesses, apart from among the band of aficionados that almost every writer attracts, in the way that Montaigne conferred immortality on Raymond Sebond, who would otherwise have been entirely forgotten. But as we shall see, Richards had the temerity to answer Orwell at some length, and very effectively into the bargain, Cyril Connolly having had the broad-mindedness to open his pages to him even though at the very beginning of his reply Richards satirized the high modernism of Connolly's review. Richards said that he was surprised to find in it anything as readable as Orwell's essay.

This essay, more than ten thousand words long, takes children's periodical publications as its theme, but there is no doubt that it is Richards's work that preoccupies Orwell and is the main target of his criticism. It was an essay ahead of its time, in that it made much of writing that, until then, would have passed under the radar of literary intellectuals, who would have disdained even to notice its existence. The essay thus helped to launch the academic activity known as "cultural studies," the main difference between Orwell and his successors being that Orwell was a very good writer.

He lays several charges against Hamilton, or Richards. One cannot help feeling on reading the essay that he is using bazookas to shoot butterflies. He later admitted that one of the charges, at least, was mistaken, namely that "a series lasting thirty years could hardly be the work of the same person every week." To this, Richards (who on occasion wrote twenty-five thousand words in a day) replied, "In the presence of such authority, I speak with diffidence: and can only say that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, I am only one person, and have never been two or three."

But from his mistaken assumption, Orwell draws the conclusion that "they have to be written in a style that is easily imitated." To this, again, Richards replies:

> On this point, I may say that I could hardly count the numbers of authors who have striven to imitate Frank Richards, not one of whom has been successful. The style, whatever its merits or demerits is my own, and—if I may say it with due modesty—inimitable. Nobody has ever written like it before, and nobody will ever write like it again.

The question of the merits and demerits of that style is not entirely straightforward. Orwell calls it an extraordinary, artificial, repetitive style. He complains that Richards's writing suffers from tiresome stylization and facetiousness, from padding and repetitiousness, and gives the following example, that "takes a hundred words to tell you that Bunter is in the detention class."

> Billy Bunter groaned.
>
> A quarter of an hour had elapsed out of the two hours that Bunter was booked for extra French.
>
> In a quarter of an hour were only fifteen minutes! But every one of those minutes seemed inordinately long to Bunter. They seemed to crawl by like tired snails.
>
> Looking at the clock in Classroom No. 10 the fat Owl could hardly believe that only fifteen minutes had passed. It seemed more like fifteen hours, fifteen days!
>
> Other fellows were in extra French as well as Bunter. They did not matter. Bunter did!

This, perhaps, was an unfortunate passage for Orwell to have chosen because it has certain

merits. For example, it captures very well the agonizing way in which time passes for the young when they are waiting for something they desire or while they are forced to do something they don't want to do. I remember the sensation all too clearly. Richards therefore has the merit of having entered (he actually claimed never to have left) the child's view of the world. The undoubted repetition in the passage therefore serves a literary purpose that it fulfils very well, and which Orwell entirely misses.

In addition, Bunter's utter, though not malicious and indeed almost innocent, egocentricity is conveyed with deftness. But it is done by allowing the reader to infer it, thus encouraging the use of his imagination. When one considers that Richards was writing for *children*, not for adult literary critics, this is surely a virtue.

As might be expected, though, Orwell's most serious charges against Richards are not aesthetic or stylistic but social. Richards creates a fantasy world, that of the public school urealistically portrayed, that is far removed from that of the majority of his readers (who, Orwell admits, are of all conditions and races of boys, for example my father in the slums of the East End of London).The world that Richards depicts is static and unchanging; Bunter's problem with the non-arrival of a postal order is the worst economic problem that is allowed to enter it. There is no poverty, no class conflict, no social problem, no war, no hunger other than that occasioned by Bunter's greed, no unemployment, no politics, and no sex in Greyfriars School. Such conflict as there is results from a clash of personalities, good versus bad. There is nothing in the stories that will prepare their young readers for the world they will actually face, that of the mine or the factory or the shop or the office, where, of course, their lives will be monotonous at best and appalling at worst. Richards didn't write directly about the problems of the world, but in effect is preparing the ground for boys' acceptance of their unjust lot.

Orwell's argument is a deeply philistine one. It is our present unpleasant and conflictual identitarian politics *ab ovo*. It suggests that literature should not so much take us out of ourselves, or allow us to enter into something of which we have no direct experience, but should be about ourselves and our own lives. It should be relevant to what we already know, namely our own experience, in which it should thereby enfold and enclose us. It should show us our miserable present and our even worse future. In fact, the logical conclusion of Orwell's priggish or po-faced argument would be the abolition of literature, for inevitably practically none of it is about ourselves or our lives, in the Orwellian sense.

In his reply, Richards has good-natured fun at Orwell's expense.

> Mr Orwell perpetrates so many inaccuracies . . . and flicks off his condemnations with so careless a hand, that I am glad of an opportunity to set him right on a few points. He reads into my very innocent fiction a fell scheme for drugging the minds of the younger proletariat into dull acquiescence in a system of which Mr Orwell does not approve: and of which, in consequence, he cannot imagine anyone else approving except from interested motives. . . . [He] not only reads a diehard dunderheaded Tory into a harmless author for boys: he accuses him of plagiarism, of snobbishness, of being out of date, even of cleanliness of mind, as if that were a sin also.

But it is in his rejection of Orwell's narrow-minded philistinism that Richards is at his best:

> Of strikes, slumps, unemployment, etc., complains Mr Orwell, there is no mention. But are these really subjects for young people to meditate upon? It is true that we live in an insecure world: but why should not youth feel as secure as possible? It is true that burglars break into houses: but what parent in his senses would tell a child that a masked face may look in at the nursery window! A boy of fifteen or sixteen is on the threshold of life: and life is a tough proposition; but will he be better prepared for it by telling him how tough it may possibly be? I am sure that the reverse is the case. Gray—another obsolete poet, Mr Orwell!—tells us that sorrows never come too late, and happiness too swiftly flies. Let youth be happy, or as happy as possible. Happiness is the

> best preparation for misery, if misery must come. . . . He may, at twenty, be hunting for a job and not finding it—why should his fifteenth year be clouded by this in advance? He may, at thirty, get the sack—why tell him so at twelve? He may, at forty, be a wreck on Labour's scrap-heap—but how will it benefit him to know that at fourteen? Even if making miserable children would make happy adults, it would not be justifiable. But the truth is the adult will be all the more miserable if he was miserable as a child. Every day of happiness, illusory or otherwise—is so much to the good. It will help to give the boy confidence and hope. Frank Richards tells him that there are some splendid fellows in a world that is, after all, a decent sort of place. He likes to think himself like one of these fellows, and is happy in his daydreams. Mr Orwell would have him told that he is a shabby little blighter, his father an ill-used serf, his world a dirty, muddled, rotten sort of show. I don't think it would be fair play to take his twopence for telling him that!

This is surely more genial (and realistic) than Orwell's ideologized view of what children's literature should be.

Orwell probably thought that in Richards he was dealing with some semi-literate hack. In fact, Richards was an accomplished man, notwithstanding that he had left school sooner than had Orwell. He early thought of being a musical performer and composer before turning (at the age of seventeen) to full-time writing. He was an accomplished Latinist who read the classics for pleasure and whose greatest unfulfilled ambition was to translate Horace into English. When bored, he recited long passages of Dante, which he had by heart, to himself, or replayed famous chess matches in his head. It is true that in some respects his taste was narrow—he reprehended Chekhov and Ibsen, for example, finding them banal and sordid. But we probably all have our blind spots.

Orwell criticized Richards because he made fun of foreigners in his stories, thereby instilling xenophobia in his readers. But here Orwell is condescending not only to Richards himself but also to his readers, who were surely sophisticated enough to be aware (as Orwell apparently was not) that the caricatural portrayals were not to be taken literally. In Orwell's literal-minded argument, then, we see political correctness gestating. Moreover, Orwell entirely misses something about Richards: that he was against racism and anti-Semitism. When Bunter uses the world "nigger," he is reproved by his classmates, who tell him that the word is gratuitously insulting and hurtful. One of the main characters in Bunter's class is Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, the Nabob of Bhanipur. True, the other boys call him "Inky," but obviously with affection; true also that his utterances are stylized and are not strictly correct English (when he is told that someone has the wind up, he says "The windupfulness is terrific!"). But the other boys understand that English is not his first language, and that his use of it is original and expressive; they recognize his very high social status and live with him on complete terms of equality. Furthermore, he is the cleverest of them, which they recognize, too. This may not seem remarkable to us now, but it was remarkable at the time Richards was writing, and Orwell had not the perspicacity to appreciate its significance.

As it stands, it might be said that Billy Bunter (whom Orwell had the grace to accept as a first-class literary creation) had some morally educative value. It is difficult to think of a single virtue, in the ordinary sense, that he possesses, and he has several, indeed many, vices. But far from hating him, we sympathize and even commiserate with him. We sense that it must be very uncomfortable being Bunter, fat and sensitive about his social inferiority (a nuance that Orwell does not catch, surprisingly, in view of the importance he attaches to examining everything through the lens of social class). But we not only sympathize with the boy, we also love Bunter. His existence enriches our world enormously and the pleasure that we derive from it. He is not just the fat Owl, he is also the Falstaff of the Remove: banish plump Bunter, and banish all the world!

This, by implication, teaches us the ambiguities of moral judgment and a tolerance for Man's foibles—lessons that we would never learn from reading Orwell's essay.

Revolutionary characters
by James F. Penrose

France's *ancien régime* ended in January 1793, when an executioner held up Louis XVI's severed head to a jeering crowd. Not long before that cold day in Revolutionary Square, many aristocrats still hoped that orderly reforms were possible. "Liberty, property and equality," wrote the comte Louis-Philippe de Ségur in his *Mémoires*, were "enthusiastically repeated by the same people who would later blame those words for their misfortune." Seduced by Voltaire's sparkling wit, Rousseau's logic, and the infectious skepticism of the *Encyclopédie*, Ségur and his like-minded friends were sympathetic to political reform. These aristocrats saw themselves as contributing to a new and fairer France. Others, however, like Louis-Antoine Saint-Just, had a darker vision for them and the monarchy.

Before the Revolution started in 1789, the Ségurs and their friends lived in an aristocratic utopia. Their wealth and privilege financed astonishingly opulent lifestyles and distanced them from France's social and economic problems. They lived on a different moral plane as well, particularly regarding sex. Yet, as Benedetta Craveri relates in her fascinating and wonderfully readable *The Last Libertines*, the comte de Ségur and his brother, vicomte Joseph-Alexandre, as well as *les ducs* de Lauzun and Brissac, the chevalier de Boufflers, and *les comtes* de Narbonne and Vaudreuil, were more than spendthrift Casanovas.[1] She shows them holding a mix of Enlightenment and traditional values. Guided by reason, open to social change, and willing to question religious and political institutions, they were also loyal, duty-bound, and supremely charming and elegant. All of them were military men who served crown and country. During the *ancien régime*, their qualities secured them career advancement and romantic conquests. Afterwards, these same qualities helped them deal with the consequences of their fall.

The duc de Lauzun had everything: name, wealth, looks, charm, impeccable connections, and a superb education capped by fifteen days of *délicieuses leçons* from a lass who trained young aristocrats in advanced boudoir technique. He used his many talents to develop into a superb diplomat and officer, but his career was hindered at crucial points by court intrigues and royal caprice. The first hint of these involved his complicated heritage and occurred when he was still young.

Like that of several of Craveri's subjects, Lauzun's immediate ancestry was opaque. His father-of-record, the duc de Gontaut, was in fact incapable of procreation, and it was whispered that one of his former comrades-in-arms (who later became the duc de Choiseuil, Louis XV's foreign minister) was Lauzun's true father. As the commander of the Gardes Françaises, Gontaut's loyalties lay solely with the king. Choiseuil, by contrast, protected his own dynastic interests. When Choiseuil, who had had his sister in mind for the role, publicly criticized the king's choice of Madame du Barry as his royal mistress, Lauzun was swept up in the

1 *The Last Libertines*, by Benedetta Craveri; New York Review Books, 616 pages, $39.95.

feud and joined the other Choiseuils banished from Versailles.

Lauzun had already served for years in the Gardes Françaises, the royal regiment. He saw action in Corsica against the separatist movement there and, as Craveri says, he was admired by his troops for his "ingenuity, sense of duty, and tactical intelligence." Understanding that his possibilities for advancement were non-existent while Louis XV was alive, Lauzun traveled to England to acquaint himself with the traditional enemy. While there, he developed two new passions: horse racing, which he helped introduce to France, and Izabelle Czartoryska, a Polish princess deeply involved in her country's politics. The affair won him over to Izabelle's political causes but later backfired.

Returning to France, Lauzun first met Queen Marie Antoinette, and their acquaintance grew over two years into a deep friendship. Lauzun naively proposed that she support an Izabelle-inspired political alliance between Russia, Prussia, and Poland. This, however, was viewed as a far-from-acceptable mix of business and pleasure, particularly by Marie Antoinette's mother, Maria Theresa of Austria. Maria Theresa viewed Poland as within Austria's orbit and the proposed alliance as a threat. Lauzun apparently did not take the hint, for Maria Theresa's ambassador then smeared Lauzun so effectively (not difficult given Lauzun's zesty lifestyle) that he became *persona non grata* at court.

The final blow was delivered by the queen. It was well known that Gontaut's command of the Gardes Françaises was to pass to Lauzun. On Gontaut's death, however, Marie Antoinette allowed it to go to another—a crushing disappointment for Lauzun and one he never forgave. Lauzun later distinguished himself with other regiments during the American Revolution and won a crucial engagement at the Battle of Yorktown. He went on to capture Senegal from the British and consolidate France's position in Africa, all to little praise at Versailles. His ideas for economically developing the desperately impoverished Senegal—and those for dealing with the English threat (including a brilliant scheme for bankrupting the Bank of England)—were all ignored. When Lauzun met the comtesse de Coigny, who, Craveri says, had her own reasons for detesting the Bourbons, his dislike turned to hatred. Lauzun participated in the Estates General, but his revenge against Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette was to ally himself with the duc d'Orléans, the king's rivalrous cousin, who was trying to supplant him.

Similarly out of royal favor was the commander of Louis XVI's royal bodyguard, the splendidly named Louis Hercule Timoléon de Cossé-Brissac. Unlike Lauzun, however, Brissac's higher status and hereditary titles—one of which allowed him the privilege of taking orders from the king alone—protected his position at court. Another point of difference was that Brissac stoically accepted his reverses. "I do what I do out of obligation to the ancestors of the king, and to my own," he explained.

Brissac's sin was falling in love with Madame du Barry, in contention for the most polarizing figure of the *ancien régime*. The naive Marie Antoinette was shocked when she saw Barry at a royal supper and discovered the exact responsibilities of Louis XV's royal mistress. Any hope of salvaging their relationship vanished when Barry laughed longer and louder than anyone at a joke about Marie Antoinette's stuffy mother.

Barry's name was synonymous with royal excess. The besotted Louis XV showered her with money and jewelry, antagonizing the court and the public. After he died of smallpox and his grandson Louis XVI ascended the throne, the new queen Marie Antoinette took revenge. Barry was arrested under a *lettre de cachet* and imprisoned in the Abbey du Pont-aux-Dames, near Meaux. Later released, she eventually returned to her house near Versailles. Though Barry kept out of the royal couple's sight, her friends and intimates, such as Brissac, ran the risk of disfavor. In Craveri's telling, Barry is more sinned against than sinning, and the author cites several contemporary accounts, some from future revolutionaries, describing Barry's graciousness and kindness.

An unrepentant *débauché* (Craveri writes that Brissac's "gaze lingered on the members of the fair sex even at his father's burial"), Brissac was a philanthropist, patron of the arts, and

would-be modernizer of France's economy. Disappointed in not being selected for the Estates General, he noticed with trepidation that it was moving too slowly on "the real principle issues that France awaits."

The chevalier de Boufflers (first name: Stanislas-Jean) also had a complicated parentage. He grew up at court in Lunéville, near Nancy, where his mother, a famous libertine, was lady-in-waiting to the wife of the exiled King of Poland, Stanisław Leszczyński. Over time, Boufflers increasingly resembled the old man at whose court his mother served, who provided for his education and interceded for him at various points.

Boufflers was cut from the same profligate cloth as his mother. Destined for the priesthood as a matter of family duty ("he didn't need to believe in God in order to become a Prince of the Church," his mother rationalized), Boufflers started at seminary but soon earned a reputation for improvising amusingly lewd verses. These, along with his picaresque story *Aline, reine de Golconde*, relating how Aline, his prostitute heroine, becomes queen while revealing her philosophy of life, got him the desired *exeat* from the seminary and entry into the army—just in time for peace.

With little wealth, no sponsors, and no *hôtel* in Paris, Boufflers lived by charm, wit, and street smarts. When one disappointed lady invited him over for a "reconciliation," Boufflers was seized by the lady's men, held down and thoroughly whipped. Released, Boufflers pointed a pair of pistols at the men and ordered them to whip the lady ("her satin skin [was] pitilessly tattered"), then each other. Departing, he gaily mentioned that he would be relating this "most amusing incident" to all and sundry. Panicked, the lady dismissed her men and begged Boufflers to stay for dinner, after which a different reconciliation occurred from that originally intended.

Over the years Boufflers rose high in the army's ranks, eventually becoming governor to Senegal, where he was appalled by the behavior of the slave-trading Senegal Company. On his return to Paris, Boufflers "employed his vast network of social relationships and the brilliance of his conversation" to turn influential opinion against slavery. Madame de Staël, for one, listened, and for the rest of her life campaigned against the odious trade. Like Lauzun before him, Boufflers made a series of proposals designed to develop and improve Senegal, and like his predecessor's they fell on deaf ears.

His long relationship with Madame de Sabran, the widow of a French naval hero, slowed, if not halted, his libertinism. His literary career (racy verses having given way to more serious stuff) got him elected to the Académie Française in 1788. That same year, he was thrilled by the calling of the Estates General, longing to play a part, though his enthusiasm was tempered by Madame de Sabran's strict monarchism. In time, the couple saw the ominous direction of the Revolution and emigrated.

Of all Craveri's subjects, Louis de Narbonne had the most privileged upbringing. Raised at Versailles—where his mother ministered to Louis XV's daughters—Narbonne counted as playmates the future Louis XVI, Louis XVIII, and Charles X. Beautifully educated, he was tutored in diplomacy by the great Vergennes himself, Louis XV's foreign minister.

The reason for all this favor was that Narbonne's real father was the most glamorous of all. The boy's nickname was "Demi-Louis" (half-*louis*—the coin on which Louis XV's profile appeared) and the resemblance was unmistakable. Royal linkages notwithstanding, Narbonne realized after Louis XV's death that his continued advancement depended on staying on the new king's good side—a tall order given his rakishness, the other competitors for favor, and, most of all, Louis XVI's family politics.

After Louis XV's death, his daughters remained at Versailles, where they frequently and openly disparaged the frivolous Marie Antoinette. After hearing from her mother's ambassador (the same who ran the smear campaign against Lauzun) that the daughters' malice originated with Narbonne's mother, the queen had her opening. When Madame Adélaïde, the older of the daughters, pushed for Narbonne to be granted a coveted ambassadorship to Russia, Marie Antoinette strangled the proposal. Narbonne, like Lauzun, was forced out of Versailles.

Establishing himself in Paris, Narbonne entertained the delightful Comédie Française

actress Louise Contat, a seasoned bedroom veteran. He frequently met with others concerned about France's governance: Talleyrand, Turgot, Mirabeau, Chamfort, and the three-time minister of finance Jacques Necker. Necker's daughter, Germaine, fell for Narbonne hard, so hard in fact that she dropped three other lovers (her husband, the Count de Staël, having been previously shunted aside). Narbonne joined in with Madame de Staël's reformist enthusiasm and began advocating for a constitutional monarchy, a position that further alienated him from Versailles. In the waning days of Louis XVI's reign, however, he was appointed minister of war and oversaw the deployment of armies to France's borders. The fall of the monarchy in October 1792 put paid to his idealism, and, in some of *Libertines*' most vivid pages, Craveri describes how Madame de Staël saved the lives of Narbonne and other monarchists through acts of singular bravery.

Both Ségurs remained monarchists but supported the power-sharing aims of the Estates General. The happily married comte Louis-Philippe had a distinguished career. Dispatched with his regiment to support the American cause, his penetrating reports to his father, Louis XVI's minister of war, so impressed Vergennes that on his return Vergennes secured the comte the ambassadorship sought by Narbonne. It was, as Craveri says, a fortunate choice, as the comte got along well with Catherine the Great. Among the comte's duties was to accompany Catherine the Great on her remarkable journey to Crimea with Potemkin, the Prince de Ligne, and an enormous convoy of servants and retainers. Craveri's account of the long journey is fascinating.

The comte remained in Russia until late 1789 and so could not participate in the Estates General. When Catherine heard the comte was leaving Russia, she tried to persuade him to stay, knowing his personal safety would be at risk on his return. During the Terror, the comte and his family escaped harm by hiding in a small village in the Loire. In the new century, the comte proved every bit as politically flexible as his friend Talleyrand, switching allegiances between Napoleon and Louis XVIII as circumstances required.

His bother, the vicomte Joseph-Alexandre, was always the livelier of the two. Amusingly indifferent about his bastardy, when asked whether he was related to a Monsieur de Ségur "who is something or other at Versailles," he jauntily replied, "people will tell you that I'm his son, but *I certainly don't believe it.*"

Craveri describes the vicomte's first loves and his early writing career. His outré efforts included his *Essay on the Means of Pleasing in Love*—though he "abandoned his readers at the door of the boudoir." As with Boufflers, the vicomte moved to less trivial subjects, composing *proverbes* (one-act plays) and other professionally staged theatricals with Narbonne's lover Contat. He excelled at impromptu versification, a talent that landed him in hot water when the egotistical Marie Antoinette coyly requested a verse revealing "the truth about myself." He found himself banished to Luzancy, well away from Versailles. There he met the author and subversive Choderlos de Laclos, another capable military man thwarted in his career. The vicomte introduced Laclos to the duc d'Orléans, himself itching to settle personal scores with his cousin the king.

Drawing on Émile Dard's 1905 study, Craveri describes how Laclos used Orléans to plot a coup. The ineffectual Louis XVI would be replaced by Orléans as Lieutenant-General of France (a type of regency) as the step towards creating a constitutional monarchy, with Laclos as Orléans' tutelary spirit throughout. With the fall of the monarchy in October 1789 and the rapid loss of governmental stability, Laclos' plot foundered. When he and his backers—Abbé Sieyès, Talleyrand, Mirabeau, and others—disappeared into the weeds, Orléans was left to his destiny.

Libertines concludes with the fates of Craveri's subjects after 1789. Facing their downfall and destruction by the Revolution, they show their mettle. While the comte de Ségur, Boufflers, and the comte de Vaudreuil survived, others were less fortunate, with some meeting dramatic ends.

Narbonne used all his charm and diplomatic guile to settle Louis XV's daughters (Narbonne's sisters, though not officially acknowledged as such) in Rome. He and Madame de Staël plot-

ted a daring escape for the royal family but were thwarted by Louis XVI's advisors, who regarded Narbonne and other constitutionalists as traitors. As Louis XVI's minister of war, Narbonne was a marked man after the fall of the monarchy. Escaping the Tuileries, he reached Madame de Staël's house, where for the next four days she and her chaplain hid him under the chapel altar. A young German doctor named Justus Bollman called on Madame de Staël one evening and met the couple. Moved by the pathos of the heavily pregnant de Staël and Narbonne's infectious gaiety, Dr. Bollman helped spirit him out of France and across the Channel.

Characteristically, the vicomte de Ségur continued along seemingly oblivious to the Terror. Writing for the *Feuillant du Jour*, a nose-thumbing anti-Jacobin daily, he was arrested and jailed for anti-revolutionary sentiments and was joined by his father, the maréchal. The pair would surely have been guillotined save for a character right out of Baroness Orzcy—Charles de Bussière. A former actor, Bussière was a file clerk for the dictatorial Committee for Public Safety. While preparing trial *dossiers* for the Revolutionary Tribunal (the Committee's kangaroo court), Bussière recognized certain theatrical names: the playwright Ségur, Mlle. Contat, and others in her Comédie Française troupe had been arrested for appearing in a politically incorrect play, *Pamela*. One by one, Bussière's *dossiers* began disappearing into the Seine. He eventually saved hundreds of lives. Collot d'Herbois, the Committee member seeking the troupe's execution, wrote to complain about the slowness of the process. An investigation was about to start when Robespierre and his associates were overthrown, ending the Terror. The Ségurs, Mlle. Contat, and her troupe were freed. A few weeks after, Craveri writes, the troupe was back at the Comédie to joyful applause.

There were no miracles for Lauzun or Brissac. Lauzun continued his army service during the Terror. He knew the stakes were high; one "must be prepared to lose [one's] head on the scaffold as on the field of battle," he wrote. Sent to the Vendée to quell the uprising there, his softly-softly approach earned him a denunciation for insufficient enthusiasm. Ordered back to Paris, he was tried and condemned. An aristocrat to the last, he spent his last hours financially providing for his lover and servants. When the executioner came to his cell, Lauzun greeted him with a glass of wine.

As for Brissac, he went down fighting. After being appointed head of Louis XVI's new Constitutional Guard, Brissac took care to man it with soldiers loyal to the King. When the Guard was disbanded a few months later (with Louis XVI's assent—one of his inexplicable decisions), Brissac was denounced and arrested for his "anti-revolutionary spirit." When his prisoner convoy passed through an armed mob in Versailles during the September Massacres, his guards abandoned him to the mob, who killed him—though not without a ferocious fight. Craveri repeats the all-too-believable story that Brissac's head was tossed into Madame du Barry's garden. Months later, Madame du Barry herself was executed on suspicion of aiding *émigrés*. Unlike her aristocratic companions who politely allowed themselves to be guillotined, Barry went noisily. The portraitist Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun wrote that if others had shown as much fight, "the Terror would have ended far sooner than it did."

Louis-Antoine Saint-Just did not share the aristocratic background of Craveri's libertines, though he did have a taste for scandalous writing. Antoine Boulant's engrossing and chilling new biography describes how a laissez-faire, anti–capital punishment, free press–supporting monarchist became, over his short but memorable career, the personification of the Terror.[2]

While imprisoned under his mother's *lettre de cachet* for theft, Saint-Just wrote a two-volume poem, *Organt*, praising libertinism and attacking the Church, monarchy, and nobility in scabrous terms. Still too young in 1791 for national office, he published his politically precocious *On the Spirit of Revolution and the French Constitution*. As Boulant explains, though Saint-Just used his essay to lay out his radical ideas for the remaking of French society, he still contemplated a limited monarchy and even took a balanced view of Marie Antoinette.

2 *Saint-Just: L'Archange de la Révolution*, by Antoine Boulant; Passés/Composés, 352 pages, €22.

Those benign views disappeared with the royals' flight to Varennes in June 1791. Though he had accepted the new constitution the previous year, Louis XVI had been playing a double game while trying to drum up armed support abroad against the Revolution. The flight was disastrous for his family and for France. In August 1791, two months after the flight, Saint-Just was elected to the National Assembly. In his momentous maiden speech, Saint-Just demanded death for the king without trial. "Judge the king like a citizen!" he demanded. By attempting to enlist foreign support against the nation, Saint-Just argued, the king was guilty of treason, just like any other man. "Those who attach importance to the punishment of a King," he continued, "will never found a republic." Though a trial was eventually held, Saint-Just gave the Assembly the argument it needed to end the *ancien régime*.

A few months after the king's execution in 1793, Saint-Just joined the Committee for Public Safety. Over the next year, he spent time away from Paris observing military action on the Committee's behalf in Alsace and in Belgium and showed himself as a capable, if vindictive, overseer. As president of the Convention in 1794, Saint-Just persuaded the deputies that "the property of enemies of the revolution must be seized for the benefit of the republic" and enacted the confiscatory Ventôse Decrees. But as the Committee became more authoritarian and dictatorial, its real work was seeking anyone with suspect origins and opinions. In June 1794, the Convention ordered mass executions and the space of killing speeded up. Until Saint-Just's (and Robespierre's) fall on the ninth of Thermidor, the Committee and the Revolutionary Tribunal were responsible for thousands of deaths. "We must not only punish traitors," Saint-Just said, "but all people who are indifferent." He was not alone, of course. Men like Fouché, Carrier, and Tallien had even bloodier hands from their repressions outside Paris.

Boulant quotes several descriptions of Saint-Just's eerie personality. "Philanthropist and executioner, chaste and libertine, utopian and pragmatic, often brilliant and often mad," said one. Others mentioned his coldness, his anger, and his "immeasurable self-esteem." Once against capital punishment, he became convinced of "the need for bloodshed to establish liberty" by "detestable and bloody means."

By mid-1794 though, Saint-Just knew the end was near. At the end of July, his former ally Bertrand Barère, who once demanded that "terror be the order of the day," delivered his "Report on the Conspiracy of Robespierre and his Accomplices" to the Convention. Following an uproarious meeting, Robespierre, Saint-Just, and others lost their power, their seats, and, the next evening, their heads. While it was a source of annoyance to Saint-Just that his Ventôse Decrees were seldom enforced, Boulant notes with grim humor that when he and his co-defendants were sentenced, the Tribunal ordered that their own properties be "*acquis à la République*."

Both of these books capture the spirit of their subjects well. Boulant allows the facts about Saint-Just's bleak life to speak for themselves. His measured recitation of these, and his use of quotations from Saint-Just's speeches and writings, create a chilling impression, oddly enhanced by the praise for Saint-Just by supportive scholars. Saint-Just's rapid rise to power and the efficiency with which he convinced others to carry out his heartless ideas seem to have affected a terrible personality change. There can be no other explanation for the cold certainty of his claim that "a nation can only be regenerated on a pile of corpses"—a sentiment faithfully followed by subsequent visionaries.

By contrast, *The Last Libertines* provides a warmer picture of Craveri's flawed but engaging subjects. Among its great charms are the quality and quantity of its gossipy anecdotes and the colorful portraits of its many incidental characters, including Joseph de Sabran who, running out of cannonballs in a naval battle against the British, packed his last gun with his table silver and blasted away. Throughout, Craveri quotes from her subjects' witty writings—evidence of extraordinarily agile and imaginative minds, and largely representative of their class. This, along with their battle-tested courage leads one to wonder the question never really addressed by Craveri: how could men like them have lost to men like Saint-Just?

Devout doubters
by Paul Dean

In 1841, an undergraduate at Balliol College, Oxford, took a respectable second-class degree after working consistently hard, and walked fifty miles to tell his old headmaster "I have failed." Three years later, the headmaster's son, also at Balliol, obtained a second-class degree after idling much of his time away and, far from being ashamed of himself or embarrassed for his father, did not seem to care much about it. The actors in this drama, of course, are Arthur Hugh Clough (1819–61), Matthew Arnold (1822–88), and Arnold's father, Dr. Thomas Arnold of Rugby School (1795–1842). Clough, who had been brought in to give extra coaching to his boyhood friend and fellow pupil, had predicted the result. "A worthy addition to our select band," he concluded, with an attempt at bravado which should not deceive us. His penitential pilgrimage to Rugby says everything about the difference between him and Matthew Arnold. The Doctor never expected distinction from his son, but he regarded Clough as his star pupil, and the admiration was mutual. By contrast, when Arnold read the *Poems and Prose Remains* published posthumously by Clough's widow, Blanche, in 1869, he was disconcerted by the "overtaxed religiousness" caused by Clough's hero-worship of Dr. Arnold, even suggesting that Clough must have had "a loose screw."

That last point apart, Clough was well aware of the situation, as we see from the prose epilogue to his uncompleted masterpiece from the 1850s, *Dipsychus and the Spirit*. In a conversation between an uncle and his nephew, the uncle denounces Dr. Arnold's inflation of schoolboy naughtiness into grave sin, asking bluntly, "Why didn't he flog them and hold his tongue? Flog them he did, but why preach?" This was wisdom after the event. Clough never freed himself from the Rugby ethos, from which Arnold took flight in flippancy. Their different reactions to Dr. Arnold's moral sternness—Clough's agonies of conscience and Arnold's unruffled dilution of doctrine into a recommendation for good behavior—show how differently the nineteenth-century crisis of faith could be experienced.

Their modest degrees did neither of them harm in the short term. Both became Fellows of Oriel College; Clough was conscientious in his duties, Arnold casual. Clough resigned his post due to theological scruples over the Thirty-nine Articles, whereas Arnold seized an early opportunity to become private secretary to an aristocrat and senior politician. Their first volumes of poetry appeared within a year of one another: Clough's *The Bothie of Toper-na-Fuosich* (later *Tober-na-Vuolich*, Clough having learned that the Gaelic of the original title was obscene) in 1848, Arnold's *The Strayed Reveller* in 1849. Arnold married in 1851, Clough in 1854, but Clough felt coolly towards Mrs. Arnold, and the men began to drift apart. Both became educational administrators, Arnold in 1851 as an inspector (later a Senior Inspector) of schools, Clough in 1853 as a more lowly examiner.

Arnold found fame as a literary, educational, and social commentator: he was Professor of Poetry at Oxford (the first to lecture in English rather than Latin) between 1857 and 1867, and was rewarded with an honorary degree in 1870.

He also undertook official fact-finding tours of European schools. By contrast, Clough had a brief spell at University College, London, as principal of a student hall and professor of English literature, but fell out with the governing body and resigned after three years. In 1852–53 he spent nine months in the United States (where he had lived as a child)—forming close ties with Emerson, James Russell Lowell, and Charles Eliot Norton—but failed to find the secure teaching post he had hoped for. Back in England, newly married, he exhausted himself by assisting Florence Nightingale in her campaign for better military hospitals. His health broke down. He died in Florence, where he had gone in hope of recovery, and was buried in the Protestant cemetery there, in the presence of his widow and his sister Anne, who became the founding Principal of Newnham College, Cambridge. Over two decades later, Arnold was struck down by the angina which had killed his father and grandfather. He was buried in the churchyard at his birthplace, Laleham, a village about sixteen miles from London, alongside his three sons who had all died prematurely. Among the crowd of mourners were Benjamin Jowett, Robert Browning, and Henry James.

Comparison between the two men began early. In 1882, R. H. Hutton—still the most underrated of Victorian critics, and incidentally Clough's deputy at the London students' hall—reviewed Samuel Waddington's pioneer biography of Clough in the London *Spectator*. Why, Hutton asked, did Clough remain neglected in comparison with Arnold? Both, he believed, "found a voice for this self-questioning age," but their voices were markedly different, Clough's having "greater range and richness" and "deeper pathos," but "less exquisite sweetness and 'lucidity' of utterance" than Arnold's. If Clough's mind was "semi-scholastic" and "analytic," Arnold, in Hutton's view, was too fond of "glamour" and sentiment. Broadly speaking, this corresponded to each poet's view of the other's work. Arnold had little taste for Clough's metrical experiments and lamented the "deficiency of the *beautiful*" in his poems, judging them "not *natural*," while Clough, reviewing Arnold's *Empedocles on Etna and Other Poems* (1852), felt the lack of "a plainer and simpler and less factitious manner and method of treatment," regretting that taking Homer, Virgil, or Milton as models kept Arnold from addressing "the actual, palpable things with which our everyday life is concerned."

Hutton concluded by prophesying that Clough's popularity would, in time, come to equal that of Arnold. Clough is still catching up. *Poems and Prose Remains* was incomplete and textually unreliable, Mrs. Clough having carried out some tactful censorship, but it was all the student had to go on until 1951, when Oxford published a new edition of the poems. Today, Clough's undergraduate diaries, correspondence, and miscellaneous prose are all available, together with a revised, extended edition of the poems by F. L. Mulhauser (1974), an excellently annotated selection by J. P. Phelan (1995), and a biography by Anthony Kenny (2005, reviewed in *The New Criterion* of June 2006). Among critical studies, R. K. Biswas's *Arthur Hugh Clough: Towards a Reconsideration* (1972) remains stimulating, while John Schad's *Arthur Hugh Clough* (2006), though brief, is outstandingly original and acute. Now, the "21st-Century Oxford Authors" series, aimed at presenting substantial, freshly edited selections from major writers for a new generation of readers, is augmented by volumes on Clough and Arnold, edited respectively by Greg Tate and Seamus Perry (who is also general editor of the series).[1]

Tate is less helpful than he might be to the newcomer. His introduction does not mention Kenny's biography, Biswas, or Schad. The volume is slim, with just under three hundred pages of text and forty of notes, where Perry has seven hundred and two hundred fifty respectively. Tate does include all the essential shorter poems—"Epi-Strauss-ion," "Easter Day" I and II, "Say not the struggle nought availeth," "The Latest Decalogue," and others—with their expressions of religious doubt, skepticism, or

1 *21st-Century Oxford Authors: Arthur Hugh Clough*, edited by Greg Tate; Oxford University Press, 384 pages, $110.
21st-Century Oxford Authors: Matthew Arnold, edited by Seamus Perry; Oxford University Press, 1,008 pages, $130.

outright unbelief. He has *The Bothie*, *Amours de Voyage* (1858), and *Dipsychus and the Spirit*, but nothing from the less well-known *Adam and Eve* (drafted 1845–48). Phelan's selection omitted *The Bothie* so as to make room for this reworking of the story of the Fall and the first murder, in which German biblical criticism sits alongside Hegel and Kierkegaard. *Adam and Eve* is clearly at the embryonic stage, but it is intellectually daring, and a few extracts could have been given. Perhaps they were omitted to make room for a poem from *Mari Magno*, a series of tales about marriage, modeled on Chaucer and written towards the end of Clough's life, supposedly told by travelers on board a transatlantic ship. "The Clergyman's Second Tale" concerns a husband who has an affair while traveling abroad for his health and is later reconciled with his wife. The style reminds us of George Crabbe, whom Clough admired, but Clough does not come off well from the comparison.

Clough's three long poems show increasing confidence and originality. *The Bothie*, subtitled "a long vacation pastoral," narrates, in sprightly hexameters, the adventures of an Oxford reading party in Scotland, during which an earnest undergraduate falls in love with a simple crofter's daughter and starts married life in New South Wales. The tone is humorous-sentimental, donnish, and agreeably frolicsome. *Amours de Voyage* has greater depth: the blasé undergraduate hero is in Rome for the 1849 revolution (as Clough himself was), which he observes with ironic detachment, and shies away from commitment to an English girl whose family he meets there. The poem uses the epistolary mode, handling the colloquial informality of exchanges between friends with more confidence than in *The Bothie*, and its setting provides an opportunity for discussion of history, politics, religion, and aesthetics.

Dipsychus and the Spirit is in a different class altogether—not only is it Clough's most striking achievement, it is one of the most original poems of the nineteenth century, persisting into the twentieth as an important source for T. S. Eliot's *Prufrock*. Like its two predecessors, Clough's poem examines the problem of commitment, whether to a belief, a cause, or an individual, but the exploration is far more probing and satirical. Indeed, Prufrock's "In a minute there is time/ For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse" could be the motto of Dipsychus, whose name means "double-minded." This dithering, nervous youth, mouthing conventional moral platitudes and Christian cant, is brought by his attendant Spirit, who may be the Devil or Dipsychus's subconscious, to see what a humbug he is. His self-delusions are progressively stripped away as the Spirit extols the advantages of submission to worldly common sense, self-interest, enjoyment of wealth, sexual indulgence, and concealment of all these things beneath a pious exterior for the benefit of gullible fools. The Spirit's dialogue is a brilliant achievement in its raciness, slangy vulgarity, and insidious insinuation, but the vacuousness of Dipsychus's self-reproaches and scruples is equally well-judged.

The poem is Clough's most ample retort to Dr. Arnold, and it is instructive to compare it with Matthew Arnold's commemoration in the poem "Rugby Chapel: November, 1857," depicting his father as a zealot, exhorting and chastising, marshaling his followers like an army on the march to the City of God. Arnold was reacting to what he termed "vicious remarks" by Fitzjames Stephen in the *Edinburgh Review*, which portrayed Dr. Arnold along lines similar to those of the *Dipsychus* epilogue. "I think I have done something to fix the true legend about Papa," he wrote to his mother. "Legend" is a revealing word. Arnold meant the poem as praise, but it's hard to warm to such an intimidating, humorless character.

Arnold sought a poetry which should be "adequate" to a time he judged "unpoetical," but was too decorous ever to achieve the creative use of contemporary idiom we find in Clough, and his poetical expressions of unease and religious doubt seem pallid in comparison. The haunting fusion of form and content in "Dover Beach" was rarely repeated, although one should single out the chilling "Growing Old" among the shorter poems. It is Clough who seems the more *modern* poet, especially in his treatment of sexual relationships (on which, see Craig Raine in the *Times Literary Supplement* of October 16, 2020). Modernism was, in

fact, a concept that preoccupied them both, as it did Dr. Arnold, who, whatever one's reservations about his educational influence, should be taken seriously as a historian and biblical scholar. There are similarities between his inaugural lecture as Professor of Modern History at Oxford in 1851 and Matthew Arnold's inaugural lecture as Professor of Poetry, "On the Modern Element in Literature," in 1857. Both saw modernism as a recurring phenomenon rather than a specific chronological period. Matthew Arnold defined the modern epochs, among which he included the nineteenth century, as those which demand "intellectual deliverance," the achievement of a perspective from which the complexities of a given society can be seen in proportion, interrelated, and grasped in their totality. The best route to this, he argued, was the study of classical literature, specifically that of Greece, with its greater clarity and wholeness; Latin literature, though belonging to a more historically significant time, is limited, for Arnold, by a strain of melancholy, ennui, even sentimentality—adjectives that, one has to say, are often more applicable to Arnold's own poetry than to that of Clough.

Writing to his mother, Arnold claimed his poetry was "in the main line of modern development." Goethe and Wordsworth, for him, were the last great poet-thinkers, having a serenity denied to their successors. The present generation is variously described as "Wandering between two worlds, one dead,/ The other powerless to be born," ensnared by "the hopeless tangle of our age," suffering from "this strange disease of modern life,/ With its sick hurry, its divided aims,/ Its heads o'ertaxed, its palsied hearts." Beset by "fatigue" and "languid doubt," modern men and women "fluctuate idly." This echoes his admonition to Clough, in a letter of 1853: "You are too content to *fluctuate*—to be ever learning, never coming to the knowledge of the truth." Yet the alternative to fluctuation was fixity of purpose, a condition which neither Clough nor Arnold himself could manage. There was no truth, only truths—or half-truths.

Both Arnold and Clough were copious and interesting letter writers. Clough's collected correspondence runs to two volumes, Arnold's to six. (Tellingly, perhaps, Arnold's letters to Clough have survived, but Arnold did not keep Clough's replies.) Neither Tate nor Perry has room for more than a few; we could do with new selected editions. When it comes to other prose, Arnold is of course the weightier figure, but the selection of Clough's prose published by Bruckner B. Trawick (1964) shows a variety not reflected in Tate's limited coverage. If not Arnold's equal as a critic, Clough showed good taste in his professorial lectures and elsewhere, and impressively wide reading (we should remember that English literature was not taught at Oxford in his student days). It is excellent to have "Wordsworth" and "The Development of English Literature" in full, but the parts of "Recent English Poetry" dealing with now-forgotten figures could have been cut while leaving intact the discussion of Arnold, and the space thus saved used for extracts from a lecture on Dryden (printed by Trawick), which contains perceptive comments on the history of prose style.

Clough's essays on educational and religious topics are also excluded by Tate. He made bold recommendations in response to the Royal Commission on the Universities in 1852, in which he advocated the abolition of entrance tests, closed Fellowships, and clerical celibacy for fellows, and urged reform of the tutorial system, to allow for the recruitment of more able candidates so that individual tuition by external teachers (who charged accordingly) would become unnecessary. The Oxford syllabus repeated too much work already done at school—and, he adds witheringly, he was better taught in the Sixth Form at Rugby than at Balliol. In a particularly splendid paragraph, he scorns the "school-boy love of racing" and "empty competition" pandered to by examinations that can be passed by cramming and a good short-term memory: a true scholar wants to know not "whom he has beat," but "what he has done." These words, recalling Cardinal Newman's *Idea of a University*, compare well with Arnold's views, mentioned below. As for religion, Clough's review of Francis Newman's *The Soul* (1852)—with its insistence that faith depends not on external evidences or sacred writings but on "the instincts of the

spiritual sense"—and his manuscript "Notes on the Religious Tradition" (1852/3), which locates tradition in the persistence of selfless service and practical action rather than in the transmission of credal formulas, strike notes to which Arnold would be sympathetic.

If Greg Tate's *Clough* seems something of a missed opportunity, Seamus Perry's handsome and substantial edition of Arnold is a wonderful treat. I shall mention my few cavils first, to clear the way for praise. There is nothing from *Friendship's Garland* (1871); the essay "My Countrymen" (1866), which Perry does include, was written independently of that work although incorporated in it. I suspect that Perry is as irritated as I am by what he describes as the "purposeful facetious jollity" Arnold can sometimes exhibit, and certainly did in the case of the *Garland*, which uses the convention of satirizing England through the eyes of an imagined foreigner. Nor is there anything from *God and the Bible* (1875), the sequel to *Literature and Dogma* (1873), which is itself well represented. The later work is preoccupied with questions of the New Testament canon, chronology, and authorship; scholarship on these matters has inevitably moved on, but Arnold anticipates approaches to the literary criticism of the Bible that later came into vogue in the twentieth century. His breezy oversimplifications and bumptious confidence in his own opinions—the side of him that made Robert Bridges label him "Mr Cocksure Kidglove"—are exasperating, but his positions are ably defended by Ruth apRoberts in *Arnold and God* (1983). Perry's most puzzling omission is the essay on Tolstoy, which originally appeared in the second, posthumous, selection of *Essays in Criticism* (1888). I would gladly have sacrificed "Poor Matthias" (1882)—a five-and-a-half page elegy on a pet canary—for an extract from this, Arnold's only detailed discussion of fiction (Perry does print some incidental remarks on *David Copperfield* from a little-known essay of 1881). It has the additional interest of comparing *Anna Karenina* with *Madame Bovary*, to the latter's disadvantage, in terms that anticipate Henry James's essay on Flaubert of 1902.

These reservations apart, there is much to celebrate. Perry finds room for about 50 percent of Arnold's poems. "Balder Dead" ("Balder-dash," according to *Punch*) and "Westminster Abbey" are missing, but both are, I suppose, borderline cases, and they are really the only ones. *Culture and Anarchy* is complete except for the final chapter, with its dated topicalities, and we have eleven of the eighteen items in the two series of *Essays in Criticism*. The consistently excellent notes quote frequently from pieces not otherwise included: they also record textual variants which give us a clear view of the development of Arnold's ideas. Perry permits himself the occasional dry aside, as when he informs us that the chain ferry across "the stripling Thames at Bablock-Hythe," commemorated in "The Scholar-Gipsy," "is now a caravan park."

Two things in particular struck me with renewed force. The first is the sheer range of Arnold's critical intelligence. *Essays in Criticism* may be out of fashion, but "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time" and "The Study of Poetry" remain classic documents, and, among the pieces on individual writers, the essay on Wordsworth (which compares interestingly with Clough's lecture) is a firm, lucid account, from someone who knew the poet personally, of what is vital and what is inert in that amorphous body of work. In fact, Arnold's instinct for what matters, when his sympathies are aroused, is impressively sure. There's a surprising amount of detailed analytical criticism, of the kind he is not usually thought to practice, in *On Translating Homer* (1861) and *On the Study of Celtic Literature* (1867). Then, too, there are the crisp, witty summary judgments: Homer composing "with his eye on his object," Pope "with his eye on his style, into which he translates his object"; Keats "an Elizabethan born too late"; Tennyson purveying "distilled thoughts in distilled words"; Macaulay "the great apostle of the Philistines," whose *Lays of Ancient Rome* is "hard to read without a cry of pain"; Shelley's gift being for rhythm rather than words; Walter Scott "the historiographer royal of feudalism"; the difference between tragedy, which "breasts the pressure of life," and comedy, which "eludes it, half liberates itself from it by irony."

Arnold is also remarkably good on the suitability or otherwise of a given meter for

a specific purpose—as was Clough, who began translating Homer into English hexameters while in America. He published an essay on this topic in 1853, predating Arnold's *On Translating Homer* by eight years, but it is not mentioned by Arnold (or by Greg Tate). Heroic couplets, says Arnold, are no good for translating Homer because the medium gets in the way of the flow of ideas; Chapman and Pope fall at the first fence here. The hexameter is best because of its combination of flexibility and speed. Arnold dismisses the idea that there is such a thing as "blank verse" in general; there are many gradations. He differentiates that of Milton, whose nobility is marred by "a laboured, a self-retarding movement," from that of Cowper, lengthened out by prolixity, and that of Tennyson, solemnly oracular and marked *legato perpetuo*. If blank verse is to be used for Englishing Homer it should be that of Shakespeare at his best, "which does not dovetail its lines into one another, and which habitually ends its lines with monosyllables."

Arnold's failure to devote a sustained essay to Shakespeare is regrettable, but there are many places where he shows a more down-to-earth grasp of Shakespeare than in his embarrassing early poem. In a short note on *Hamlet* and Montaigne, to be found in Christopher Ricks's *Selected Criticism of Matthew Arnold* (1972), Arnold is as uneasy about the problematic quality of the play as Eliot was to be. Perry prints a little-known essay on the visit of the Comédie Française; "The French Play in London" (1879) advocates Shakespeare's superiority over Hugo and more broadly the advantages of blank verse over the rhyming alexandrine of French neoclassical tragedy, with "its incurable artificiality, its want of the fluidity, the naturalness, the rapid forward movement of true dramatic verse." Shakespeare's use of rhyming couplets, Arnold continues, diminished as his work developed; Dryden's fondness for them merely shows that "true tragic poetry is impossible with this inadequate form," but the "just and perfect use of the ten-syllable couplet is to be seen in Chaucer." (This makes up, to an extent, for the notorious disparagement of Chaucer, in "The Study of Poetry," as lacking "the high seriousness of the great classics.") On Shakespeare's control of pace, his stylistic range from the antiquated to the everyday, above all his uniting of the Renaissance spirit of renewal with "the traditional religion, reformed or unreformed, of Christendom," Arnold is perceptive and convincing.

The second noteworthy surprise in Perry's selection is the practical wisdom of Arnold's remarks on education. His duties were more circumscribed than the description "school inspector" might suggest. His remit covered elementary schools only and was further restricted to Nonconformist institutions, since the Anglican and Roman Catholic churches had their own systems. (His notoriously patronizing attitude towards Nonconformity in *Culture and Anarchy* therefore can't be excused on grounds of ignorance.) He conducted oral examinations of the pupils, and of older pupils who were permitted to teach the younger ones, and scrutinized samples of written work. He also oversaw the qualifying examinations for pupil-teachers. Initially he was one of only three inspectors for the whole of England, covering an area "from Pembroke Dock to Great Yarmouth," as he recalled in his retirement speech. Later, his duties were largely confined to central London. Perry prints the press report of the speech just mentioned, together with Arnold's reports to the Board of Education for 1853, 1863, and 1867; the essay "Democracy," from *The Popular Education of France* (1861); and an extract from *A French Eton, or, Middle-Class Education and the State* (1864), an account of a visit to the *collège* run by the Dominican priest Lacordaire. His observations, at home and abroad, convinced Arnold that the rule of public school–educated aristocrats in England, with their "inaptitude for ideas" and their preference for gentlemanliness over learning—precisely the stated preference of Dr. Arnold at Rugby, we should recall—was waning, and that there was an urgent need for a state-sponsored system for the rising middle class who would take over the reins of government before many years had passed. Resistance to a measure of centralized control, in the name of freedom of thought, is misplaced, Arnold points out suavely in "Democracy," since "It is a very great thing to be able to

think as you like; but, after all, an important question remains—*what* you think."

The persistence of Old Etonian British prime ministers is only the most obvious example of how relevant Arnold's criticisms remain. In 1863 he attacked the new remuneration system, which replaced rewarding the achievement of individual classes with rewarding the universal attainment of governmental "standards." Ambition and individual experiment, he complained, were thus discouraged, and all that mattered—as is still the case in too many hard-pressed schools in Britain—was the fulfilment of the prescribed targets. The question "What can the best pupils do?" was replaced by "Can all pupils do the minimum?" Of course there should *be* a minimum, but, in Arnold's words, "The intellectual life of the school is the intellectual life of its highest class." In 1867 he again condemned the "mechanical" nature of much teaching, obsessed with quantifiable data to the exclusion of "language, geography, and history," which he rightly said are major sources of imaginative stimulus for children, and he laid the blame squarely on officialdom. Again, this picture is sadly recognizable. In his retirement speech he pleaded for the appointment of a proper Minister for Education. The Lord President of the Council claimed that title, but, Arnold bitingly remarked, "A man is not Minister of Education by taking the name, but by doing the function." Not until 1944 was such a post officially created in England, and very few of the subsequent ministers have held office for more than two or three years, making long-term strategic planning impossible. In few other respects is Arnold so truly a "twenty-first-century author" as in his educational writings.

Culture and Anarchy will always be Arnold's most celebrated piece of social criticism, and it inevitably occupies pride of place in Perry's selection, but there are numerous other essays—"Democracy," "My Countrymen," scattered passages in the *Essays in Criticism*—where Arnold addresses social questions. A line of thought comes down to him here from his father, and, at one remove, from Coleridge, whose *On the Constitution of the Church and State* (1830) was a major influence on the Arnold family. Arnold and Clough belonged to the class of public intellectuals dubbed by Coleridge the "clerisy," defined as those learned in "all the so-called liberal arts and sciences, the possession and application of which constitute the civilization of a country, as well as the theological." A civilized nation could also be a cultivated one, but not inevitably. Anticipating Newman, Coleridge grounded all learning in theology, the study of which prevented a nation from becoming cultivated but uncivilized, by placing humanity's spiritual hunger at the center of education, political theory, and social improvement. This, filtered through Dr. Arnold, is behind Arnold and Clough's retention of the ideal of service, civic responsibility, and anti-materialism, worked out variously in Clough's stress on duty and conscience and Arnold's exaltation of sweetness and light. Their temperamental difference becomes the dialectic between Hebraism (obedience to authority) and Hellenism (independence of thought) in *Culture and Anarchy* and in Arnold's work on the Bible.

Arnold heard of Clough's death as he was preparing the Oxford lecture published in 1862 as *On Translating Homer: Last Words*. He closed his remarks with a restrained tribute to Clough's "true sense for his object of study, and a single-hearted care for it . . . which gave so rare a stamp to his character, which kept him so free from all taint of littleness." He praised Clough's integrity, "the Homeric simplicity of his literary life." Although this does less than justice to Clough's complex personality and work, it is more genuine and nearer the mark than Arnold's poetical tribute, "Thyrsis," written two or three years later. This picture of Clough as restless and unstable, a casualty of the pessimistic *Zeitgeist*, is distorted, and Arnold was right to say that "if one reads the poem as a memorial poem, not enough is said about Clough in it." It is more about Arnold working himself up to the necessary pitch of noble grief.

But it would be unfair to end on this note. Arnold and Clough command our sympathy as well as our respect. Each of them, one feels, found something ultimately disappointing not only in the other, but also in himself. Seamus Perry and Greg Tate enable us to be moved afresh by their refusal of easy consolations.

New poems
by Karl Kirchwey

Canada geese

In the era of diamonds and mink and fog,
        while I sleep on a bed of straw,
        they sleep on down, each one banded to show
whose bird it is—Caesar's—on the leg.

The white chin strap I recognize,
        the lilt and twist of the black boot, where
        an absurd republic threatens war.
Now it comes at me with glittering eyes,

in perfect silence, wings flared, beak open:
        but better go catch the wind in a net
        than say it is stupid or try to stop it,
like the meme that destroys reputation.

Leviathan

What I am interested in are the strategies for maintaining the silence and the strategies for breaking it.
—Toni Morrison

The picture was called *The Southern Fishery*,
in which a sperm whale levered out of the sea

at a shocking angle, its jaw agape,
and in the distance the white-bellied mother ship

standing off from the many-footed parasite
of men scudding and floundering in their peascod boat

toward the dark sublime and the ritual of
murder with the harpoon and flensing knife.

Day after day I passed the thrift store window:
ten dollars framed, that blunt head breaching the green billow

and no takers, the toppled rage and fear
collapsing in a welter, the thread of each oar

driving on through a low bush of spume
toward some roiling, exposed thing in me, some

disabled sense of self and intention.
And then one day I looked and it was gone,

with just a bent nail remaining in its place,
leaving me to imagine where it was.

Now I cross the street, but my eye resorts there still.
I should have bought it and turned it to the wall,

that flayed body hanging chained and slack,
the jaw that broke the sea and dared to speak.

All Saints

You're in the last row at the *Requiem*.
A woman arrives late, slides down the pew
(*And let perpetual light shine on them*),
and then begins what looks like exam review,

astronomy or dermatology, with images:
a dark macula against a flank of white
(*Et lux perpetua luceat eis*),
one of the moons of a gaseous planet

or the glaring verdict of a micrograph
(*de poenis inferni et de profundo lacu*)
open in her lap, beyond the crisis of
souls at their final judgment it seems, although

perhaps it turns her on or helps her focus
(*from the pains of hell and the deep pit*),
a musician herself, maybe, for she is
radiant with concentration, and her foot

keeps perfect time (*to pass from death to life*),
and whatever the composer could do,
pockmarked and broke and bound for a common grave,
his half capon for dinner and his yellow

breeches (*de morte transire ad vitam*),
she is the one alive now; it is her
moment, come from library or narrow room,
to thread the jagged gulfs of C minor,

thinking of anything or nothing at all.
The terror of it, and the utter bliss,
sharpen that right in her, inalienable,
enabling her to bestow (*quia pius es*)

on you a smile that somehow counts on yours,
confiding, even co-conspiratorial,
though she is gone long before the applause,
just as she came (*for thou art merciful*).

Reflections

The middle ground of fiction

by John Steele Gordon

Most novels come and go, soon on the remainder table and then forgotten. Some, however, are publishing sensations and great commercial successes in their time. One such was *Peyton Place*, by Grace Metalious, published in 1956. It stayed on the *New York Times* best-seller list for fifty-six weeks and spawned an industry, with movies, a sequel, and a hit television series. But no one would call it a great work of fiction. And today, while in print, it is only a name to most people or, perhaps, a metonym for "dirty books."

Others, genre books, are read generation after generation. The mysteries of Agatha Christie sell hundreds of thousands of copies a year. But while their plots are often ingenious (they make terrific airplane reading), their characters are forgettable at best (although such great actors as David Suchet and Joan Hickson have brought Hercule Poirot and Jane Marple to vivid life in television productions).

And then there are the classics. People have been reading *Robinson Crusoe* and *Gulliver's Travels* for three centuries. Charles Dickens has been dead for half that, but his novels will survive as long as the English language itself. Indeed, he is so readable and his characters so memorable that he is able to use absurd plot devices that no lesser talent could possibly get away with. (After the foundling Oliver Twist is trained by Fagin and his gang to be a pickpocket, the first pocket he—unsuccessfully—picks, out of all the teeming masses of London, is that of Mr. Brownlow, who happens to have been Oliver's long-dead father's best friend. Later, when he graduates to housebreaking, the house he breaks into is owned by a woman who turns out, conveniently enough, to be his aunt.)

Somewhere between the trash of *Peyton Place* and the glories of *Pride and Prejudice*, however, there lies a middle ground. These are novels that, while often denigrated by English professors—many of whom seem to think that books that are such fun to read can't be "real literature"—are enormous best-sellers on publication and stay in continuous print for decades afterwards.

These books have similar characteristics. They have strong plots that involve situations and backgrounds not well known to most readers but intimately familiar to the authors. Equally, they often have memorable characters that worm their way into the warp and woof of the culture that spawned them, not unlike Dickens's Uriah Heep and Ebenezer Scrooge.

And while these authors often have long and successful writing careers, none of their other books reach either the financial success or the literary quality of their one masterpiece. James T. Farrell, for instance, wrote dozens of books, but is remembered for only one, *Studs Lonigan* (1932–35). This is unlike, say, Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Faulkner, or Steinbeck, most of whose work is worthy of serious attention. But for one book, these middle-ground authors rise above their talents and become one of the immortals.

Perhaps the most famous of these middling novels is *Gone with the Wind*, by Margaret

Mitchell, which has sold thirty million copies since its publication over eighty-four years ago. It's a bit of an exception. It is the only book the author ever wrote (a youthful novella, never intended for publication and long thought lost, was published fifty years after her death). And while she had no personal knowledge of the Civil War (she was born in 1900), Mitchell grew up in an affluent Southern family. It is impossible to overstate how deeply steeped in romanticized memories of the antebellum South and the Civil War were these families at the turn of the twentieth century, when many family members had personal experience of the "lost cause." Mitchell remembered being shown "Sherman's sentinels," the chimneys that were all that survived of plantation houses burned by Sherman on his March to the Sea.

Let's look at three of these middle-ground novels—page-turning fun to read and unforgettable to have read—from the decade of the 1950s.

The Caine Mutiny, by Herman Wouk, was published in 1951, exactly one hundred years after the publication of another classic American sea story, *Moby-Dick*. Unlike Melville's masterpiece, which was the polar opposite of a best-seller when first published, *The Caine Mutiny*, about what may or may not have been a mutiny aboard USS *Caine* during World War II, was an instant and major success. It remained on the *New York Times* best-seller list for a total of 122 weeks, forty-eight of them in the number-one spot. It won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1952.

In 1954, Wouk adapted the trial scenes of the book into a successful play, *The Caine Mutiny Court-Martial*. And that same year the movie version opened, starring Humphrey Bogart. It was the second highest grossing American film that year, and Bogart received his third Academy Award nomination as best actor for the part of Captain Philip Francis Queeg. Bogart's formidable performance as Captain Queeg (a name that Dickens would surely have admired), playing against lesser acting talents such as Van Johnson and Fred MacMurray, makes Queeg effectively the center of the story in the film. But in the novel, Willie Keith is the axis around which the story turns. As Wouk explains in an opening note, "The story begins with Willie Keith because the event turned on his personality as the massive door of a vault turns on a small jewel bearing."

Keith is a young Princeton graduate, callow, over-privileged, casually snobbish, even a bit of a momma's boy, as the novel begins at the outset of World War II. But over the course of the book he slowly evolves into a grown-up, very much in charge of his own destiny. It is a fascinating journey that plays out against the equally fascinating background of the far-flung battlefields of the Pacific theater on the rust-bucket destroyer-minesweeper USS *Caine*.

The climax of the story comes during the typhoon that struck the U.S. Third Fleet in December, 1944, in the Philippine Sea. It is often called "Halsey's Typhoon," as Admiral William Halsey commanded the fleet. Three ships, not dissimilar to the *Caine*, were lost in the storm, with great loss of life. At the height of the storm, when Queeg insists on obeying the last order received, long after radio contact had been lost and at the peril of the ship, the *Caine*'s executive officer relieves him of command under Article 184 of Navy Regulations and orders a change of course.

Was it a proper use of this article, or was it mutiny? At the critical moment when the helmsman did not know whom to obey, he turned to Willie Keith, who was Officer of the Deck, asking him what to do. Willie told him to obey the executive officer, making himself possibly at least an accessory to mutiny if not a mutineer himself. The callow youth of three years earlier was no more.

Wouk—who died in 2019, ten days short of his hundred-fourth birthday—knew whereof he wrote. Born in the Bronx, he earned a bachelor's degree from Columbia at the age of nineteen and spent the next few years writing jokes for Fred Allen, one of the most successful radio comics of the era. After Pearl Harbor, Wouk joined the U.S. Naval Reserve and served as an officer on two ships very similar to the fictional *Caine*, and he experienced a typhoon off Okinawa on board one of them. While in the Navy, he wrote his first book, *Aurora*

Dawn (1947). It was chosen as a Book of the Month Club main selection, which, in the 1940s, assured commercial success. His next book, *City Boy* (1948), was a disappointment. But then came *The Caine Mutiny.*

Wouk went on to have a long and successful career (his last book was published on his hundredth birthday) in both fiction (*The Winds of War* and *War and Remembrance*) and nonfiction (*This is My God: The Jewish Way of Life* and *The Language God Talks: On Science and Religion*). But *The Caine Mutiny* is his undoubted masterpiece.

Anatomy of a Murder, by Robert Traver, was published in 1958, and, like *The Caine Mutiny*, was a huge success and a Book of the Month Club main selection, which help land it on the *Times* best-seller list for sixty-two weeks. The following year it was made into a movie by Otto Preminger starring James Stewart, a movie widely regarded as one of the greatest trial films ever made. (The judge in the movie was played—in his only acting role—by Joseph N. Welch, the Boston lawyer who began the destruction of Senator Joseph McCarthy by asking him at the Army–McCarthy hearings, "At long last, have you left no sense of decency?") While the book is a murder mystery in a sense, the reader knows whodunit virtually from page one. The question upon which the plot turns is whether the defendant is guilty of murder or not guilty by reason of temporary insanity.

Robert Traver was the pen name of John D. Voelker, whose long legal career, as both a prosecuting attorney and criminal defense counsel, reached a zenith when he was appointed a justice of the Michigan Supreme Court. To put it mildly, he knew his way around a courtroom and the criminal law.

Born in the small town of Ishpeming in Michigan's remote, sparsely settled Upper Peninsula, Voelker lived there most of his life, and it shaped him deeply. That is where *Anatomy of a Murder* is set, although the names of towns are changed. (The movie was shot entirely in Marquette County, where Ishpeming is located, a fact that plays no small part in its remarkable verisimilitude.)

Besides his legal career, Voelker was a passionate fly fisherman all his life as well as a writer. The protagonist in the book and first-person narrator, Paul Biegler, who is closely modeled on Voelker, is also a fisherman. Voelker had written his first story when he was twelve. He started writing for publication soon after returning to Ishpeming from law school and a stint at a Chicago law firm. By 1954, he had written numerous short stories and articles on fishing as well as three novels, from which, in his words, "the readers stayed away in droves."

He wanted to write a novel about a criminal court case that would cover both the research and preparation as well as the trial itself. As a deeply experienced criminal trial lawyer, Voelker knew how vital research and preparation are to a successful outcome at the trial itself, although most courthouse novels and movies give them short shrift. The literary problem, of course, is to keep the reader interested before getting to the cut and thrust of legal combat in the trial itself.

It is a measure of how well he succeeded that in this page-turning novel the trial doesn't even begin until halfway through the book. And it is this digging into the past of the various witnesses, the uncovering of secrets, the finding of evidence that is the anatomy of a murder. And it is the law that is the true hero of the book.

Voelker chose as a model a case from 1952 in which he had served as defense counsel. It involved an Army lieutenant who had shot and killed a man who, he claimed, had raped his wife. As the homicide had taken place well after the rape, the only possible defense was temporary insanity. But insanity defenses seldom work when the defendant is not obviously crazy. Paul Biegler has to do deep research into Michigan case law to find a strategy that might work and carefully interview the witnesses before he is ready to defend his client in court. Lawyers, like generals, must have a battle plan.

The enormous success of the book allowed Voelker to retire from the Michigan Supreme Court and become a full-time writer (and fisherman). He wrote four more novels about the

legal system as well as anthologies on fishing. But while they were well received, they did not match up to *Anatomy of a Murder*.

Advise and Consent, by Allen Drury, was published in 1959. Like the other two novels it was a blockbuster, spending 102 weeks on the *Times*'s best-seller list and winning the Pulitzer Prize for fiction. In 1962 it was made into a movie, again by Otto Preminger, and with an all-star cast (no fewer than eleven names appeared above the title on posters). One of the stars, Charles Laughton, terminally ill with cancer, gave his last, thrilling performance as Seabright B. Cooley, the senator from South Carolina and president pro tempore of the Senate.

Set in the late 1950s, at the height of the Cold War, the novel revolves around the nomination for Secretary of State of the liberal Robert Leffingwell, whose confirmation requires the "Advice and Consent" of the Senate. It is a controversial nomination, to say the least, and launches an epic political battle in the Senate between liberal and conservative senators.

Born in Texas, in 1918, Drury grew up in California and attended Stanford. He got a job as a journalist after graduation and, following Pearl Harbor, enlisted in the Army, but an old back injury washed him out. He went to Washington, D.C., and spent two years covering the Senate for United Press, a position that allowed him to observe its inner workings as few people can. It is this inside perspective that gives the novel much of its power and appeal.

"Politics," as Peter Finley Dunne famously observed, "ain't bean bag." And that truism is on full display in *Advise and Consent*. It is not a game for gentlemen. Senator Cooley, determined to keep Leffingwell from being confirmed, looks for evidence that he had once been a member of the Communist Party. In the nick of time, he finds it.

The president, determined to get Leffingwell confirmed, finds evidence that Senator Brigham Anderson—senator from Utah and head of the Senate Foreign Relations subcommittee that must approve the nomination before it can go to the full Senate—had once had a brief homosexual tryst years earlier, during the war. The president gives the evidence to the odious McCarthyesque Senator Fred Van Ackerman to put pressure on Anderson to give Leffingwell a pass. The result is explosive.

It has often been asserted that *Advise and Consent* is a *roman à clef*, with the characters modeled on real Washington figures of the time. Drury always denied it, indeed putting the denial in later printings of the book. And it seems that while the characters bring to mind certain politicians of the 1950s, that is only because such politicians are always to be found in Washington.

Drury went on to write several more novels, some of them sequels to *Advise and Consent*. But, as with the books following *The Caine Mutiny* and *Anatomy of a Murder*, while they sold well, none was quite up to the standard of the book that had made him famous.

Reconsiderations

Caledonian seeker

by Steve Morris

You'll find the headstone of Alexander Carmichael (1832–1912) on his home island of Lismore, in the Inner Hebrides of Scotland, in the graveyard of St Moluag's Cathedral. The stone bears a touching inscription:

> Be my soul in peace with thee, Brightness of the mountains. Valiant Michael, meet thou my soul.

It is just the kind of poetic gem, with its high literary style, that you'd expect from the man who, in the nineteenth century, collected the tales of his fellow Hebrideans and then recounted them in the greatest anthology of its kind, the *Carmina Gadelica*. One hundred and twenty years later, Carmichael's towering collection is still in print and has been called a "bible of Celtic Christianity."

More than seven hundred pages long, the compendium presents hundreds of Highlands and Islands hymns, prayers, incantations, and charms. The picture that emerges of Gaelic-speaking Scotland is astounding. These are a nature-loving people, with hearts full of lyric poetry and pride for their island communities. Their religion is a coherent, gentle Christianity, amenable to all.

But there is something odd and liminal about *Carmina Gadelica*. Edinburgh University, which holds Carmichael's papers and notes, pinpoints the "crepuscular rhapsodic mysticism" of the great work. It stood against the very angular evangelical revival sweeping the Highlands and Islands at the time the book was compiled. That was no accident.

The poems within are almost too good to be true. Perhaps we should have asked more questions from the start. As the Edinburgh Celtic Studies historian Ronald Black writes, "everyone agrees Alexander Carmichael existed. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for the contents of *Carmina Gadelica*." Is *Carmina* a literary hoax, a plot to create a smoothed-out reality that never existed? Is it art masquerading as science? Or is it a true masterpiece, one whose glorious achievement of vision and poetry transcends the convoluted story of its creation?

Alexander Carmichael was born on December 1, 1832, the ninth and youngest child of Hugh Carmichael, a farmer and publican, and his wife, Elizabeth MacColl. The family took pride in coming from ancient stock. Alexander's childhood was idyllic, but the Highland Clearances and a famine during his early years seem to have left the young man with a sense of the precariousness of his people's culture. He soon determined to collect the stories and prayers of the crofters before they all went to dust.

Carmichael's portrait, painted by the Scottish artist William Skeoch Cumming in 1899 when the subject was sixty-seven, presents a tall, beefy man in a kilt, with a long white beard. But the appearance of confidence and authority was both hard-won and more fragile than it seemed. Carmichael had no academic training. He was an enthusiast—a story collector—and it seems as if the anxiety of the amateur never quite left him. It

certainly might explain the decades-long gap between the collecting and the publishing of his first volume.

Carmichael's passion was listening to the old folk tales, prayers, and spells of the people of the Highlands and Islands. His career as an exciseman, which had him going home to home across the country, was well suited to this extracurricular endeavor but not without its attendant challenges. (Families who might have had an illicit whisky still out back would have been less accommodating of the tax collector's visits.) It helped that he understood his own people and for many years lived among them. Carmichael assembled the stories he heard and wrote them in field notebooks—often traveling on dangerous and long journeys just to get an interesting fragment from some faraway islander.

When Carmichael died in 1912, his legacy as an author and antiquarian had been seemingly secured by this work, even if only two of the eventual six volumes of *Carmina Gadelica* had been edited and published. But more than half a century later, in 1976, controversy broke out when a Gaelic-studies scholar named Hamish Robertson penned an article that condemned Carmichael's sloppy methodologies and loose relationship with the raw material.

The reality was likely far less scandalous. Carmichael had originally planned a modest book of prayers from Uist, an island in the Outer Hebrides. But after years of collecting pieces of this region's oral traditions, he soon had a problem: there was so much material, how was he to edit it down? The simple book became a six-part colossus—edited and contributed to by many hands, including his wife, daughter, and son-in-law.

By 1882 Carmichael had moved to Edinburgh with his cultured and well-connected wife, and he became a leading figure in the city's Gaelic intellectual circles. He mixed with professors and scholars—"real academics"—who may have persuaded the insecure amateur to take different tracks with the work. Carmichael's propensity to obsessively fiddle with the recorded words—there were often innumerable versions of the same prayers or tales to choose from—led to delay after delay. His desire to construct a heroic persona for a Highland people who were often despised and ridiculed as little better than savages surely also contributed to the interminable process of editing and publishing the work. Both issues bring us to the 1976 article by Robertson, which showed how the final versions had moved some way from the originals. It looked certain that Carmichael had added meter to the verse, invented "Gaelic" words and phrases, sprinkled the text with archaisms, and simply made bits up.

Things could have ended here, with the book left to die a painful and ignoble death. But the case for *Carmina* being a hoax isn't clear cut at all, and the controversy has broader implications on the field of folklore and mythological study. Consider the work of those other extraordinary folklorists—the Brothers Grimm. Jacob Grimm was a scientist and philologist. His brother Wilhelm was a literary scholar with an agenda. The latter wanted to rebuild Germany's confidence and help it to become a unified nation with tangible origins. It was Wilhelm who did almost all the work, and his "true" tales from the folk tradition went through multiple edits at his hands. He created, in other words, a new reality. His aim was to rebuild Germany through traditional tales—the kind that build national identity. Had the brothers just written down the stories verbatim (as many on the scientific side of the folklore brigade said they should), who would have read them? No one outside the academy, doubtless. We need art to help us to inhabit reality.

The same dilemmas and concerns were at hand in Scotland at the time of Carmichael's enterprise. Writers like John Francis Campbell meticulously wrote down exactly what they heard and published it sans alteration. These sorts of efforts are now nearly impossible to read. The truth is that Carmichael wasn't breaking all the norms of folklore collectors at the time. Many folklorists of Carmichael's day held that it was acceptable to "cook" the raw material they worked with. To be sure, some of his work is fairly well done: the longest prose stories are pretty obviously altered. At the same time, the prayers and incantations seem to be

closer to the originals that Carmichael would have heard firsthand.

Hoaxers cover their tracks, but Carmichael kept all his notes, and he was forthright about the way he conducted his writing and fieldwork. (These original manuscript entries are what Robertson judged against the final product in his 1976 article.) Many of his story-hunting trips were perilous and exhausting, often for little success. At one point it is claimed he was badly beaten by a crofter. Who would take such risks if they were going to make everything up? He could have just stayed home.

If not an outright hoax, was Carmichael's work a plot, encouraged by a cabal of clergymen and powerful academics riding the wave of fresh interest in Celtic studies, to create a convenient fiction of the Gaelic "spiritual man?" It is certainly true that *Carmina* leaves out a lot of inconvenient pagan material. Carmichael's modifications present a unified and winning character of the people of the Highlands and Islands.

The archetype of the Spiritual Celt was convenient, to say the least. The bigger and more important question is whether or not the idea of any unified Celtic Christianity is itself preposterous. In truth, the people—either Catholic or Protestant—held the usual mix of beliefs, rationalities, and superstitions. They may not have recognized the kinds of ideas Carmichael was attributing to them.

In light of these various inaccuracies and misrepresentations, is it still worth reading the work? Is it possible to forgive the man who wanted to hear the voices from the past and to preserve a fast-disappearing world for posterity? Undoubtedly, yes: *Carmina Gadelica* is still important. It speaks to some of our deepest needs. When feelings of peril and uncertainty arise within the soul, a Carmichael prayer like the following might touch even the hardest heart:

> Be Thou a smooth way before me,
> Be Thou a guiding star above me,
> Be Thou a keen eye behind me,
> This day, this night, for ever.
> I am weary, and I forlorn,
> Lead Thou me to the land of the angels;
> Methinks it were time I went for a space
> To the court of Christ, to the peace of heaven.

I love the prayers and incantations of *Carmina* because they have the deep ring of truth—as all good art does. Indeed, art often feels more real than reality itself, as Henry James wrote about in *The Real Thing:* "I liked things that appeared; then one was sure." And as James's onetime painting teacher, William Morris Hunt, counseled his students, "You are to draw not reality, but the appearance of reality!" *Carmina* is one of the most beautiful books of poetry and prayers ever created, and it's likely thanks largely to Carmichael's editorial interventions.

Carmichael knew the voice of the Highlanders and Islanders in his heart, and he could write it down precisely because he had heard it and grown up with it. Yes, this helped the cause of rehabilitating the people of Northern Scotland, but that was a by-product, even if Carmichael's well-heeled friends were happy for it to be thus. Carmichael refines some of the roughness of the originals—he smooths edges. If he hadn't, we would not be reading his book now, because in doing so he allows the words to cross through generations.

How do you feel when you read something like this from *Carmina*? Have we been taken in?

> God of the moon, God of the sun,
> God of the globe, God of the stars,
> God of the waters, the land, and the skies,
> Who ordained to us the king of promise.

It doesn't feel fake. But is that enough? Michael Mitton, who has written about Celtic Christianity, explained to me that the reason it feels so real is that it meets one of our great needs: to see the God of gentleness, kindness, and poetry. Carmichael's prayers feel exactly like a homecoming, even if you aren't a Celt. That's good enough for me.

Theater

The most grateful Englishman

by Kyle Smith

Tom Stoppard frequently and approvingly quotes Cecil Rhodes's remark, much ridiculed by those in a position to take their own culture for granted, that "to be born an Englishman is to have drawn first prize in the lottery of life." It's a view Stoppard's stepfather, Kenneth, instilled in the boy from a young age. Born Tomáš Sträussler in Zlín, Czechoslovakia, Stoppard did not arrive in England until he was eight, having had his life upended first by Nazi Germany and, on the other side of the globe, Imperial Japan. Other men might have taken on a hunted or insecure personality from such early traumas, but Stoppard, on the evidence of Hermione Lee's definitive authorized biography, *Tom Stoppard: A Life*, is a case study in the joy and gratitude that comes, or ought to, with being English.[1]

Stoppard, now eighty-three and still a major force in theater—just last January, his play *Leopoldstadt*, about generations of Austrian Jews before and after the Holocaust, debuted to acclaim in London before the hammer of coronavirus struck—has never stopped marveling at the lucky accident of his being raised in England. It's the most spoiled segment of English society that overlooks the country's value. Consider the bristling disgust of, say, Emma Thompson, the London-born, Cambridge-educated, Academy Award–winning writer and actor who sees her native land as a sort of fetid prison camp of the soul, its culture an infection best dealt with by opening all doors and windows as widely as possible to the world. Arguing for the United Kingdom to remain in the European Union in 2016, Thompson famously described Britain as a "tiny little cloud-bolted, rainy corner of sort-of Europe, a cake-filled misery-laden grey old island," adding, "I feel European even though I live in Great Britain." Thompson was born swathed in the prejudices of the self-hating cultural aristocracy (both her parents were actors) and has worked as an entertainer her entire adult life.

Stoppard's background differs slightly. All four grandparents and many other relatives were slaughtered in the Holocaust, while his father, Dr. Eugen Sträussler, is thought to have died along with many others trying to flee Singapore in 1942 when his ship was sunk by Hirohito's invading forces. Stoppard was by age nine the world citizen his cosmopolitan colleagues pretend to be. Far from dismissing his good fortune as his due, he is keenly aware of how differently everything could have turned out. "For every thousand people," he said in 1973, "there's 900 doing the work, ninety doing well, nine doing good and one lucky bastard who's the artist." Staggeringly appreciative, that. It's a wonder he didn't get his artist's license revoked on the spot. Is any group more afflicted with dyspepsia than the successful portion of our creative class? Certainly no other group seems to maintain a higher ratio of status—or income—to upbeat thoughts. Professing woe, especially about one's country and culture, is the default posi-

1 *Tom Stoppard: A Life*, by Hermione Lee; Knopf, 896 pages, $37.50.

tion for Western cultural elites, and has been for at least half a century.

Sir Tom (he was knighted in 1997), however, is a joyous contrarian, as the emeritus Oxford professor Lee shows in her exhaustive (if sometimes exhausting) nine-hundred-page literary biography. Writing with the full cooperation of her subject and his circle, Lee is sometimes thorough to a fault. I could have done without the five-page description of one of Stoppard's houses, nor did I see the point of an almost equally long digression detailing his work on a screen adaptation, never used, of Philip Pullman's atheistic fantasy allegory *Northern Lights*, known in the United States as *The Golden Compass*. (Another writer started from scratch, and the film was released to a collective shrug in 2007.) Still, Lee's slab of a book now stands as the definitive life of the leading playwright of his time. (Ira Nadel in 2002 published an honorable but unauthorized shorter biography, titled *Double Act*. Stoppard, who objects in principle to biography on the reasoning that literal facts obscure deeper truths, claims he never read it. As one of his characters put it in *Indian Ink*: "Biography is the worst possible excuse for getting people wrong.") Lee delves with equal vigor into both life events and literary analysis, devoting considerable space to each major work and the details of their earliest productions, in addition to sensibly explicating the various texts. A small-type listing of Stoppard's credits covers nearly two pages, yet Lee makes room for at least a brief discussion of seemingly every project, even some of no consequence.

It's refreshing that Lee avoids the biographer's trap of subject-loathing (a tendency Stoppard was apparently leery of, hence his refusal to assist any biographer until he had reached the age of seventy-five). She is at pains to illuminate the generosity of his soul, the esteem in which even his surviving ex-wife and several ex-girlfriends hold him, and his extensive portfolio of loving friendships, many with ideological foes such as the hard-Left playwrights Harold Pinter and David Hare. "In the land of showbiz, which is not free of spite, he has an exceptionally good reputation," Lee writes. Yet she concedes, at the very end of the book, that some essence of him remains walled off. Another playwright (name not supplied) contends that he has known Stoppard for forty-five years and yet doesn't know him at all. Stoppard has confessed that he puts on a flashy show while remaining hidden—he calls himself "a repressed exhibitionist."

Lee's project is supported by Stoppard's strong memories, which extend all the way back to early childhood, though he doesn't remember his father except from photographs. The four Sträusslers (including Stoppard's younger brother, Petr, later Peter) earned their ticket out of Zlín through the intercession of Bata, a leading shoe manufacturer that effectively ran the town, even to the extent of operating medical clinics. As the jackboot was about to stomp on Czechoslovakia in 1939, Bata helped arrange for many Jewish families, including that of its company doctor Eugen Sträussler, to escape to its overseas factories. Its Singapore branch was where the Sträusslers headed, by sea, having no inkling that the British colony would be overrun by Japan. The family sought to flee to Australia, but Eugen stayed behind to help the British volunteer defense corps and was killed. Martha Sträussler (known as "Bobby") boarded an American ship with the boys and was surprised to discover only after boarding that it was heading not for Australia but India, where she was to work at a Bata store.

In Darjeeling, Petr and Tomáš attended an American Methodist school, and their mother met a British major, Ken Stoppard. Martha accepted his wedding proposal, and the family moved to Derbyshire, England, after the war in early 1946. Young Tom reveled in English country life, attending first the Dolphin School near his Derbyshire home, then Pocklington, in Yorkshire. At seventeen he left school, decided he was a journalist, and talked his way into a job at a paper in Bristol, where his mother and stepfather then lived. Among the friends he made while hanging around the theater scene in Bristol was an up-and-coming young actor named Peter O'Toole, with whom Stoppard was in a love triangle (the girl they both dated was Isabel Dunjohn), and who awed Stop-

pard with his performances in Shaw's *Man and Superman* in 1957 and in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* the following year. Stoppard was with O'Toole in Stratford-upon-Avon the morning the latter became famous, as congratulatory phone calls and newspaper reviews praising O'Toole's Shylock poured in. Observing the hubbub, Stoppard told his mother, "I'd like to be famous!"

Though he was as an artist inspired by the Fifties movement toward existential unease as captured in *Godot* and Pinter's *The Birthday Party*, Stoppard's work is distinguished by its varsity-wit enthusiasm—delight in language, in learning, in games. In his best plays—*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (1966), *Jumpers* (1972), *Travesties* (1974), *The Real Thing* (1982), *Arcadia* (1993), *The Coast of Utopia* (2002), and *The Hard Problem* (2015)—Stoppard delivers everything a theatergoer could ask for: the champagne of Wilde and the beef of Ibsen and Shaw, prepared with the Continental flourishes of Beckett and Pinter. Unlike those titans, however, Stoppard dismantled dangerous social myths in the process. One comes away from a Stoppard performance admiring not just the genius of his technique but the substance of his ongoing argument—against utopianism, artistic faddism, and atheistic materialism.

Travesties, for instance, is a zany concoction that is on the surface a pastiche of Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* but also makes an aesthetic and political argument by commingling the Great War experiences in Zürich of the exiles V. I. Lenin, James Joyce, and Tristan Tzara. All three are revolutionaries, but Stoppard properly separates Joyce as an inspired builder of a new edifice, whereas Lenin and Tzara merely sought to destroy old ones. Stoppard often points out that writing a play requires both skill and imagination; someone who has the former but not the latter might make a delightful wicker basket, whereas someone having the latter but not the former gives us only "modern art." Tzara and the other Dadaists personify the kind of vapid (if critically praised) art he deplores.

His work has already proved able to extend its appeal across generations. *Travesties* was smashingly revived in its 2016–18 incarnation in London and New York, while the fiftieth anniversary production of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, the play that made his name when Kenneth Tynan (and Laurence Olivier) bought it for the nascent National Theatre within days of its debut at the Edinburgh Fringe, was equally well received in London in 2017. Meanwhile, Stoppard's fourteen radio plays, which he started writing in his twenties as a tyro playwright but has continued to compose sporadically across the decades, have just been collected and published as an audiobook by the BBC. *Leopoldstadt*, in which he considered his own heritage like never before, is due to return to the Wyndham Theatre in London on June 12. (No New York production has yet been scheduled.)

Stoppard has hinted that the latter might be his last play; he often takes ages to come up with a suitable idea, though between plays he keeps up a ferocious pace of other activity. I met him unexpectedly once, at the Four Seasons Hotel in New York in the fall of 2006, where the English director Paul Greengrass was the honoree at a small party promoting his riveting film *United 93*. I was talking to Greengrass when he said, "I'd like you to meet Tom, he's writing my next movie." I turned, and there was Stoppard, matey and charming and blithely unconcerned with whether I or anyone else was aware of his stature. I think I mumbled something fraught with awe, but my mind has gone blank on the matter. I can't rule out the possibility that I bowed, or requested to touch the hem of his garment. The film, by the way, was *The Bourne Ultimatum*—one of dozens of popcorn pictures Stoppard worked on over the years—but you won't find his name in its credits. Universal Pictures reacted frostily to Stoppard's ending, which killed off the hero of the billion-dollar franchise, and little or nothing of his script made it into the finished film. Yes, even Tom Stoppard gets rejected; the screenplays he wrote adapting *A Christmas Carol* (for the director Bennett Miller) and his own *Arcadia* (for the producer Scott Rudin) generated only silence from those who commissioned them.

Those misadventures call others to mind. For years in the 1990s, Stoppard was contracted by

Universal to punch up various scripts it had in development, and he spent several weeks working with—ye gods—Steven Spielberg on an attempt to fashion an animated film from Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Cats*. Stoppard also contributed without credit to such films as *Medicine Man*; a Charlie Chaplin biopic (developed as *Charlie*, released as *Chaplin*); *Restoration*; *Sleepy Hollow*; *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*; *102 Dalmatians*; a 2010 Ridley Scott *Robin Hood* that Stoppard later derided as "Robin Hood invented socialism"; and one about a hausfrau werewolf called *Mom*. Among his many credited works—almost all of them built on someone else's idea—are the screenplays for *The Human Factor* (1979), *Brazil* (1985), *Empire of the Sun* (1987), *The Russia House* (1990), *Billy Bathgate* (1991), *Vatel* (2000), *Enigma* (2001), *Anna Karenina* (2012), *Tulip Fever* (2017), and *Shakespeare in Love* (1998), the only unqualified success in the bunch and the one for which he won an Oscar. One might consider most of these efforts *infra dig* for a writer of Stoppard's ability (including the meretricious Harvey Weinstein picture *Shakespeare in Love*), and few of them were even Stoppardian. An exception was his exquisite BBC/HBO adaptation of the Ford Madox Ford tetralogy, *Parade's End* (2012). The rest were, for the most part, paycheck jobs, and on these duds Stoppard frittered away much of his career, which might have been more wisely spent on his calling, itself hardly unremunerative. In a typical year Stoppard has productions running all over the world (*The Coast of Utopia*, for instance, ran for ten years in Russia), and, unusually for a playwright of our times, he even sells lots of published plays. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* has sold around one million copies and *The Real Thing* almost as many. Theater has been faithful to him. Why did he expend so much energy running around with those Hollywood slatterns?

Lee is not a probing interviewer any more than she is a humorist (the closest she comes to a witty line is "It remains to be seen if Stoppard's Ghost of Christmas Past has a future," on page 721), so the question is never posed, but there are times in this book when the reader is nearly compelled to throw the thing on the floor and shout, "Damnit, Stoppard, stop faffing about and get back to the real thing." Stoppard has allowed as many as nine years to slip away between plays; while the list of major works is impressive—there are more than a dozen major original plays, counting *The Coast of Utopia* as one, plus several important translations of Continental playwrights and Chekhov—it could have been considerably longer. Stoppard would protest that ideas for plays simply don't come to him very often, but perhaps he was crowding them out of his mindspace with all of these projects of secondary, tertiary, and quaternary import.

I do not mean to downplay his achievement in the theater, unmatched and unapproached by anyone living. "Polymathic, brainy, inspirational, passionate, rigorous, sympathetic, conservative with a small 'c,' irresistible, supportive, witty" are some of the words Lee has heard when soliciting adjectives to describe the great man, as well as "curious, open, gentle, thoughtful, amatory, daunting, clear-thinking, focused, stimulating, brave, warm-hearted." Quite a satisfying haul of compliments, yet Lee reveals in the same paragraph that she has been holding back a bit, because the *most* common descriptors are these: "loyal, kind, considerate, glamorous, generous and intelligent." (Though he is also apparently "not as nice as people think," she says.) The playwright is as expansive as his work; he has given to his associates as assiduously as he has given to his art. One finishes the book in a state of immense gratitude that Stoppard exists. Few who do so will disagree with a remark, attributed to "a famous writer, who loves [Stoppard] dearly": he is "one of the most important people in the world."

Art

Salman Toor at the Whitney

by Karen Wilkin

Slender, agile figures, with wistful expressions, engaged in unremarkable activities in very particular settings. Vigorous brushmarks and sensuous paint. Passionate color, now intense and delectable, now dulled down and a little murky. Diaristic implied narratives, enacted by multiple characters. Ambiguous, contemplative, pared-down images, with everything intensified by animated contours. Energetically brushed expanses that seem to press upon the protagonists of the elusive dramas. We begin to recognize a narrow-faced, handsome, dark-bearded fellow who appears and reappears, in different guises, and soon realize that he and many of the other figures share an exaggeratedly long nose, as if they were all members of the same family. Pinocchio? Fierce. Playful. Elegant expressionism? Mannerism, wrenched into the twenty-first century?

These are first impressions of "Salman Toor: How Will I Know," the young, Pakistani-born artist's first solo museum show, part of the emerging artists' program at the Whitney Museum.[1] (The title comes from a song that the artist says he likes dancing to.) Organized by Christopher Y. Lew, a curator at the Whitney, and Ambika Trasi, curatorial assistant, the exhibition brings together fifteen of Toor's recent paintings on plywood, made between 2018 and 2020. We learn that Toor, born in Lahore, Pakistan, in 1983, has an MFA from the Pratt Institute and now lives mostly in New York. He paints, we are told, imagined "intimate views of young, queer Brown men in New York and South Asia," and considers the figures who populate his paintings "to be fictional versions of himself and his friends."

Four Friends (2019, private collection), the first work we encounter, states the principal theme of "How Will I Know" and announces Toor's strengths as a provocative storyteller, colorist, and manipulator of paint. Two lean young men dance ecstatically in a sparsely furnished, eerily lit living room. Two others, one with a mop of dirty blond curls, cuddle on a sofa, cell phone and drink in hand. A flood of urgently brushed, aqueous green dominates the setting. The paint sits up on the hard surface of the plywood. The inflections of the robust application slow down our exploration of the green surface, yet, despite this nod at painterly painting, the agitated green-ness holds everything together the way the subtly modulated, untroubled field of red does Henri Matisse's *The Red Studio*. The delicious pink trousers of the central, upright dancer anchor the entire painting, making us take into account his pink neckerchief and then follow the many notes of dull yellow that flicker through the painting: socks, shirt, a lamp base, skin tones.

Nothing is overtly Matissean about *Four Friends*, other than the sheer extent of the green—not the paint handling, nor the play of contours, nor the theme and variation of

1 "Salman Toor: How Will I Know" opened at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, on November 13, 2020, and remains on view through April 4, 2021.

relationships among individual elements that knit so many of the French master's works together—but we soon become aware that we are reading *Four Friends* just as we read *The Red Studio*. We slowly work our way around the fictive interior, taking inventory of furniture, a bookshelf, drawings on the wall, shadows, lamps, wine glasses, the lit windows of a building across the street, screened by the bare branches of a tree, seen through a window framed by a string of lights, and more. We focus on details of clothing, cataloguing shorts, modishly torn jeans, and decorative stitching. We itemize socks, shoes, and bare feet, and make note of sideburns, exuberant curls, skin color from rich brown to pasty pale, body hair, jewelry.

This close looking heightens our awareness of how Toor's touch responds to the contours of his imagery. We are captured by the flurries of bold strokes surrounding the dancers—suggestions that their movements made their surroundings vibrate—and find ourselves concentrating not on the imagery, but the fact of paint and gesture once again. The muscular brushmarks and coiling rhythms make us think about Toor's chosen ancestors among his modernist predecessors: Vincent van Gogh, perhaps Chaim Soutine, and, more recently, the New Leipzig School—think Neo Rauch, absent the bombast and pretentiousness.

But the tasty color and sinuous, slim figures also have echoes of Florentine Mannerism, especially Pontormo at his most luminous and extravagant. I kept remembering that wonderful little installation featuring his recently cleaned Carmignano *Visitation* at the Morgan Library & Museum two years ago, a glorious painting notable for its tight bouquet of four standing women—the Virgin, Saint Elizabeth, and two attendants—all swathed in gorgeous silks: pink, teal, mint green, orange. These high-minded art historical associations notwithstanding, there's also an undercurrent of cartoon-ish humor that seasons Toor's images like a squeeze of lemon, or, to change metaphors, that are as impossible to ignore as the bass of music from a neighboring apartment—or from the speakers on the window sill of *Four Friends*.

The most compelling paintings in "How Will I Know," even the most economical, share this combination of seriousness and playfulness, material richness and implied narrative. They depend upon a slightly disconcerting tug of war between specific details and open-endedness, with a bracing touch of acid. There's a lot to look at, even in the most simplified compositions, such as the deceptively straightforward *Man with Face Creams and Phone Plug* (2019, Whitney) or *Two Men with Vans, Tie, and Bottle* (2019, private collection). In these, we are confronted by half-length, narrow figures linked by that family resemblance we have learned to recognize. Slope-shouldered and as distinctively clothed as the men in *Four Friends*, they dispassionately contemplate their meager possessions, spread out before them on bare tabletops. These imaginary self-portraits, we learn, are inspired by the often demeaning treatment of Middle Eastern and South Asian men traveling abroad, seen from the viewpoint of the anonymous customs official who authorizes entry or pulls travelers aside for further screening. Whether or not we know what provoked the paintings, Toor's figures, in this series, seem vulnerable, fragile, almost engulfed by the roughly stroked backgrounds. The muted, grayed-down palette reinforces the mood.

Two large figure groups, *Tea* (2020, private collection) and *Bar Boy* (2019, Whitney), are among the most ambitious works in the show, gatherings of self-contained characters who share the space with Toor's alter ego, presented as the Other: vertical, thin, compressed—a point of stillness and seeming isolation in complex compositions. In *Tea*, a family group sits at a table, crowded to the left side of the panel, while the standing Toor figure remains apart, arms at his sides, clad in artfully torn jeans that we recall from *Four Friends*. In an audio clip on the Whitney's website, Toor says that he imagined the scene as an encounter between a conservative group and someone "emancipated" but distanced, with the lovingly painted still life objects on the table, including some opulent fruit, becoming surrogates for the unspoken.

In the all-male crowd in *Bar Boy*, lurid light reveals the family resemblance many of them

share, as well as dramatic differences—here a few blonds stand out by contrast—as they cluster together or perch on stools, ignore one another, embrace, or even sleep. In the center of the painting, that now-familiar slope-shouldered young man, wearing a fetching broad-brimmed hat and an earring, stands apart from the others, as if dividing the room, lighting his own face with a cell phone. The rest of the figures, absorbed in their own encounters or self-contained, ignore him. Prompted by the long noses, those of us raised on Carlo Collodi's classic tale of the puppet who wanted to be a real boy start thinking about the notably flexible, sometimes schematic, long-nosed figures as marionettes, an association that Toor himself supports in an audio clip. As in *Four Friends*, *Tea* and *Bar Boy* are dominated by an all-enveloping expanse of green, a color that Toor says he finds "inviting, glamorous, and poisonous." That's an excellent summation of the affect of the bar painting; the insistent green of the interior is at once verdant, otherworldly, and toxic.

Other paintings are more anecdotal and occasionally more light-hearted. Some take as their points of departure figures on a stoop, a puppy play date, and welcoming a visitor, while still others address such challenging notions as harassment by venal police and conceptions of beauty. An enigmatic (green) picture of the interior of a closet, lit by a bare bulb, with a single hanger on the rod, teeters on the edge of the sinister with its pile of body parts—are they disarticulated mannequins or marionettes, or something dreadful?—and a pink-feather boa.

Two small male nudes read as sketchy, brushy versions of those designed-to-titillate Rococo paintings of plump, rosy (female) nudes disporting themselves on rumpled bedding; here, however, the protagonist is a thin, dark-skinned male and the props a cell phone and a laptop, rather than a silky lapdog. While it's difficult to tell from the limited selection, the show and the works on the Whitney's website suggest that Toor's more recent paintings are more inventively constructed, more ambiguous, and less anecdotal than those made a few years ago.

One of the most compelling of the works in "How Will I Know," *Nightmare* (2020, private collection), announces a feeling tone entirely different from any of the others. The various leafy greens we've encountered elsewhere have faded to a near-monochrome ominous gray-ochre with sour yellow overtones. In a shallow space against a rough brick wall, two men, one standing, one kneeling, watch a naked man writhing on the sidewalk before them. Their clothing and skin tones lock them into the bricks, a connection emphasized by their ample shadows. By contrast, the skin of the supine man, arms extended upwards, is a warm brown; he is further differentiated from the beholders by a wash of pale light. The scene seems to be taking place in the present, but the pose and placement of the naked man make it impossible not to think of the countless images of the Conversion of Saul, dazzled by divine light and fallen from his horse, transformed into the disciple Paul on the road to Damascus. I kept equating the naked man in *Nightmare* with the similarly posed, clothed Saul, imprisoned by the legs of his horse, in Caravaggio's stunning painting of that fraught moment in Santa Maria del Popolo, in Rome.

Art world mores change. For some years, only the artist and those with identical backgrounds, experience, and predilections were thought capable of accurately "unpacking" the work of art. The rest of us were supposed to rely on the artist's often lengthy written explications. Apparently, works of art were not trusted to speak for themselves, nor were ordinary viewers assumed to be capable of grasping meaning and intention without extensive guidance. Admittedly, given the hermetic, self-referential nature of a lot of work made at the time, these were often accurate assessments. I recall a particularly opaque Robert Gober show with an immense volume of commentary, bigger than a Manhattan phone directory in pre-digital days, open on a lectern; otherwise-baffled viewers were supposed to study the book for instruction and direction, if they had a couple of hours to spare. More recently, as the outcry over Dana

Schutz's tribute to Emmet Till revealed, it's the artist who must share the ethnos, culture, and all the rest of it associated with the subject he or she chooses to address, no matter how obliquely. Making work stimulated by anything other than the artist's own history and inheritance, it appears, is not permitted, even though carrying this notion to its logical conclusion disbars the entire Western canon. Titian, a Christian Venetian, should never have painted those scenes of Greek myths.

Yet that is not to undervalue the resonance of art that seems to reflect deep feeling and the particulars of its maker—work such as Toor's paintings in "How Will I Know," which are obviously informed by lived experience. As a young, gay, South Asian man who divides his time between New York and Pakistan, he can't be accused, as Schutz was, of making unauthorized use of a subject that doesn't belong to him. But if the qualifications required of the viewer still apply, a different question arises. Am I, as a not-young, straight, white, female, native New Yorker (albeit one who frequented her share of equivocal bars with her gay friends and attended their raucous parties) allowed to voice an opinion about Toor's work? Despite those instructive experiences, am I missing coded references? Are the (to my mind, enriching) art-historical connections that close looking at Toor's paintings suggested to me simply a product of my Eurocentric education and expertise, or are they evidence of insight into the artist's intentions?

Numerous possibilities are suggested by "The Self as Cypher: Salman Toor's Narrative Paintings," an essay by Ambika Trasi, the show's co-curator, available on the Whitney's website, along with audio clips of the artist discussing three of the paintings on show (which I recommend). I take some comfort in the fact that "Salman Toor: How Will I Know" is installed in the gallery on the Whitney's ground floor that is always free and open to the public, a location that suggests a desire for the widest possible audience, not a specialized group of viewers. In any event, the best of Toor's work seems to me to be so strong that it requires no special pleading.

Exhibition note

"Engineer, Agitator, Constructor:
The Artist Reinvented"
The Museum of Modern Art, New York.
December 13, 2020–April 10, 2021

When notice of "Engineer, Agitator, Constructor: The Artist Reinvented" arrived in my inbox, I gave the e-mail a cursory scan and promptly deposited it in my trash folder. Knowing that curators have a tendency to overlay contemporary mores onto historical precedent, I feared this MOMA show would have "Woke" stamped all over it. The exhibition title reminded me of the initial wave of political correctness some thirty years ago. At that time, "cultural worker" had been mooted as a replacement for the word "artist"—the latter carrying with it the gamey stench of elitism. Starry-eyed soul that I am, I thought "cultural worker" had long been consigned to the circular file of post-Marxist assaults on the language. A quick surf of the internet proved otherwise: "cultural worker" has become part of the lingua franca for the enlightened among us. There is, I learned, an organization dubbed Cultural Workers Organize—its stated mission being the fomentation of "collective responses to precarity." It's a hop, skip, and click from this kind of thing to engineers, agitators, and constructors.

"Precarity" was, in fact, my state of mind when I visited MOMA and wandered into "Engineer, Agitator, Constructor." The first thing to be read on the introductory wall text is that "the title 'artist' is an insult." The exhibition catalogue goes further, including what appears to be a snippet of free verse: "No more painters, no more writers, no more musicians . . . no more, no more, no more, nothing, nothing, nothing." The "artist-proletarian," we are duly informed, will usher in "the language of the masses, not the individual." Should one have the stomach for *pronunciamentos* of this sort, they can be readily gleaned from any number of Twitter feeds, newspapers, and academic journals. The aforementioned quotes? They come not from a usual suspect like *The New York Times*, but from

Georg Grosz, John Heartfield, Louis Aragon, and Raoul Hausmann. Troublemakers all, for a time anyway, and integral figures—dare one say "artists"?—during a signal moment in twentieth-century art. Those with a sense of historical sweep will recognize the names. Or maybe not. Cultural memory ain't what it used to be. Which is a significant reason "Engineer, Agitator, Constructor" proves to be a noteworthy event.

The exhibition serves as a showcase for the museum's 2018 acquisition of some three hundred works on paper from the collection of Merrill C. Berman, a financial advisor with a predilection for the graphic arts. The curatorial focus is on the international avant-garde—specifically, how it responded to and was shaped by historical events, chief among them World War I and the devastation of Europe, along with the Russian Revolution. The ascendance of mass media is equally attended to, as is its re-imagining by designers whose artistic agenda was no less radical than their politics. As such, "Engineer, Agitator, Constructor" errs on the side of reproducible materials. It contains a handful of paintings, sculptures, and industrial objects; a sampling of collages; and an abundance of brash and propulsive posters—maybe too abundant. The compositional strategies of the Russian Constructivists, as well as those of their followers, were contrived to arrest the passersby's attention when encountered at a magazine kiosk or on a city wall. As museum pieces, one bullying tract on the Socialist Offensive followed by another (and another) tends to work against one's powers of concentration. Artifacts this loud need space and context in which to echo. The installation at MOMA muffles their audacity.

"Engineer, Agitator, Constructor" begins with Russian Constructivism, touching upon its roots in Suprematism with figures like Kazimir Malevich and Lyubov Popova, and then glances upon Dadaism and Neo-Plasticism. Collage and photo-montage are given prominence, as they betoken not only the mixing of mediums, but a concomitant blurring of artistic disciplines. Organized around a discrete set of themes, the exhibition makes a telling shift from subsections titled "Artist as Agitator" and "Activating Data" to "Artist as Adman" and "An Expert in Publicity." That design innovations predicated on the theories of Karl Marx would funnel their way up—or, depending on how one looks at these things, *down*—to Madison Avenue is a hindsight rich in irony. Still, the heady atmosphere of "agitation–propaganda" dominates, and the confluence of pictorial innovation and extremist politics is emphasized. In that regard, the MOMA show engenders consternation. The so-called Communist Experiment was an epic catastrophe. Can one commend artists who were in thrall to its illusions for pictorial know-how without making a hash of history?

Not a few engineers, agitators, and constructors found themselves crushed by those they sought to lionize. Gustav Klutsis, a gifted artist hailing from Latvia and a Stalinist through and through, was summarily executed as "an enemy of the state" in 1938. (No utopian deed, it seems, goes unpunished.) Klutsis's work is given a prominent berth at MOMA, as are other talents whose work merits consideration, including Natalia Pinus, Nikol Sedelnikov, Elena Semenova, Varvara Stepanova, Władysław Strzemiński, and Valentina Kulagina, but not Lydia Naumova, whose posters commemorating the International Trade Union privilege bureaucratic didactics over visual legibility. The Tbilisi-born Solomon Telingater is a find—his nimble employment of collage brings a rare and welcome wit to the proceedings. Humor, albeit largely unintentional, figures into Bart van der Leck's studies for an ad campaign commissioned by Delft Salad Oil. Van der Leck applied de Stijl principles to the image of a mustachioed gentleman surrounded by bottles of salad dressing. The corporate overlords were not amused by the resulting array of dancing geometric shapes. Van der Leck lost the job. The moral? Revolutionary impulses will only get you so far—the real world is obstinate in that way. This sobering lesson may not be the starting point of this ambitious and instructive exhibition, but it is the finish line for those with the eyes to see it.

—Mario Naves

Gallery chronicle
by James Panero

"Albers and Morandi: Never Finished" is one of those sublime, museum-quality exhibitions where sight alone is allowed to inform and delight.[1] "Museum-quality" might do a disservice, in fact, as the qualities of our museums are increasingly drawn to the verbal, even the hectoring and didactic, over the pictorial. Now on view at David Zwirner, this exhibition is near perfect in its selection, presentation, and insight. The result is stunning, even dumbfounding, in how it shows painting in its own language, on its own terms, and, at its best, speaking across styles in visual conversation.

Although near exact contemporaries—Josef Albers was born in 1888; Giorgio Morandi in 1890—these two artists seemingly painted worlds apart. Albers was theory. Morandi was practice. The hard edges of Albers looked forward. The soft contours of Morandi looked back. Or so we were told. "Never Finished" finds their shared affinities. They shared, for one, the same absorptive palette. Rather than radiate out, pale blues, airy grays, buttery yellows, and earthy browns pull us in. The two artists also approached composition in complementary ways, exploring their own recurring motifs. *Simplex munditiis* is the phrase that comes to mind from the recesses of high school Latin—the Horatian line that might translate as "simple in its refinements." Both Morandi and Albers distilled their paintings to their own bare minimums of essential information, each paying respect, one might even say "homage," to their chosen forms.

Seen together, Morandi brings out the softness of Albers's line, while Albers reveals the sharpness of Morandi's shapes. Up close, Albers is all edge, but back away and his squares, despite their flat brushwork, take on a mysterious glow. From afar, Morandi's still lifes seem extra still, but get closer and those squares, rectangles, and triangles come alive in their own mysterious ways.

Each artist finds a balance in his compositional energies. Albers looked for the tension between figure and frame. In all of his signature "Homage," just what, precisely, is the "Square," and what is the frame around it? Beyond the square forms on masonite, here, in certain works, the frames themselves thicken to become part of the overall compositions.

Albers's designs seem to tunnel inward, often from light outer forms to darker voids. His innermost squares are both absences and presences, forms floating on top that also sink beneath. Morandi finds a similar tension between subject and object. Just what is the "natura" of his "morta"? Is it the canvas itself, so sensuously brushed, or the vessels depicted therein? Here, rather than forward-facing, Morandi's frames are allowed to recede, with his canvases now floating in the void. As curated by the gallery's David Leiber, this exhibition makes the most of its space and light. Each room uses paired works and lines of sight to tunnel from one to the next, through evolving moods and tones,

1 "Albers and Morandi: Never Finished" opened at David Zwirner, New York, on January 7 and remains on view through April 3, 2021.

in a painterly conversation that is, indeed, "never finished."

Just up the block from Zwirner, last month at Elizabeth Harris, that small, serious gallery holding out among the megas of Chelsea, "Victor Pesce: Still Life" revealed the life in the stillness.[2] With unmistakable homage to Morandi, and perhaps not a little to Albers, Pesce painted basic forms with complex intensity. Created in the last twelve years of his life—Pesce died in 2010 at the age of seventy-one—the works on view depicted blocks and bags, boxes and vases. Over time, a simplicity of means betrays a strangeness of meaning, as these still lifes dissolve into abstractions of oil and ideations of shape. Just what is that haunting green block of *Bridge* (2007)? Pesce looked for the bones of form. "In the language of painting," as John Goodrich writes in his catalogue essay, "he found the means of making them rhythmically, vitally alive—*known*, as a painter might know them."

Spread across the gallery's two Chelsea venues, Miles McEnery last month enlightened the dark days of winter with a luminous husband–wife double-header. "Wolf Kahn: The Last Decade 2010–2020" looked to the artist's late pastel-like landscapes. "Emily Mason: Chelsea Paintings" opened a window onto the sunny compositions the artist developed in her New York loft, in which she had worked since 1979.[3] Taken together, the paired exhibitions honored two artists, married for sixty-two years and both recently deceased, who maintained a connection with Tenth Street and, in their enduring work, each other.

In her nearly square canvases, here dating from 1978 to 1988, Mason lit up her compositions with washes of color that appear like dapples of light. As though illuminated by the sunshine from a window, her oils operate more like photo emulsion, seemingly brightened by luminous rays passing over their surfaces. At their best, as in *The Green In Go* (1983), these passages open up her designs. Streaks of light pull us into her abstractions that might otherwise be too densely color-filled to unpack.

Mason's abstract dynamics revealed something about her husband's landscapes a block away. Late in life, Kahn's woodsy scenes became a thicket of blowing, branching brushstrokes. The feeling of vernal softness, of a verdure perfumed with yellows, oranges, and greens, went right to his surfaces. Yet Kahn left a hint of depth, a spot of color or light, to signal distance. In *Redwoods* (2019), a bit of sky viewed through the trees brings us into the scene. In *Woodland Density* (2019), a blue hill, as though cast in shadow, carves out deeper space. Such glimpses, whether of the horizon or a cabin or a woodland stream, offer just the right destination in the abstract wilderness.

Anyone who has ever mixed intensely chromatic paints will notice that the results are not brighter colors but duller murkiness. That's Color Theory 101. In her alchemical experiments with pigments and polymers, Jill Nathanson looks for ways to prove color theory wrong. Through abstractions created of translucent layers of acrylic, polymers, and oil, which she pours onto panel, Nathanson tries to find the light of her colorful combinations. In "Light Phrase," her latest exhibition at Chelsea's Berry Campbell Gallery, on view last month, Nathanson looked to enlarge and refine these fluid forms.[4]

Unlike the opaque layering of oil on canvas, Nathanson's translucent media are far less forgiving in their combinations and permutations. Occasionally the experiments go awry. In *Sparkshift* (2020), shimmering pools of purples, blues, oranges, and reds risk puddling at one point into a brown. In other compositions, such as *Through Another's* (2020), color-rich curves make some abrupt turns that feel overly manipulated. The best forms were those that,

2 "Victor Pesce: Still Life" was on view at Elizabeth Harris Gallery, New York, from January 7 through February 27, 2021.

3 "Emily Mason: Chelsea Paintings" and "Wolf Kahn: The Last Decade 2010–2020" were on view at Miles McEnery Gallery, New York, from January 7 through February 13, 2021.

4 "Jill Nathanson: Light Phrase" was on view at Berry Campbell, New York, from January 7 through February 6, 2021.

despite their complex creation, seemed simple, even natural, in occurrence. Take the upward swirl of *Tan Transpose* (2020) or the sparkling beach glass of *Only a Friend* (2020). Here were crystal visions filtered through green-, blue-, yellow-, and rose-colored glasses.

"Parts of a World" is an apt title for an exhibition of Jane Freilicher's still lifes. The artist could take on a world of parts and incorporate them into a painted whole. Last month Kasmin Gallery presented fifteen of these still lifes, painted over five decades beginning in the early 1950s.[5] In her quotidian visions of fish and flowers, Freilicher often painted the views from her beach-scrub window in Water Mill, Long Island, and her greenhouse-like studio overlooking the rooftops of New York's East Village. Near and far, inside and out are taken in with equal measure. A single color then connects the disparate parts. What results is a mood, a world of sense and sensation that left me smelling the goldenrod and forsythia and hungry for the oranges and oysters.

It's been a year for keeping things in house. For the painter Deborah Brown, the household gods of kachina dolls, glass figurines, and pet dogs all become subject matter in her latest, plague-year body of work, on view last month at Anna Zorina Gallery.[6] A painter of loose lines and sun-drenched colors, Brown never lost the sense for the light of her Pasadena youth, even when walking her dog Zeus in the industrial business zone of East Williamsburg, Brooklyn. Brown looks for the animism in everyday scenes. Twenty-five years ago, for a mosaic series in the Houston Street subway station, she reimagined the train platforms with sea life swimming among the straphangers. Now skewed perspectives of domestic scenes, starring the bric-à-brac we have all rediscovered, find the humor and warmth of a year of staying in.

The minimalist 1970s challenged the expressionist 1950s. For Jack Tworkov, at one time a burning young painter of the New York School, the answer was to cool his molten compositions into glass and stone. Now at Van Doren Waxter, "Towards Nirvana / Works from the 70s" collects these prismatic, architectural constructions of black, white, and gray.[7] A fine essayist and a chair of Yale's art department in the 1960s, Tworkov always reflected on art and history and his role within it. This exhibition includes a catalogue essay by the curator Jason Andrew and a sample of Tworkov's own writing that well represents his broad perspective. It should not have been unexpected that Tworkov, entering the 1970s, would seek a new path. "I am tired of the artist's agonies," he remarked in 1974. His answer was to look to systems—the movement of chess pieces or the rules of composition—to distill his abstractions. His wild mark-making became more like hatches, his surfaces like etched planes overlapping and folding in on themselves. The exhibition at Van Doren Waxter reveals the color and heart that still energized these cerebral constructions. A dot of red or dash of yellow electrifies these abstractions far more than some wild expressionist brush.

Sharon Butler may have identified the "new casualism" of the outer-borough aesthetic, that studied desultoriness of what we might call the Jefferson Street Touch, but her latest paintings evince a new formalist intent. I like all the buttoning up. In her latest exhibition at Theodore:Art, forms and patterns have matured in her compositions.[8] The contingent line has developed into the assured mark. The white holes of *Pink (Dec 19, 2018)* (2020) play between figure and ground. The rectangles of *May 29, 2018* (2020) balance like pickup sticks. Meanwhile her brush handling has replaced freshness with maturity. Surfaces have aged. These paintings have a history. It's been a year for feeling the years.

5 "Jane Freilicher: Parts of a World" was on view at Kasmin Gallery, New York, from January 21 through February 27, 2021.

6 "Deborah Brown: Things As They Are" was on view at Anna Zorina Gallery, New York, from January 7 through February 13, 2021.

7 "Tworkov: Towards Nirvana / Works from the 70s" opened at Van Doren Waxter, New York, on January 14 and remains on view through March 20, 2021.

8 "Sharon Butler: Morning in America" opened at Theodore:Art, Brooklyn, on January 15 and remains on view through March 7, 2021.

Music

Livestream chronicle

by Jay Nordlinger

December 10 is Human Rights Day—because, on that date, the United Nations adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, in 1948. December 10 is also the day on which the Nobel Prizes are awarded, in Stockholm and Oslo. That is sheer coincidence: on December 10, Alfred Nobel, the establisher and benefactor of the prizes, died (in 1896).

Last December, a Human Rights Day concert was given on the twelfth, which is close enough to the actual date. The concert had extra significance in 2020, in that it also marked the seventy-fifth anniversary of the U.N. This concert was a piano recital—played by Grigory Sokolov, the great Russian born in 1950. According to the concert's publicity, Sokolov is "perhaps the most revered pianist alive."

You know, publicity or not, that's true.

The recital took place in Geneva, at the Palace of Nations, the onetime home of the League of Nations. Specifically, the recital took place in the Human Rights and Alliance of Civilizations Room, which used to be known as "Room XX." It was refurbished in 2008, and its outstanding feature is its ceiling—or rather, the painting on it. This work is marvelously colorful. The artist is Miquel Barceló, of Spain. More particularly, Barceló is from Mallorca, which has a place in musical history: it was there that Chopin and George Sand spent time together.

Not many were in attendance when Sokolov gave his recital (owing to pandemic restrictions). But he bowed to the handful with his usual gravity.

He opened with Schumann, and not common Schumann, either: the *Four Fugues*, Op. 72. Schumann wanted to have his say, or have a go, in this old form, and these pieces are interesting. You can think of them as fugues à la Schumann. Sokolov then moved on to more Schumann: something slightly more common, but still not often heard in the recital hall (or a palace of nations).

This is, or these are, the *Bunte Blätter*, or "Colored Leaves," Op. 99, a collection of fourteen pieces. They are very much like Schumann: child-like, ingenuous; subtle, clever; dark, disturbed. He is a somewhat mysterious composer, as well as a great one. Many of his pieces here, as elsewhere, are like songs—essentially songs without words (to borrow Mendelssohn's designation of pieces of his own). How did Schumann decide which melodies, or ideas, would be songs—proper songs, with words—and which would be songs without words? I think he had so many good melodies and good ideas, it hardly mattered.

Grigory Sokolov played the songful pieces songfully. He has great lyricism in his fingers. Sokolov has an uncanny ability to sculpt a phrase. Yet his playing still had plenty of crunch and bite, when those qualities were called for. (The piano is, in the end, a percussion instrument.) "'Tis the gift to be simple," goes an old hymn. You need such simplicity in the *Bunte Blätter*, and Sokolov has it. Also, he played with great clarity, with no blurring whatsoever, except when he desired it. I noticed, too, that he was using very little pedal.

He is so smooth, so lyrical, he does not really need the aid of the pedal.

Throughout the fourteen pieces, Sokolov kept absolute focus, the way you would want a surgeon to perform brain surgery (or any). He played as though this activity were the most important thing in the world. And these pieces were firmly committed to memory (his). They were also note-perfect, virtually—studio-perfect. This is not required, but it's a bonus. Mainly, the pieces came out naturally. I had no sense of interpretation. The *Bunte Blätter* were "ungainsayable," as William F. Buckley Jr. would say—immune to contradiction. Sokolov played them the way they go.

Finally, I'd like to tell you a secret: they can be dull, these *Bunte Blätter*. But Sokolov got the maximum music out of them. And he did so with no forcing or trickery at all.

In the final segment of his program, Sokolov played Chopin. About Chopin, Schumann made one of the most famous comments in musical history: "Hats off, gentlemen, a genius." Yes. Sokolov played polonaises, four of them. Two are little known—Op. 26, No. 1, in C-sharp minor, and Op. 26, No. 2, in E-flat minor—and the other two are very well known: Op. 44, in F-sharp minor, and Op. 53, in A flat, the "Heroic."

Sokolov being Sokolov, the pieces were well played, of course. But, frankly, they were a little subdued for me. I like more swagger, more élan, more panache. Do I just want showboatery? No, but these pieces have a charge, and this went largely unfelt, this day in Geneva.

The Metropolitan Opera presented a concert from Wuppertal, Germany—a city about twenty miles east of Düsseldorf. The venue was the Wuppertal Stadthalle, a sight (and site) to behold. Our singers were a soprano and a tenor: Sondra Radvanovsky, who grew up in Illinois and Indiana; and Piotr Beczała, who grew up in southern Poland. They were accompanied by a pianist, Vincenzo Scalera, who grew up in New Jersey. I first heard him in the 1980s, when he accompanied Bergonzi. *There* was a gig for a young man (and Scalera more than merited it).

As you would expect, the program from Wuppertal was a mixture of arias and duets. Most of them were from Italian opera—there were three selections from *Andrea Chénier* (Giordano), for example. Yet the program ended with three selections from *Rusalka* (Dvořák). Beczała also gave us an aria from his homeland—from the opera *Halka*, by Stanisław Moniuszko, which premiered in 1854. This was a nice, educational touch.

For years, I wrote, in review after review, "The story of Sondra Radvanovsky is simple: When she's 'hooked up' and in tune, she is world-beating. When she's not, she's not." I also remember something I wrote when she was singing one of the Three Queens (Donizetti) at the Met: "When did Sondra Radvanovsky become, not just a very good soprano, but a historic, pantheonic one?" She had.

The concert from Wuppertal opened with a soprano aria by Verdi: "Pace, pace, mio Dio," from *La forza del destino*. This aria comes toward the end of the opera; Leontyne Price used to close the first half of her recitals with it. Radvanovsky was somewhat brave to begin with it, I think.

Her first note was splendid: a soft high F, crescendoing. She held it forever, and it was beautiful. "She's hooked up," I thought. "She's on." Soon after, she took some liberties with tempo that I thought were unwise. In any event, Vincenzo Scalera was right with her, old pro that he is. As she sang the aria, Radvanovsky was not especially Italianate. But this did not especially matter. The aria had its strength, delicacy, and drama.

At the end of this aria comes a series of curses: "Maledizione! Maledizione! Maledizione! Maledizion! Maledizion!" Price used to let out a little yelp at the very end. Radvanovsky did not do that—no one does—but she did something very interesting: she grabbed the final *n*, hard; she made a point of the consonant. This was very effective.

Piotr Beczała, too, opened with Verdi—with "Quando le sere al placido," from *Luisa Miller*. I tend to associate this aria with Richard Tucker (and, later, Plácido Domingo). From the beginning, it was evident that Beczała, like Radvanovsky, was "hooked up." He was in tune, secure, confident. That marvelous instrument of his is maybe not as sweet as before;

but it is amply beautiful, and fully mature. He sang his aria with a lyrical power, plus pathos.

Maybe the highlight of the concert was the love duet from *Un ballo in maschera* (again, Verdi). As long as I'm walking down Memory Lane, let me say that Leontyne Price and Luciano Pavarotti sang this duet in the Met's centennial gala, on October 22, 1983. From Radvanovsky and Beczała—and Scalera, don't forget—it was magnificent. It was exciting, yes, and beautiful, and moving. I don't think I've ever heard it so sensitive and intimate. Is this because the duet was accompanied by a piano, not an orchestra, and in an empty hall? Possibly, yes.

Along the way, Radvanovsky sang "La mamma morta," from *Andrea Chénier*. This is a verismo scorcher, to be sure. But in this atmosphere, it had elements of an art song, too. There's a combination for you! Verismo and art song.

As has become traditional in these Met livestreams, the singers talked to the audience (the worldwide audience, in Internetland). Beczała spoke of "the healing power of opera." (We could have a debate about that.) Radvanovsky said, "There is no substitute for hearing the human voice live"—but maybe a transmission of this sort is second best. She broke down a little as she spoke.

She broke down again when she announced her final aria—her "very favorite aria," she said. It is "Song to the Moon," from *Rusalka*. She was going to sing it for her father, she said. (Some Googling tells me that Radvanovsky's father was Czech, and died when Sondra was seventeen.) As she wiped away a tear, she said, touchingly, "Excuse me."

When Radvanovsky had sung "Song to the Moon," Beczała sang another aria from *Rusalka*: the Prince's Aria. Then the two sang the final duet from the opera. Scalera played superbly, as he had throughout the concert: with savvy, musicality, and pianistic skill. These opera accompaniments on the piano can be pretty cheap-sounding. Not from this fellow.

But return to an earlier juncture in the concert. After Radvanovsky and Beczała had sung the *Ballo* duet, I thought of an old line: "Sometimes the 'good ol' days' are now."

Onstage at Wigmore Hall, in London, were the Britten Sinfonia, Jennifer France, and Jack Sheen. The Britten Sinfonia is a chamber group founded in 1992. Publicity tells us that the group is "heralded as one of the world's leading ensembles." That is news to me, but publicists can be forgiven their hyperbole, possibly. Jennifer France is a British soprano. And her name, "France," makes me smile at a memory.

When I was young, I assumed that John Ireland (1879–1962) was an Irish composer. He was English, however, born outside Manchester.

As it happens, Jack Sheen is from Manchester, and he is a composer and conductor. He is not yet thirty, born in 1993. The Wigmore concert featured him in various roles: composer, conductor, arranger, and player (of an unusual kind, or kinds).

Interspersed on the program were three arrangements that Sheen has made of music by Hildegard of Bingen, the abbess, writer, philosopher, etc., from Germany. May I call a person who lived in the twelfth century a "Renaissance woman"? You will take my meaning regardless. Hildegard was impressively versatile. The Wigmore program also included music by Oliver Knussen, Sheen, and, finally, Jürg Frey.

Knussen was born in Glasgow in 1952, and died in Snape, Suffolk, in 2018. On American shores, at least, he is probably best known for a children's opera, *Where the Wild Things Are*. He is also known for another children's opera, *Higglety Pigglety Pop!* Both of these works are based on books by Maurice Sendak, who supplied the operas' librettos. It will not surprise you to know that Knussen also wrote *Hums and Songs of Winnie-the-Pooh*—a work performed in this concert.

It is quirky and playful, as you might expect. Also ominous, creepy—a little nightmarish. I would place the work in the category of British Weird. This is not necessarily a pejorative designation.

From Jack Sheen himself, there was a new work: *Hollow propranolol séance*. The second word refers to a heart medication, a beta blocker. I am not sure what the word "hollow" means in this context. In the piece, there are pops, bleeps, and slides—and heartbeats. The music is very

soft, hardly audible (at least as livestreamed on my laptop). It moves slowly, deliberately, putting me in mind of works by Morton Feldman, the twentieth-century American. *Hollow propranolol séance* strikes me as one of those works more interesting to compose and to play than to hear. But about its intelligence—particularly its inner logic—I have no doubt.

For the final work on the program, Sheen played cymbals and "manipulated silver foil," as the BBC announcer put it afterward. (In the New World, we're apt to say "aluminum foil.") The work was *Circular Music No. 2*, by Jürg Frey, a Swiss composer born in 1953. He has written at least ten such "circular" pieces.

About the others, I can't tell you, but No. 2 is very slow-moving, requiring patience on the part of the listener. Also requiring "buy-in." The same is true of Jack Sheen's piece.

As I listened impatiently to the Frey, I thought of Wagner and Debussy. To be entranced by *Parsifal*—drugged by *Parsifal*—you have to submit to Wagner and his sense of time (or lack of time). You have to give in, letting the cares and concerns of your own world go for a while. You have to do the same with Debussy's opera, *Pelléas et Mélisande*, I would say.

At some point—I was not young—I was willing to do this for Wagner and Debussy (and myself). Should I be willing to do it for Frey? I think so, yes. There is magic in *Circular Music No. 2*, if only I would let it work on me.

They keep coming, as they have since—when? Sometime in the second half of the nineteenth century? I'm talking about Russian piano virtuosos. And thank heaven for this stream. The latest is Alexander Malofeev, age nineteen. He recently played a concerto with the Spanish Radio and Television Symphony Orchestra, in Madrid. The conductor was George Pehlivanian, a French American who was born in Beirut into a family of Armenian background. (Not all lives or identities are cut and dried, are they?) Young Malofeev wore a black mask as he played. It kept sliding down—as they do—and Malofeev kept pushing it back up. The conductor, too, wore a mask, as did members of the orchestra—all except the wind players.

The concerto was the Saint-Saëns No. 2 in G minor. People like to snicker at this piece, and they always have. A famous quip goes, "Begins with Bach, ends with Offenbach." (The quipper was Zygmunt Stojowski, a Polish pianist and composer who lived from 1870 to 1946.) But pianists and audiences have always loved this concerto, with good reason. Artur Rubinstein championed it, proudly. And Alexander Malofeev played it . . . consummately. I feel sure—I would bet my own money—that Rubinstein would agree with me.

Malofeev played the first notes with authority and resonance. (Important.) He calibrated the opening pages shrewdly. (Also important, and tricky.) Throughout the first movement, he played with virtuosity (effortless), beauty, and maturity. You forgot you were listening to a youngster. He sang in his right hand, accompanied himself in the left. His playing was clear and limpid. His trills were exemplary—creamy, smooth. He knew when to take his time. He was in the skin of the music.

The second movement, for many, is the *pièce de résistance*. It is the Scherzo. From Malofeev, it was just what the doctor orders: fleet, crisp, elegant. Also fun. Malofeev does not think the music is trash. He knows better. The closing Presto, he played with rhapsodic barreling (a phrase that will make sense if you know the music). Furthermore, he never banged, even when he was loud—very loud. He never did anything—not one thing—vulgar. The music was exciting while at the same time Frenchly elegant.

On concluding, Malofeev exchanged forearm bumps with the conductor and the concertmistress. Then he played two encores—two Russian beauties: Rachmaninoff's arrangement of his song "Lilacs," and Mikhail Pletnev's arrangement of the Pas de deux from Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker*. In playing these pieces, Malofeev was honoring the ancestors. He played them with great appreciation, and, more than that, love.

So, yes: here's another one. I hope that audiences listen to Alexander Malofeev—and learn from him and thrill to him—for another sixty years, at least.

The media

Reality show

by James Bowman

The sub-head to an article in *The Wall Street Journal* by Holman W. Jenkins, Jr., about the GameStop phenomenon (remember that?—it does seem a long time ago now, doesn't it?) caught my eye. "Robinhood," it read, "might remind its customers that stocks are about something real." Something what? There was that word again. *Real*. Mr. Jenkins was making an excellent point about the GameStop boys, but his choice of the word also reminded me of the extent to which "Reality" has lately replaced "Truth" as the gold standard in which the media are dealing every day. Or think they are. On the same day his article appeared, *The New York Times*'s tech correspondent Kevin Roose published one in that paper headed: "How the Biden Administration Can Help Solve Our Reality Crisis."

I'll bet you didn't even know that we had a reality crisis, though readers of *The New York Times* will not have been surprised to learn of it. The word and its various antonyms and antonymic euphemisms or circumlocutions—"fantasy," "dreamworld," "unreality," "warping reality," "conspiracy theory," etc.—had often been found in its pages in previous weeks, especially since the invasion of the Capitol on January 6, since the invaders were presumed to have been acting upon the fantasy of a stolen election.

Now, at least in Mr. Roose's view, a full-blown "reality crisis" was upon us. It was said to be "our" crisis, that is, but as so often in *The New York Times*, there was a certain ambiguity in the use of the first-person plural pronouns. When, for example, Nicholas Kristof wrote a few days later that "We Are a Nation of Child Abusers," the "we" could be presumed to refer to everybody in the country except for the concerned and compassionate folks at *The New York Times* and their concerned and compassionate allies in government and the media. No "child abusers," they! When Rachel Shteir writes to explain "Why We Can't Stop Talking About Betty Friedan," however, I'm pretty sure that the "we" she refers to includes few people outside the premises of the *Times* itself—and not many inside of them either.

But in the case of the alleged "reality crisis" it would seem to be a little strange to suppose that "we" or "our" could be meant to comprise the vast majority of Americans for whom reality remains pretty unproblematic, rather than that thin upper crust of the American elite who are prepared to believe anything they read in *The New York Times*. You'd think, therefore, that "our" reality crisis would belong to the latter, especially since Mr. Roose's first move upon discovering that these unfortunates were suffering from a "reality crisis" was to consult with some reality "experts" in academia, that well-known bastion of reality studies. But then we find that "the experts agreed that before the Biden administration can tackle disinformation and extremism, it needs to understand the scope of the problem"—which suggests that "the problem" is not with the Biden administration or its allies at the *Times* but, sure enough, with the rest of us.

In other words, although he had skipped a groove in the record or a page in the narrative ostensibly in order to write about "reality," he was really just harping on the same old string of "extremism" which had preoccupied the writers and editors of the *Times* to the point of obsession for the previous four weeks. Now, the label of "extremists" having been firmly fastened on the Trump supporters in the Capitol and on its grounds on January 6 (displacing, for the moment anyway, the previous ones of "racist," "white-supremacist," or simply "deplorable"), Mr. Roose's contribution was to eke out the narrative of the "far-right extremist threat" by citing expert opinion to the effect that, being presumptively out of touch with reality, the so-called extremists were also crazy.

And, if them, then also, perhaps, all those millions crazy enough to have voted for Mr. Trump, but certainly all those who believed, as Mr. Trump does, that serious electoral fraud was at work on November 3 and 4 last year. Of course Mr. Roose, like everybody else at the *Times*, had known all along that "millions of people have chosen to create their own version of reality," as he put it. He only wanted the experts to confirm it. This they obligingly did before going on to advise him that the answer to his question of how the Biden Administration can help solve "our" reality crisis was, among other things, that the President should appoint a "Reality Czar" to enforce "our"—the other "our" this time—version of reality upon those who, amounting to roughly half the population, persist in believing in their version.

It does seem remarkable that so many of those who have spent the last four years complaining of Mr. Trump's "authoritarian" tendencies as a "threat to democracy" should now be urging his successor on to engage in ever more authoritarian behavior himself, whether in the form of the flurry of executive orders that proceeded from the presidential desk in the first weeks after his taking office or in the appointing of new and better "czars" of this or that. On the day after the inauguration, someone writing in *USA Today* even urged Mr. Biden to appoint a "Democracy Czar"—though he did note a certain irony in the title. But if, like Mr. Roose, you regard yourself as the custodian of "reality," becoming "Reality Czar" is only a small step.

And here I hope you will permit me to introduce a brief aside, since I believe that Kevin Roose is coming a bit late to the reality party. Some years ago, I proposed to write a book titled *Reality, A History* as a sort of companion piece to my *Honor, A History*, published a few years earlier. As with *Honor*, the title was meant to signify that it was *a* history, not *the* history, which would have required much greater erudition and intellect than mine to bring off. Also like the earlier book, however, it could be a useful *vade mecum*, or so I thought, for honest readers puzzled by the many and various but, even then, almost universally tendentious uses of the words "real" and "reality."

I proposed to start with the emergence of the words in English, in something like their modern sense, in the sixteenth century. Quarrels in Latin among the medieval schoolmen over "realism" vs. "nominalism" didn't penetrate the vernacular until then—coincidentally with, if not directly related to, the contemporary controversy stirred up by the Reformation over "the Real Presence" of the body and blood of Christ in the Eucharist. The concept of reality, I thought, had to await a cultural moment when it became possible, or even necessary, for ordinary people, speaking English, to discriminate between reality and unreality, instead of treating everything as equally real and therefore requiring no intellectual category of the "real" to distinguish it from the unreal.

Or, rather, to try to distinguish it, as this was not always easy. As with "the Real Presence," the reality of ghosts was a matter of some considerable controversy around this time. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the first occurrence of "unreal" in English (applied to honor, interestingly enough) was in 1605, roughly within a year of Macbeth's adjuration to Banquo's ghost: "Unreal mock'ry, hence!" In *Hamlet*, too, the Prince has his doubts about the specter of his father:

> The spirit that I have seen
> May be the devil, and the devil hath power
> T' assume a pleasing shape; yea, and perhaps
> Out of my weakness and my melancholy,
> As he is very potent with such spirits,
> Abuses me to damn me.

The Protestant Church of England, you see, in doing away with the Roman Catholic belief in purgatory, had also to abolish belief in ghosts, since ghosts had been previously supposed to be, like Hamlet's father, the earthly apparitions of souls in purgatory. Now, they were "unreal."

Good times! There was a lot more, too, as there ensued over the succeeding three or four centuries a great many subsequent controversies about what was real and what was not, with sometimes one notion of reality having the upper hand and sometimes another—though at no time, I believe, was there anything that could be characterized as a "reality crisis." But publishers were not interested, and the project had to be abandoned.

To cut to the chase, however, I can reveal here that, after centuries of ups and downs for reality, by the 1970s, in the wake of Watergate, it had been defined journalistically. "Reality" then and all the way through the 1980s and the Reagan–Bush years into the 1990s became the sordid stuff which was covered by falsely pleasing or anodyne appearances, which it then became the job of the media to strip away in order to reveal the shocking truth beneath. As someone back in those years once said, the media's job was not to cover the news but to uncover it.

That, however, was not the end of reality's story—which, if your patience with this digression has not already run out, I shall proceed to summarize. Perhaps because they were disgusted with the uncovering job that fell to their lot during Bill Clinton's second term as president—and who could blame them?—or perhaps for some other reason, reality at some point around the turn of the century became privatized. Having for a generation past exercised a self-awarded authority as arbiters of reality, the media generously decided that, henceforth, this authority would be conferred upon anyone who wanted it. In effect, there was no more reality: only your reality and my reality; your truth and my truth. Let a hundred flowers bloom!

That last slogan, as you probably remember, was used by the late Chinese Communist dictator Mao Zedong sixty-odd years ago to encourage critics of his regime to come forward with their criticisms under an implied promise of safe conduct. Then wily old Mao, having thus discovered who these critics were, proceeded to persecute them as the "rightists" and "bourgeois revisionists" whom the Red Guards of the Cultural Revolution a decade later swept from positions of power and authority across the country and, if they were not simply murdered, sent to work on farms and in labor camps. Now that we seem to be undergoing a Cultural Revolution of our own led by the Red Guards of the media's Cancel Culture, you've got to wonder if they haven't been playing a similar trick on us after all the various "liberations" they were championing up until only a few years ago.

At any rate, I think this is the background against which we should consider Kevin Roose's proposed Reality Czar. It seems unlikely that President Biden would ever take up the suggestion and appoint such a person—who, if he did, would more likely be a Czarina like Elizabeth Warren. But then he doesn't really need to, since we already have an industry of Reality Czars in the form of the media themselves. Mr. Roose's article only makes official what has been apparent for some years now, that the media have aggressively taken back the authority as arbiters of reality that they only pretended to give up twenty years or so ago.

Throughout the Trump years, their "fact checkers" were busy laying down the law as to what's real and what isn't and discovering, no doubt much to their surprise, that it was President Trump and not themselves who had lost his tether to reality. Moreover, reality itself has now, in its latest incarnation, undergone something of a rehabilitation. Instead of being synonymous with crime, corruption, violence, drugs, illicit sex, and everything that eschews the light of day (or of the media), reality is now

synonymous with the progressive ideology and the media's triumphalist narrative about it. The media now conspire to cover up those old-style types of reality—at least when, as in the case of Hunter Biden's business activities, they don't fit in with the media narrative.

I have my doubts that they would ever have investigated allegations of electoral fraud or chicanery made by a Republican president with the enthusiasm they gave to the Hillary Clinton–FBI–CIA narrative about the 2016 election, but fifty years ago they might at least have gone through the motions. Now they simply pronounce such allegations to be just another lie from someone whose habitual mendacity the Reality Czars have spent the last four years firmly establishing in people's minds. "Everybody knows he's a liar," said Joe Biden of his opponent in the first debate last September. Given Mr. Biden's own history of lying, well-known among his detractors, you might have expected a few eyebrows to be raised at this, but Mr. Trump's alleged lies were too well-documented and the current president's too thoroughly ignored by the media for it to have made so much as a ripple in the media mill pond.

By the way, *The Washington Post*'s "Fact Checkers," who had done the lion's share of the documentation, finally checked out a few days after the inauguration of the new president with a grand total of 30,573 "false or misleading statements" attributed to his predecessor. The absurdity of such bogus precision as to number was no greater than the absurdity of the whole exercise, unless we understand that the *Post*, along with the rest of the media, have already assumed the right to exercise the authority of a Reality Czar over those with whom they disagree. And they do so in the name of their progressive allies in the government who, as the new administration takes over with a decidedly authoritarian cast to it, have never questioned and certainly never now question their right to sit in judgment over those whom they now openly regard as, in Nancy Pelosi's words, "the enemy within."

The day after Mr. Roose called in its pages for the appointment of a Reality Czar, *The New York Times* reviewed a documentary film by Rodney Ascher called *A Glitch in the Matrix*, about people who believe we are living not in "reality" but in a computer simulation of it."The Matrix," of course, refers to the film of that name from 1999, which took a similar point of view. *The Truman Show*, of a year earlier, proposed that the whole world of its main character was in fact the enormous set of a long-running "reality television" show. It's nice to know that Hollywood never gets tired of playing around with the specious profundity of the idea of multiple realities, but someone should send them the memo: the rest of the media have moved on. The age-old question of what is real and what is not has finally been answered. Reality is whatever the Reality Czars of the media say it is.

Books

DeBoer's war on "smart"

by Amy L. Wax

Not all men are equal, as our Founders knew. "No two men are perfectly equal in person, property, understanding, activity, and virtue," wrote John Adams in 1776. Nor can they "ever be made so by any power less than that which created them." The "diversity in the faculties of men," says *Federalist* 10, will produce "different and unequal faculties of acquiring property." In a free society, disparities in wealth, position, and status will inevitably arise. Yet the Declaration of Independence declares that all men are created equal. Adams explains: despite differing talents and capacities, "all are subject by nature to equal laws of morality" and "equal laws for their government," but that entails no promise to use the powers of government to correct unequal life conditions.

The relentless pressure to dissolve the clear demarcation between legal equality and equality of outcomes, never anticipated by our system's architects, is one of the hallmarks of our age. The expectation is now all-encompassing, extending not just to material resources, but to talent, status, ability, and position. According to Fredrik deBoer—a journalist, former teacher, and self-described socialist—this expectation has given rise to a destructive, counterfactual delusion: right-thinking people now insist that every person starts out as a "blank slate," with the same potential for intellectual development and life achievement. That assumption, in conjunction with a society that increasingly elevates and rewards cognitive ability, leads to an obsessive emphasis on creating equal academic outcomes for all. It also generates what his new book terms "The Cult of Smart": the tendency to assign brainpower global significance, valorize and reward it above all else, and conflate "moral equality, political equality, and equality of value with equality of ability."[1]

Unlike many on the progressive left today, and especially those in the world of education, deBoer firmly rejects the "blank slate" assumption, declaring forthrightly that "different students vary significantly in their underlying ability, and that this difference in talent profoundly shape[s] academic outcomes." More strikingly, he asserts that "genetic parentage" sets limits on cognitive ability and that this inheritance "plays a larger role in determining human outcomes than the family or home environment." These realities mean that "everyone simply can't be made equal." People's abilities and developed capacities—their "human capital" in today's parlance—will inevitably vary. Some people will turn out smarter than others, and no system of education, however well-funded and well-functioning, can alter that fundamental fact.

Although manifestly sound, these assertions are deeply unfashionable among broad swaths of influential elites. In deBoer's view, the adamant refusal to acknowledge natural differences has done untold damage to society as a whole, deforming the education system, distorting our policies, and setting many up for humili-

1 *The Cult of Smart: How Our Broken Education System Perpetuates Social Injustice*, by Fredrik deBoer; All Points Books, 288 pages, $28.99.

ation and disappointment in a society where economic status and social station are closely tied to academic success. That damage operates through a meritocracy that sorts, assigns, and compensates people based primarily on their intelligence. By rewarding brainpower to the point where smarts are regarded as the paramount, indeed the sole, basis for respect and admiration and "the only true measures of human worth," the meritocracy encourages attitudes and arrangements that inflict harm on the majority of people with no outstanding intellectual talents and relegate them to the status of life's losers.

Although marked by many flaws, this book is important and worthy of attention. DeBoer's willingness to challenge unrealistic orthodoxies that are widely accepted among left-leaning intellectuals and educators and his bold attempt to rethink broad policy questions in light of a more accurate, realistic view make this book refreshing and worthwhile. The author is to be commended for facing the truth about human intellectual ability and the importance society attaches to it. No sober and objective person familiar with decades of cognitive behavioral research and psychometric data can seriously doubt that some people are born with greater intellectual potential than others. Nor can it be denied that high intelligence is widely admired and often handsomely rewarded or that brainpower significantly influences who succeeds in school and in life.

Many of the author's criticisms that follow from facing these facts, especially in the educational realm, are well-taken. He observes that the meritocratic promise of upward mobility that is billed as a great economic leveler, a weapon against the rigidities of class, and an embodiment of the American Dream, although a boon to some individuals, inevitably functions as a zero-sum game in which most people don't, and can't, make it to the top because, well, only 20 percent of people can end up in the top 20 percent. And he points out that, for reasons of both nature and nurture, children growing up in educated, higher-income families tend to stay in that class. That the meritocracy mostly replicates existing inequalities is why, as deBoer concedes, upward mobility cannot serve as the formula for widespread social wellbeing. Climbing the social ladder is no substitute for improving the quality of life for those in the middle and at the bottom.

DeBoer also savages legal reform efforts such as No Child Left Behind for creating unreachable educational goals, which fault public schools for their failure to do the impossible and promote a "blame the teachers" mentality. Likewise, he frowns on non-profits such as the Gates Foundation that pour vast sums into raising and equalizing academic achievement instead of gearing their efforts to a range of abilities. He has no use for "college for all," which he blames for a long list of ills, including ever more prolonged adolescence, delays in family formation, growing ranks of semi-credentialed debt slaves, the atrophy of non-college options, the intensified social stigma attached to the lack of a bachelor's degree, and a costly arms race that bloats universities, escalates education costs, and beggars families.

Although deBoer writes well and gets a lot right, his admirable iconoclasm is marred by hyperbolic assertions, egregious sins of omission, straw men, agenda-driven positions, and logical defects like the moralistic fallacy. One serious wrong turn is his attack on charter schools, which he claims rely on demographic manipulations and statistical tricks to achieve impressive academic results. DeBoer fails to appreciate that academics are only part of why families shun public schools and flee to charters. Many parents regard the atmosphere, culture, and behavioral expectations of a school as equally, if not more, important than test scores. They don't like their children passing through metal detectors or held hostage by unruly students that teachers are powerless to remove. They want their children to be properly socialized, learn manners, and be exposed to the conduct and folkways of successful people. The proof of charters' appeal is revealed by videos showing jubilant, tearful New York families of students who win the charter school lottery in the city—the type of scene that is repeated all over the country. Although deBoer insists the celebrants have been hoodwinked, the lucky families would be the first to tell him otherwise.

By far the greatest weakness of this book is its final chapter, in which the author issues a call both grandiose and nebulous to abolish the meritocracy entirely. He contends that his radical plan follows from so-called "luck egalitarian" principles, which maintain that inequalities based on factors individuals cannot control, such as the genetically based limits on intellectual ability, are inherently unjust. According to the author, smart people deserve no credit for their intellectual gifts and the social credits that follow, just as the less smart cannot be blamed for their lack of success. These injustices can only be fully corrected by restructuring the entire system so that earnings and social status are no longer tied to academic success. Our meritocracy must be abolished.

Despite its seemingly impeccable logic, the revolution deBoer envisions would do more harm than good and has little chance of becoming reality. His vaunting recommendation represents a missed opportunity for hard, practical thinking about how to best manage the inequality that will inevitably result in a free society run along meritocratic lines, including a more thoughtful examination than he provides of how the educational system could better be restructured to serve students of varying ability. And while he's at it, deBoer might consider ways to dislodge the delusional, egalitarian "blank slate" thinking that has the ruling class in its grip and bring influential people around to more realistic, albeit less appealing, understandings. Finally, to the extent that the Cult of Smart as he describes it exists, the author should contemplate how best to curb and temper it without upsetting the whole apple cart and triggering the law of unintended consequences. How could less intellectually able people earn greater rewards, respect, and recognition? How can we slow the educational arms race? These compelling questions, however unexciting, cry out for sober reflection.

None can be adequately addressed without confronting why, despite its imperfections, unfairness, and unsavory aspects, the skill-based meritocracy arose, persists (more or less), and directs outsized rewards to brainpower. The reason, in a nutshell, is that high intelligence has enormous economic and social value. Ours has evolved into a complex "knowledge economy" that places a large premium on juggling piles of information, navigating difficult concepts, mastering esoteric technology, managing intricate systems, and performing cognitively demanding tasks with efficiency and speed. Smarter people tend to do all this better, and positioning them to perform these functions has obvious upsides. But, as deBoer well understands, this comparative advantage doesn't make intellectual elites better people or morally superior, nor does it justify their unquestioned and excessive authority over powerful societal institutions and policies. Where normative or political judgments are at stake, elites should serve as our handmaidens, not our bosses. But the answer is to keep all this in mind and act accordingly, not to stop categorizing, sorting, and directing people based on talent.

As an idealist mesmerized by egalitarian collectivism, deBoer also airbrushes out important, time-honored reasons that outstanding ability frequently earns richer returns. First, incentives matter. Second, high talent is rare. Greater rewards tend to elicit greater effort, and we want smart people to put their brains to good use. DeBoer's willful disregard for the plain facts of human motivation implicitly indulges the moralistic fallacy: because the meritocracy is unfair, smart people shouldn't demand handsome rewards, ergo they will maximize their efforts without them. Of course, human nature doesn't work that way, and most people won't be moved by such logic. As for the rarity of talent, one fact that deBoer doesn't emphasize enough is that the cognitive capacity inscribed in our DNA is distributed along a bell curve that drops off rapidly at both ends. The higher the ability level, the fewer the people who can attain it. The number of people with the chops to be a math professor at Harvard is vanishingly small.

Likewise, although conceding that even under socialism some people are "better at certain things than others," the author pays virtually no attention to one of meritocracy's—and capitalism's—central functions, which is to sort people into tasks and roles to which

they are suited and that others are willing to pay for. He sets forth no plan for identifying and channeling talent once socialism displaces capitalism and the meritocracy finally disappears. And he ignores the unsavory stew of raw power, partisanship, political correctness, and privilege that surely will fill the void.

Not satisfied with destroying capitalism and vanquishing merit, the author's stated aim is nothing less than to "eliminate the very ideal of just deserts altogether." Good luck with that. Great feats of intellect, as well as artistic prowess, scientific creativity, innovative acumen, and clever entrepreneurship—all these represent the commanding heights of what humans can achieve. Just as beauty will always be prized and loveliness loved forever, excellence will always be admired, high achievement honored, and the extraordinary revered over the ordinary, regardless of any immediate social benefits and palpable payoffs.

Moreover, few outside elite circles truly believe that people's success or failure is purely a matter of destiny, beyond individual effort and commitment. Intellectuals' long-standing efforts to depict luck as all-important, social forces as all-powerful, and human agency as delusory, have not stopped ordinary people from praising signal accomplishments and admiring exceptional attainment. Nor, despite efforts from certain quarters, have we yet ceased blaming malefactors, condemning nefarious acts, and making moral judgments. The expectation that the cold logic of moral luck or the plain facts of human genetics will argue most people out of their reactive attitudes or moral sentiments is sure to meet with disappointment. That would require a dramatic transformation in social life as we know it.

Ultimately, deBoer's brief against the meritocracy and the Cult of Smart is fatally weakened by a chain of overstatements. He exaggerates the importance of extraordinary brainpower, inflates the extent of its innate component, and understates the control people have over their life's direction. And he misapprehends the social respect conferred on intelligence alone.

In his eagerness to drive home the point that genes influence IQ, deBoer underplays the evidence that heredity is not all-important. Psychometricians generally agree that nature and nurture both contribute more or less equally to measured intelligence, depending on when and how it is measured. And despite decades of study, the experiential part of the equation is still remarkably little understood. Parenting, peers, culture, social class, and other unknown environmental factors are all in the mix, and judging their discrete effects has proven difficult. Finally, the data does not rule out that individuals play a role in shaping their own destiny, character, lives, and fate.

Additionally, social science evidence suggests that, although recent economic changes have undeniably made life harder for the less talented, choices and behavior still matter to life outcomes, regardless of ability level. It is an oft-repeated observation that individuals who follow the so-called "success sequence"—graduate from high school, get married before having children, and work steadily at any job available—are rarely poor. Avoiding addiction and crime improves outcomes even more dramatically. Meeting these demands does not require high intelligence or outstanding academic achievement. Rather, it requires recognizing, believing in, and sticking to a few tried and true "rules for life." Average people are especially in need of simple rules and clear guidance to help them navigate the economic challenges they face and forge a path through life's complexities.

DeBoer's overemphasis on the limits imposed by innate intelligence is of a piece with the author's striking obliviousness to the importance of social and moral norms to average people's lives and achievements—a blind spot he shares with many progressive elites. He cannot bring himself even to mention those infamous "bourgeois values"—respectability, reliability, honesty, thrift, diligence, restraint, and rectitude—that work to encourage prosocial behavior and mark out constructive paths. He alludes to the importance of traditional, stable families, which he recognizes now predominate among elites, but ignores the self-sabotaging behavior that deprives the less advantaged of their supports. It never occurs to him that the Cult of Smart, with its out-

sized veneration for academic credentials and fancy degrees, might represent a displacement of the common admiration once accorded to old-fashioned moral virtues. A renewed consensus surrounding rules of conduct might do more to dispel the supposed Cult than the sweeping transformations deBoer envisions.

Does the Cult of Smart that deBoer describes really exist, or is it less far-reaching and influential than he suggests? The latter is more plausible. Even among the most credentialed and status-conscious who are obsessed with academic prowess, one would be hard pressed to find a person who treats intelligence "as the sole criterion of someone's worth." Traits and achievements that don't require high IQ—extraordinary courage, outstanding leadership, grit, and moral purpose—still elicit ample admiration. Putting even modest abilities to good use, living up to potential, working hard, acting in constructive ways, and performing socially useful tasks, however humble—all this still commands widespread respect. It is gratifying that the COVID era has raised the profile of "essential services" and ordinary jobs that are often performed by people without a college education. Perhaps it is true that such people do not receive enough gratitude, recognition—and, yes, compensation—and that it would be better if they did. But this is not always easy to accomplish, because the economic system has its own logic. It is far from clear how the pay, prestige, and quality of life of the less educated can realistically be improved. Perhaps DeBoer will shed light on this question in his next book.

Another important defect of this book, albeit understandable in light of the topic's sensitivity, is deBoer's reflexive treatment of group differences in cognitive ability, and especially those consistently documented between blacks and whites. While acknowledging an innate genetic contribution to individual intellectual potential, he repeatedly insists that genetics plays no role in race gaps in IQ. Without presenting any evidence, he relies on a cherry-picked sample of "experts" to dismiss curtly the possibility of any heritable component. Yet he also cites a recent survey, which he labels "disturbing," that reports that mainstream psychometricians queried anonymously are evenly divided on the question. To deal with the contradiction, he resorts to going full *ad hominem*, tarring any deviation from his position as "pseudo-scientific racism" and stating (falsely) that such views are propagated chiefly by young "alt-right" fanatics and other "extremist" types. Like many *bien pensants*, he implicitly succumbs to a wishful moralistic fallacy: it shouldn't be true that groups differ in intrinsic ability, so it can't be true, so anyone who thinks so is evil and a racist. This is not just lazy and unpersuasive but also threatens untoward consequences. DeBoer is quick to point to the policy distortions wrought by "blank slate" thinking about individuals. But he ignores the potential for equally costly and misguided initiatives, affecting every aspect of social and economic life, that could result from erroneous assumptions about group differences. A fuller, more evenhanded treatment of this issue awaits a braver and more impartial soul than this author.

Life with Louis

Harriet Pattison
Our Days Are Like Full Years:
A Memoir with Letters from
Louis Kahn.
Yale University Press, 448 pages, $45

reviewed by Brooke Allen

When Nathaniel Kahn released his 2003 film *My Architect*, a biographical portrait of his father, the architect Louis Kahn (1901–74), the architecture world and people who care about such things were astounded at the personal and financial chaos within which the great man designed and constructed his famous edifices. Kahn was a late bloomer: it wasn't until the 1950s that he received his first important commission, an extension to the Yale University Art Gallery, and was recognized as being potentially a major talent. Big commissions followed: the Richards Laboratories at the University of Pennsylvania; the Salk Institute at La Jolla; the Indian Institute of

Management in Ahmedabad, India; the new capital of East Pakistan at Dhaka, which by the time of its completion had become the capital of a new nation, Bangladesh; the Kimbell Art Museum in Fort Worth; the Yale Center for British Art; the FDR Memorial at Roosevelt Island; and myriad other projects he labored over but which for one reason or another fell through. All this he took on during the last twenty years of his life, while his business was bleeding cash and he was also juggling and trying to keep separate three different families, all in the Philadelphia area: his "official" one with wife Esther and daughter Sue Ann; a nearby ménage consisting of an ex-lover, Anne Tyng, and their daughter Alexandra (b. 1954); and his long-time, semi-detached partner Harriet Pattison—twenty-seven years Kahn's junior—who was raising their son Nathaniel (b. 1962). "It occurs to me now," Pattison muses in her revealing new memoir, *Our Days Are Like Full Years*, "that this was a kind of living equivalent of the way he sought a strong distinction between spaces in his architecture."

A professional landscape architect who has collaborated with numerous architects including Kahn himself (the Kimbell, the FDR Memorial), Pattison is well equipped to discuss Kahn's professional life and his art, and she has interwoven her narrative with reproductions of letters from Kahn, photographs, architectural drawings, and other relics of his time with her (1959 until his death in 1974). It was the most productive period of Kahn's life, and he was constantly on the move, sending Pattison love letters, sketches, and postcards from airport lounges and hotel rooms all over the world. She would imagine, she recalls, "how wonderful it would be to live together and have a family—although when I tried to talk about specifics, Lou would fall silent or say something poetic that effectively put the discussion off."

Pattison always considered Kahn the love of her life and made no effort to move on, as her predecessor Anne Tyng had done, when it was clear Kahn was not going to leave Esther: "He said little about his marriage, other than that he had made a mistake. I knew this could hardly characterize thirty years of connection, but it was what I wanted to hear, and I accepted it." When Pattison and Kahn began their relationship, she was working as an assistant at Parke-Bernet Galleries, but she soon abandoned that: "How meaningless was that world of trading possessions compared to the unbound world of *making* art that was Lou's!" The trajectory eventually led her, with Kahn's help, to landscape architecture. Kahn would come to visit her when he could, but she went long stretches without him. "I didn't want to end up like a character in an Edith Wharton story, the lover of a man who showed up at his convenience," she writes, but on some level that's how it turned out to be.

If anyone needs reminding how much the world has changed since 1962, they have only to look at the reaction of Pattison's nice WASP family when she turned up pregnant and announced she was going to keep the baby. Her brother went completely haywire, created "a terrible scene" in Kahn's office and a row outside his front door, with the unhappy Esther and Sue Ann listening from inside. Kahn himself tilted "between willful inaction and passive bewilderment." His first reaction on hearing the news was to stagger and cry "Not again!"—not exactly an encouraging response for Pattison. Eventually he agreed to accompany her to a Jungian therapist who was, she says, "singularly unhelpful, vehemently denouncing Lou as a coward with shrieks of scorn." No one, at that time, seemed to imagine that she could live a decent life with an illegitimate child, nor did anyone in her family consider the possibility of taking her in or helping to raise the baby: "They were all too afraid of compromising our family's good name." With Pattison approaching her due date, Kahn flew off to India, writing, "I will try to get the where with all soon. How to do it—well I'll find a way." By "where with all" he meant the money necessary to bring a child into the world, but of course this was never forthcoming, and in the end Pattison's mother footed the bills and Pattison herself found temporary refuge with a kind couple in Massachusetts. "Lou's marginal resources," Pattison explains, "were limited to office petty cash furnished in twenty dollar bills. What I did not understand at the time

was how much Lou's life and work depended on Esther's financing, and had since the beginning of their marriage."

In those days architects had a heroic image: they were going to rebuild society, and human nature along with it. Corbu was still God. Sixty years on, with a sizable proportion of the globe trashed by the work of overweening architectural egos, that image has been indelibly tarnished. Pattison believed in it, though, and appears still to do so, and she let Kahn get away with much pusillanimous behavior (one can hardly help agreeing with the Jungian analyst!) because of his stature as visionary genius. This book, like *My Architect* before it, does not make Kahn seem a very noble character, but to some degree he *was* a visionary genius, and Pattison communicates her excitement about the work irresistibly. Kahn was of course capable of ugly structures (the FDR Memorial, for example), and brutalism, unless exercised with enormous taste and humanism, tends to be just—well, brutal. But Pattison got a thrill from being part of the creation of the Kimbell, the Yale Center for British Art, and the big projects on the Indian subcontinent—as well she might have done. Kahn was not a particularly good writer: he makes points, writing about architecture, that are frustratingly airy and hard to grasp; but one is made aware, in his notes included in this book, of the strenuous effort, the integrity of his vision, his painstaking struggle to let the soul of the building express itself, to discover "what the building wants to be." His life, Pattison writes, was "a lone, ambitious quest for transcendental ideals Lou believed in and sought, like a knight seeking the grail." Her accounts of Kahn's failures are as interesting as those of his successes. For two years he tormented himself over striking the right note for the new presidential palace at Islamabad: he believed that form should follow function and did not believe that domes were functional for a place of assembly. "The logical use of the dome is dependent on the total order of the spaces which they crown." But the Pakistanis wanted domes. It was, after all, to be a new capital for a specifically Islamic republic. When after much struggle Kahn was finally fired, he took it very well. "The hell of it is that they detected what I felt about my own design—no conviction." Similarly, when his design for a Holocaust memorial at Battery Park City was rejected as looking too pagan, he acknowledged the criticism. (A design for the Hurva Synagogue in Jerusalem was also condemned as pagan, interestingly.) Of all his clients, he felt most connection with the Indians, and he worked happily with them throughout the IIM project. "The Indian people understood him. He was not 'idealistic' or 'impractical.' He was an artist and a teacher in search of the truth, as best as he could find it."

As Kahn's second daughter, Alexandra Tyng, grew up, she decided she would no longer passively accept her place in the background of Kahn's life. At sixteen she reached out to Pattison and her young half-brother Nathaniel, and the siblings became a family unit. It was an alliance that eventually came to include the eldest half-sibling, Sue Ann. (Sue Ann is now a flautist, Alexandra a painter: all three children followed their father into careers in the arts.) Pattison herself became friends with Anne Tyng. "We enjoyed how [the children] became close and were united in our belief that they should not be excluded from his public world, which indeed they were." When in 1970 Kahn was awarded the prestigious Philadelphia prize—the ultimate honor from his home city—neither Alex nor Nathaniel was invited to the ceremony, but Alex boldly telephoned Kahn's office and requested tickets, and the two young people went together. Esther studiously ignored them at the reception, but Kahn did not, and it was the beginning of the children's at least partial integration into Kahn's official life, and family. In the meantime Kahn, bizarrely, had welcomed Pattison, with whom he was now collaborating on projects, to move into his office—an arrangement he didn't inform Esther about. Pattison was stashed in a "fourth-floor hideaway adjoining the storage area," the door of which she kept bolted against Esther's monthly visits, when the visiting wife would rattle at the door and loudly ask everyone why it was locked. "Nathaniel commented that I acted 'like you're living in somebody else's

house.' But I was confident that I belonged, and I knew that Lou needed me."

In some ways Harriet Pattison's story, unusual as it may seem, is a classic one for a woman of her generation. Born in the late 1920s to a highly respectable family, she came of age just before the sexual revolution that would have made her life as a single mother more acceptable; by the time it arrived, as it did a few years after Nathaniel was born, her situation had been permanently constricted by the awkward bargains she had made with Kahn, her family, her society. Her book is often painful to read, as it all seems to have been take, take, take on Kahn's part, and give, give, give on hers. Even at his funeral (he died, sadly for a man who spent his life contemplating the architectural sublime, in the men's room at Penn Station), Pattison was excluded: first disinvited by Esther and then, when she came anyway, relegated to a side room away from "the family." And yet she very clearly believes she did not get a bad bargain. She was able to maintain her relationship, at whatever emotional cost to herself, with the one man she loved; she was given a son; she was fortunate enough to be able to take part in the great architect's works, not only as a sounding board but as a collaborator. It's a fascinating psychological study. Like Nathaniel Kahn's *My Architect*, this memoir sets out to paint a portrait of Kahn and ends up being, instead, a surprisingly revealing self-portrait.

All over the maps

Mathew Edney &
Mary Sponberg Pedley, editors
The History of Cartography, Volume 4: Cartography in the European Enlightenment.
University of Chicago Press,
1,920 pages, $500

reviewed by Jeremy Black

A Map or Chart of the Road of Love, and Harbour of Marriage (1748) by "T. P. Hydrographer; to his Majesty Hymen and Prince Cupid," one of the very many maps clearly reproduced in this fourth volume of the University of Chicago Press's *History of Cartography*, offers guidance to such hazards as the Whirlpools of Beauty and Adultery, the Rocks of Jealousy, and Extravagance Bank. The Land of Desire sits opposite Cuckold's Shire. The scholarly text that the editors attach to this map draws attention to the contrast between this and the French *Carte de l'isle du mariage* (1732), which has marriage as an island. In the British map from 1748, it is presented in a more benign light, with "Content Bay" and "Felicity Harbour" leading off from it.

All maps are here. The value of *The History of Cartography* to those interested in maps has long been a given, and one further affirmed by the project's scale, which is unlikely to be matched. The importance of an understanding of maps to broader intellectual, cultural, and political currents emerges clearly, as does the very delight of maps. Indeed, as an aesthetic product, the two "parts," each substantial volumes themselves, of this one "volume," with the total weight almost sixteen pounds, are a triumph. As your reviewer, I have read it cover to cover, but you, dear reader, can follow the helpful and clear organization by entries, or, alternatively, just browse at random. You will find not only maps aplenty but also illustrations of many types. Turning to the conceptual clusters, and in a far from exhaustive list, there are treatments of: surveying and observation; property mapping; boundary surveying; topographical surveying; urban, geographical, celestial, and thematic mapping; marine charting; art, craft, and cartography; science and cartography; geodetic surveying; the map trade; map collecting; administrative and military cartography; relevant individuals and institutions; maps and books; surveys and expeditions; and particular spatial contexts, which include European colonies as well as the United States.

Thus we find a formidable coverage, and one of interest to readers across a wide range. Moreover, the volume repeatedly rises to the challenge. As ever, it is possible for critics to suggest differing priorities and methods of organization. I might have preferred a degree more of attention to the chronological context

and thus to change within the period. Furthermore, there are a few mistakes that deserve correction. For example, East Friesland was acquired by Prussia in 1744, not 1749. The Holy Roman Empire was not "a dynastic state," and its weakness was not accentuated by mapmaking. For a work of this scale, however, there are very few errors indeed, and, one hopes, they can be corrected for the online edition.

The editors offer a valuable guide to Enlightenment thought, one that is worth considering alongside Ritchie Robertson's important new *The Enlightenment: The Pursuit of Happiness 1680–1790* (Harper). It is far from easy to write on that topic today, because the Enlightenment as a movement is now seen as inherently multi-centered and diverse, but also because of the often bitter debate at present about its purpose, placing, and value, a debate that regularly includes an ill-informed attack on the West and Westernization, as well as linked but also often very separate critiques of rationalism and secularism. There is also now a reaction against the developmental progressivism that characterizes much past historiography, as well as a reluctance to reify enlightenment, let alone an "Enlightenment Project."

The editors' attempt to steer readers will not meet with agreement by all. I find overly certain and sweeping the contention, "If the Renaissance was the era in which Europeans discovered and mapped both the world and the self, the Enlightenment was when they discovered an autonomous earth and understood more fully the power of the state."

As I argued in *Eighteenth-Century Europe* (Palgrave Macmillan, 1990), it is important also to note the limitations of the states in this period. To a degree these compromised the attempts to accumulate and employ information. Moreover, as this volume ably shows, the achievements of the commercial sphere were often as or more significant than those of the state. The editors are surely correct to point out the spirit of inquiry, whether public or private, that informed much Enlightenment thought.

Throughout this tome the scholarship adds many useful insights. Thus we learn how for Germans—who were without any major direct stake in colonial designs or world trade in this period—there was little impetus to sustain or develop a detailed interest in the geography of overseas countries. As a consequence, the German portrayal of the world as a whole is presented as intellectual rather than driven by more practical needs and opportunities.

Catherine Bousquet-Bressolier has helpful comments on how best to read and interpret cartographic memoirs and throws light on some of the difficulties underlining the impressive scholarship in this volume. Roger Kain argues that consent to taxation in the British parliament meant that there was no need to reform the land tax and "thus no need to invoke instruments such as taxation mapping." The strength of customs and excise revenue and administration was also part of the equation.

Jordana Dym is very interesting on "Travel and Cartography," which includes as subsections: motives, methods, and preparation; maps for travelers, maps produced by travelers; acquiring local knowledge; publishing travelers' maps; the credibility of travelers' cartography; and the use of travelers' maps. The role of travelers was to be replaced by specialists, but Dym demonstrates their earlier significance and exemplifies the success of the volume in providing a variety of interesting as well as pertinent maps.

Geoff Armitage uses his discussion of world maps to draw attention to the abandonment of historical vignettes, which he suggests demonstrates "the new emphasis for geography on the situation of the terraqueous globe in the present." This is illustrated by a full-page reproduction of Louis Denis' 1795 reprinting of Jean-Baptiste Nolin's earlier world map, a map accompanied by astronomical diagrams as well as allegories of the continents. The last entry, by Wolfram Dolz, is on Adam Zürner, the mapper of Saxony, whose technique is ably described and whose work is supported by two contemporary pertinent illustrations, one showing Zürner's surveying and mapping procedures. This is a triumphant entry with which to close the volume.

American readers will find much of interest regarding their own country, including the

reproduction of many maps, from Samuel Holland's chart of Boston Harbor to the erroneous mapping of Pacific North America in Philippe Buache's 1752 map of the North Pacific. The 1699 map of Casco Bay is linked to a tour of fortifications on behalf of William II by a Dutch-born military engineer.

Map collectors will enjoy the discussion of their predecessors. For example, in Switzerland, a growing interest in publicly obtainable maps gave rise to an increasing number of private collections during the seventeenth century. In the following century, more widespread education encouraged an interest in maps, which, in turn, helped lower prices. The current locations of major collections of the period are discussed. In Britain, map collecting reached a royal apogee in the person of George III, who had an estimated fifty thousand maps, views, and atlases. John Locke had argued in 1703 that "a good collection of maps" was "very necessary" in any gentleman's library. I feel sure that he would have added this volume, and indeed this entire triumphant series, which is a major achievement for scholarship, publishing, and American philanthropy, the source of much of the funding for the *History of Cartography* project.

Everything as it is

David Edmonds
The Murder of Professor Schlick:
The Rise and Fall of the Vienna Circle.
Princeton University Press,
336 pages, $27.95

reviewed by Frederic Raphael

The Vienna Circle is now best remembered for its illustrious tangent, Ludwig Wittgenstein. In its prime, between the wars, the unofficial fraternity was presided over by Moritz Schlick, who began his academic career as a physicist. Inspired by Ernst Mach, Schlick and his associates presumed science to be a "social practice," devoted to the solution of "usually practical" problems. Philosophy, traditionally crowned "the Queen of Sciences," was dethroned, as Europe's pre-war emperors had been in 1918, and relegated to dusting and polishing propositional paraphernalia. The fraternity soon to be known as "Logical Positivists"—Rudolf Carnap the most rigorous; the elephantine trumpeter Otto Neurath the loudest—regarded metaphysics as the "beguiling nonsense" of what A. J. "Freddie" Ayer came to stigmatize as "pundits."

Ethics and aesthetics were banished from the common ground of science and left for private cultivation. Radical disinterestedness distinguished the Circle from those denounced by Julien Benda in 1927's *La Trahison des Clercs*: intellectual opportunists who cut their cloth to suit ideological patrons. In the same year, Martin Heidegger published *Being and Time*. Within a decade, he became the timeliest of treasonous clerks by coming out for National Socialism. Not one of the Vienna Circle proved an accessory to genocide. It is a contingent irony that Moritz Schlick was murdered, in 1936, by a jealous student, pumped up with the lethal *air du temps*.

David Edmonds begins his magisterial conspectus, *The Murder of Professor Schlick*, with an emblematic vignette. Having marked that in September 1939 there was a Harvard conference of the Vienna Circle in exile, attended by distinguished accretions such as the logician W. V. O. Quine, he cuts, in cinematic style, to "the village of Truskolasy, in southern Poland, [where] dozens of peasants were rounded up and shot. Just fifty miles away, twenty Jews were forced to assemble in the marketplace. Among them . . . Israel Lewi. When his daughter, Liebe, ran up to her father, a German told her to open her mouth 'for impudence.' He then fired a bullet into it." The connection between philosophy and programmatic murder is sealed in what Kenneth Burke would call "perspective by incongruity."

The notion, advanced by the post-war German historian Ernst Nolte, that Hitler's Germany initiated genocide only as a prophylactic against "internal enemies," is a recent instance of tendentious scholarship. Long before the war, opinion-mongers, ranging from the academically respected Carl Schmitt—he actually conceded a point or two to his ex-pupil

Leo Strauss—to the crackpot Nazi Alfred Rosenberg, demonized "the Jews" by means of pseudo-logical constructs. Berel Lang has noted the sinister role that can be played even by the definite article in propagating the image of a polycephalic bogey. Intellectuals and impostors, prophets and divines have frequently prescribed carnage as a preliminary to the promised happiness of the greatest number.

The French philosopher Brice Parain (1897–1971) declared "words are loaded pistols, we use them at our peril." And, he might have added, misuse them at other people's. Logic may validate the steps of any argument; it can do nothing to justify its premises. Hitler and Stalin published voluminous parodies of scholarship to provide scriptural warrants for barbarism. Man alone among animals kills in the name of principle.

What philosophy *should be* was at the heart of the Vienna Circle's concerns. In the light of its historical uses and misuses, Wittgenstein's claim that "philosophy leaves everything as it is" sounds more wishful than descriptive. Even in the Greek cities of the sixth century, few of the original seven sages, now lumped together as "pre-Socratic," were entirely dispassionate speculators about the nature of things. Love of wisdom was compounded with hegemonic vanity (Pythagoras), imperious resentment (Heraclitus), and gray eminence (Anaxagoras). That all subsequent philosophy has been said to be footnotes to Plato implies the abiding allure of prescriptive *hauteur*. The *Politeia*, misleadingly translated as "The Republic," proposed government by philosopher-kings. The status of these Platonic "guardians" was rendered unchallengeable by the "*gennaion pseudos*," commonly rendered as "noble lie," which certified their quasi-divine assumption of power. "Lordly fabrication" is a truer translation. To challenge its logic became treason; birthright was might. Male and/or female (because souls had no sex), the elite was entitled to rule first by birth, then by privileged education, prolonged when it came to mathematics. Two thousand years later, command of the mathematical high ground served to vaunt the *superbe* of both Bertrand Russell and Ludwig Wittgenstein.

When I was reading what was called, in 1950s Cambridge, "Moral Sciences," the core curriculum was limited to English-language writers. Polemic iconoclasm, when it came to metaphysics, theology, and morals, was supplied by Ayer's *Language, Truth & Logic*, published in 1936. Its twenty-six-year-old author denounced what he called "literal nonsense"; propositions devoid of possible empirical verification had no claim to philosophical significance. Ayer's swiftly expressed gospel had been culled from the Vienna Circle. He attended their meetings while learning German—during a few months' stay at his Oxford tutor Gilbert Ryle's suggestion—in fractious "Red" Vienna, just before the 1938 *Anschluss*. Although he came to the mature conclusion that his early enthusiasm was misguided, Ayer never changed his mind about the subjective status of morals. At a white-tie Mansion House dinner in the 1970s, I dared to tell him how much *Language, Truth & Logic* had meant to me. He said, "It still brings me in a thousand pounds a year."

My sole wince when reading Edmond's magisterial opus was reserved for the title. "Rise and Fall" is catchpenny salesmanship. The Vienna Circle, with all its faults, continues to stand for a tradition of humane, secular thought that foundered in the bloody apocalypse of totalitarianism. That some of the blood was that of the admirable, if adulterous, Schlick does not render his murder (by a jealous student) central to this impressive account of his and his friends' finally losing battle with the forces of reaction and unreason. Edmonds is never ponderous, although his book contains only one joke, rather good, if flat, about the Bauhaus.

The Roman Catholic Church, the right-wing academic establishment, and the government of post-1918 Austria were all scandalized by the agnosticism of Vienna's exclusive (and excluded) group of independent intellectuals. Schematic modesty was read as irreligious provocation. How could Schlick and his colleagues dare to claim that in the sphere of science, as in St. Paul's vision of heaven, there was, or should be, neither Jew nor Gentile? Reliance only on what, in Wittgenstein's phrase, "was the case" amounted to defiant heresy. The

Vienna Circle's attempt to build a systematic barrier against the misuse of philosophy was as timely as it proved futile.

With indisputable upper-class Austrian origins, an American Protestant wife, and a "capacious apartment" in Prinz-Eugen-Straße, not far from the Rothschilds' mansion, Schlick was commonly accused of being a Jew. Why else endorse the erasure of metaphysics and imply that its proponents were vacuous, if not fraudulent? Martin Heidegger's portentousness excited repeated derision during the Circle's relaxed moments. Heidegger's own brother took his verbosity to be a po-faced form of Dadaism. The Nazi philosopher's secret notebooks—secret that is, until recently—puncture the levity and cast perverse light on his "romance" with the young Hannah Arendt especially after her sponsored spell at the Eichmann trial. A reexamination of that other school, dominated by Heidegger and celebrated, *à sa façon*, by Jean-Paul Sartre, cries out for an anatomist of Edmonds's stamina and diligence.

Ludwig Wittgenstein was first presented to the already celebrated Bertrand Russell in 1911, in Trinity College, Cambridge. The author of *Principia Mathematica* was soon to rate Wittgenstein (whom he first took to be a German national) as one of those rare beings who instanced genius. Wittgenstein himself attributed that distinction only to Beethoven and Mozart, in his terms "the sons of God." No such accolade was ever laid on the magisterial Russell. Did aristocratic genealogy deny him maverick singularity? Wittgenstein did Russell the favor of demonstrating to him that, since mathematics was an immense nexus of tautology, the quasi-divine fundamentals he had sought to establish over twenty years were no more than, so to say, *pi* in the sky. For the rest of his long life, Russell was reduced, in whatever shrewd style, to the sophist's role. His revenge was to omit Wittgenstein from his popular 1945 *History of Western Philosophy*.

Imported permanently into Cambridge in 1929, Wittgenstein's messianic status and the embalmed renown of his *Tractatus*, capped by a reluctantly embraced professorship, isolated him as a mantic one-off. After his death in 1951, his *Philosophical Investigations* pedestaled the five-foot-six genius. Incessantly quoted, was he ever mimicked in any kind of accent? Did anyone call him Ludwig? Only one man, Marshal Jean de Lattre de Tassigny, is known to have addressed General de Gaulle as "*tu*." Wittgenstein was less foreigner than donnish eccentric. It was said that one day he met an undergraduate who lived on the same staircase in Whewell's Court and said, very Britishly, "I get more stupid every day."

Claiming that the philosopher was, by definition, a solitary, Wittgenstein shied away from commitment both to the Vienna Circle and to the Cambridge "Apostles," a self-elevating intellectual elite dedicated to uninhibited candor when in conclave, mutual advancement outside it. Members included G. E. Moore and Russell, who had posed as Wittgenstein's examiners when he was accorded a Ph.D. on account of the *Tractatus*. Their putative pupil had been pleased to excuse them from trying to understand it. Moore said that he first suspected the young Wittgenstein to be remarkable when he was the only student to look puzzled in his lectures.

Not until Stephen Toulmin and Allan Janik's *Wittgenstein's Vienna* (1985) were the complex roots of what had become known, after World War II, as "therapeutic positivism" uncovered. Freud's couched neurotic and Wittgenstein's rabid metaphysician were to receive similar patient treatment. When John Wisdom reported that he had had a difficult session with another cranky philosopher, Wittgenstein said, "Perhaps you made the mistake of contradicting something he said." The easing of intellectual cramps was, in theory, a matter of persuasive, never assertive, intellectual massage. In Wittgenstein's terms, after due treatment, the fly would make its own way out of the fly-bottle (and, though he did not say so, very probably into somebody else's ointment).

By severing metaphysics from the philosophical canon, the Vienna Circle cut itself off, as if by chance, from the horror of what soon became Austria's pitiless civil war to which Hitler would come as devilish deliverer. Schlick's murder in 1936, and the assassination of Chancellor Dollfuss by a posse of Austrian Nazis, are reminders that what Sartre called

"contingency" is forever at odds with the logics with which men (rarely women) have sought to girdle the world. What Thucydides called *to aprosdoketon*, the unforeseen—and Harold Macmillan, the British prime minister in the early 1960s, "Events, dear boy, events"—can be relied on to disrupt what Hegel and Marx, in reciprocal, crosspatch ways, took to be the predestined course plotted by reason. The murder of Schlick, for whatever hectic motive, was one more case of the infectious spread, and celebration of, unreason. That his killer, Johann Nelbock, was eventually released and recruited to the Nazi ranks was in line with the sanctification of murder in the "Horst Wessel" *lied*.

The Vienna Circle shunned questions of race, politics, and religion. The principal pursuit was to distinguish valid ideas, in propositional form, from metaphysical flannel. That all participants were liable to be stigmatized as heretics or Jews was due to their rejection of religious considerations. Edmonds notes that "Red Vienna" was "a socialist island in a reactionary country." In the referendum of May 1919, Vorarlberg—truncated post-war Austria's westernmost province—voted, with a majority of 80 percent, to adhere to Switzerland rather than remain part of the "Jewish state" of Vienna. Sigismund Waitz, later the archbishop of Salzburg, called the Vienna government "the rule of Satan." The limited, not to say blinkered, range of the Circle's philosophical scope can be read, plausibly, as circumscribed by Spinozan caution.

Their corporate radicalism was kept alive, after 1945, especially by Ayer's Swiftian requiem *Language, Truth & Logic*, which Edmonds declares, at the outset, to have been the pugnacious text that attracted him and no few others to philosophy as a purge for obsolete and noxious ideas. Followers of philosophical wars and skirmishes will recall Karl Popper's notorious rap with Wittgenstein, at the Cambridge Moral Sciences Club in 1947, entertainingly retailed by Edmonds and John Eidinow in *Wittgenstein's Poker* (2001). The literal stand-off between the transplanted Viennese sprang from Popper's championing the Kantian view that there could and should be universally valid ethical statements. In his frustration, Wittgenstein seized a poker from the fire irons. Popper then advanced as an example: "It is wrong to threaten visiting lecturers with a poker." Wittgenstein flung said iron into the King's College grate and headed for the door, pausing only to say to the meeting's aristocratic moderator, "What do you know about philosophy, Russell? What have you ever known?" Historians say that the victor in a close battle is determined by who is left in command of the field. Popper was, no doubt, domineering and self-important, but *The Open Society and Its Enemies* has a resurrected importance in the current babel of dialogues of the deaf.

What Gilbert Ryle labeled "the systematic elusiveness of 'I'" was typical of the positivist and meta-positivist style. In post-war, meta-Wittgensteinian Cambridge, it was fashionable for us to parrot the claim that all sentences beginning "I think" or "I believe" were to be classified as "mere autobiography." The essence of valid discourse was that it was impersonal. If Albert Einstein, for paradigm purposes, was an indisputable genius, the curvature of space, which he first propounded and later verified, could as well, *in principle*, have been proposed or observed by another: it was "out there," not a private invention. In this regard, there is a measure of sadism in Wittgenstein's graceless accusation that Friedrich Waismann had plagiarized his ideas. Such possessiveness smacks of the tradesman. Waismann was a decent, unpretentious advocate of Wittgenstein's ideas, despite a life of anguish, exile, and personal tragedy.

The Logical Positivists' dethroning of philosophy coincided with the decline and fall of the German and Austro-Hungarian empires at the end of the Great War. The way was cleared, however inadvertently, for the domination of ideologues and pseudo-messiahs who depended on the creation of demons—capitalists, cosmopolitans, Reds ("the Jews" supplied a one-size-fits-all model)—for their right to dictatorship.

The Nazi-inspired assassination of the Austrian nationalist chancellor Dollfuss in 1934 presaged the collapse of Christian culture and the triumph of ideological absolutisms. To-

day's English-speaking world exalts what Herbert Marcuse labeled "repressive tolerance": we are so broad-minded that those who take exception, at whatever level of intelligence, are liable to suffer, socially and professionally, if they question the going cant. Wokeness too risks putting reason to sleep. The best philosophy is dialogue, not doctrine. Think about it.

London's smallest lung

Andrew Jones
The Buildings of Green Park: A tour of certain buildings, monuments and other structures in Mayfair and St. James's.
ACC Art Books, 168 pages, $35

reviewed by Benjamin Riley

Green Park is, improbably, the park in which I've spent the most time over the course of my life, despite only having lived in London for a year. It's not that the park, pleasant though it is, held any special place in my heart. There was no mystical attachment. It was simply the most efficient way, by foot, to get from my flat in Pimlico to the London Library in St James's Square, where I did most of my work in graduate school. The route took me over the Elizabeth Bridge, which left me in plain sight of the Victoria Coach Station, a sort of equivalent to New York's Port Authority Bus Terminal in interior character, though a far more attractive building, dating from the 1930s and furnished with a reticent deco façade. (There I once waited for the bus to Cheltenham to watch the horse races; I should have taken the train.) Over the bridge, a right onto Buckingham Palace Road set me on my way towards Central London, taking me past Victoria Station on the right. The station is a far way from its days as a semi-glamorous point of origin for the boat train to France, evoked so memorably by Henry Green in his 1939 novel, *Party Going*. When I lived in London, it was mired in continual construction dust, which seemed to have abated the last time I was there, in late 2019, though the glass-and-steel forms that have risen in place hardly warm the heart. At left are the outbuildings to Buckingham Palace, most notably the Royal Mews, whose entrance gate's coupled columns, winningly rusticated and topped with a lion and unicorn, give the space a suitably martial air. Then I would pass the Palace itself, dodging tourists and their exercises in amateur photography, crossing Constitution Hill into the smallest of London's royal parks, what was once "Upper St James's Park," now "Green Park." A small incline brought me past elegant surviving Georgian houses, through a small passage to Cleveland Row, onto St James's Street and its eighteenth-century air, through to King Street, past Christie's London headquarters, and finally onto St James's Square itself.

All these memories arose while reading Andrew Jones's *The Buildings of Green Park*, a delightful tonic of a book that is a cheerful antidote to current proscriptions on international travel. The book is the result of Jones's own peregrinations, undertaken in 2020 (dread year!) as Britain was subjected, like much of the world, to "stay-at-home" orders, commonly known as "lockdown." An international lawyer by trade, and clearly an industrious sort, Jones decided that he would use the time normally spent commuting to his office to walk in the park that abuts his home (he lives on Piccadilly). Determined to learn about all the buildings that face Green Park, he set a goal of writing about one building a day. The result was a series of posts on Instagram, the digital photograph-sharing service, and, eventually, a handsome hardcover book that contains potted biographies of not only the buildings, but also the monuments within or facing the park. All of us who pledged, when our masters sent us inside, to clean out our sock drawers but still haven't done so must feel rather foolish in the face of Jones's achievement. The book, in addition to being cheerfully informative throughout, is a model of design. From the cloth spine with embossed gold lettering, to the labeled map preceding the text, down to the attached ribbon bookmark and the index and bibliography, the book fulfills all its remits—at once an attractive object and a useful primer on an intriguing, especially private bit of London.

Green Park's fifty-one acres were first enclosed by Henry VIII, but it was not until 1688 that the park was surrounded by walls. Even then, its boundaries remained unfixed, with the northeast corner sold to become Arlington Street, and more land subsequently added to the west. But it was the eighteenth century that gave the park its cachet, with the Queen's Walk, named for Caroline of Ansbach, the wife of George II, laid out in 1730 along the eastern edge by Charles Bridgeman, the pioneering garden designer. Soon thereafter grand noble houses began fronting the Queen's Walk, many of which still stand today and give the park its graceful bearing.

Spencer House (1756–58), built for John Spencer, later the first Earl Spencer, was the earliest major house to have its principal façade face the park rather than St James's. Its initial architect, the capable but now-forgotten John Vardy, gave way to the fastidious James "Athenian" Stuart, who, when later building 15 St James's Square, disparaged his tradesmen, imploring them not to "murder" his column capitals. With its massive seven-bay façade and rich detailing, it set the tone for architectural extravagance next to the park.

Lancaster House (1825–41) only has six columns in its portico, but its nine bays declare its splendor forcefully. The house was begun for the Duke of York, George IV's brother, but royal debts forced a sale to the second Marquess of Stafford, who later became the first Duke of Sutherland, famed for his wealth. Queen Victoria allegedly told his wife, "I have come from my House to your Palace," which gives a sense of the scale. But it is the honey-colored Bath stone of the façade that really captivates, a soft golden color I remember well from my time in London. Jones thinks so, too, admitting that "seeing its Bath stone façade glowing in the early morning sunshine became one of the great pleasures of my daily outing during Lockdown." Leased for free to the British government since 1913, the house has since 1922 held the Government Wine Cellar, amounting to 39,000 bottles, which also gives a sense of the scale.

The final individual mansion to be built on the park, Bridgewater House (1845–48) is a massive Florentine *palazzo* by Charles Barry, reminiscent of the architect's Travellers and Reform clubs of Pall Mall, though exceeding both in grandeur. Jones captures charming details like the "Groom" and "Coachman" doorbells still present at the house's back entrance, as well as the expansive formal garden, which can just be glimpsed from the Queen's Walk, especially in winter, when the trees are denuded of their leaves.

At the top of the Queen's Walk, at the corner of Piccadilly, stands the Ritz Hotel (1903–07), which Jones describes as the Walk's

> apogee . . . a little piece of the arcade in the rue de Rivoli and a large dollop of the court of Louis XVI, miraculously landed on Piccadilly, with almost non-stop *crêpes suzette* within, an eternal flame for Margaret Thatcher who died here on 8 April 2013 after being generously accommodated by the Barclay brothers, then the owners of the hotel.

A solid piece of architecture, as all landmarks should be, the Mewès & Davis–designed hotel "has an unusually strong structure due to building regulations not having caught up with technology: it is the first large steel-framed building in London but also (at the insistence of the local building authority) supported by its cladding system." This belt-and-suspenders approach allowed it to weather multiple bomb hits during World War II, as dramatized in Anthony Powell's *Dance to the Music of Time*. Indeed, numerous scenes throughout those novels take place at the Ritz, which evinces a magnetic quality in the books, much as the actual building does today. Who can forget the scene in which, at an old boys dinner in a basement party room, the bloviating Widmerpool's "uncalled-for speech" begins with a "kind of involuntary grunt" and ends with his former housemaster Le Bas "knocked . . . out cold" after an apoplectic fit? For Powell people, real life is always seen through the lens of the novel, not the other way around.

Jones's book is full of delights, even for the seasoned visitor to the environs around Green Park—the man who knows his Justerini &

Brooks from his Berry Bros. He notes the ornamental ship's prow at the corner of 81 Piccadilly, suggesting it refers to the Royal Thames Yacht Club's former occupancy of the site. While the Pevsner guide ignores this winsome detail, Jones furthers our appreciation of the building and its history, recounting how it once served as the location of Watier's club, "founded by the Prince Regent during a dinner party at which members of Brooks's and White's were complaining about having to eat endless boiled fowl in oyster sauce." The Hard Rock Cafe—which a friend maintains is the best place for a clandestine meeting in London, as no one you know will be there—is all "soaring exuberance, that orgy of decoration, those stripes, and also that zany discipline." We can well understand why the Pevsner guide calls the building, built in 1905 as a mixed commercial and residential development, a "remarkable freak," and sympathize with Edward VII, who complained that it spoiled his vista across the gardens of the Palace.

Jones ends his tour with a feature of the Park I'd never noticed, though one fitting for what Pitt the Elder called one of the three "lungs of London." Jones names it the "Pantheon," a circle of trees 142 feet in diameter, exactly the same as the famed Roman dome. These trees, the remnants of a long-lost enclosed bandstand, create a canopy with a circle open to the sky—an oculus, as it were. I'm eager to get there, and soon I hope. In the meantime, we have Jones's book, which he calls "a memento of the strange confinement brought about by COVID-19": scraps, though appetizing ones.

Besmirching a tradition

Edmund Fawcett
Conservatism: The Fight for a Tradition.
Princeton University Press, 544 pages, $35

reviewed by John Kekes

Edmund Fawcett's new book, *Conservatism: The Fight for a Tradition*, is a history of the conservative approach to politics in America, England, France, and Germany from the eighteenth century to the present. It is divided into six parts. The first two are general accounts of conservatism, while the remaining four cover the periods between 1830–80, 1880–1945, 1945–80, and 1980 to the present. The book discusses many conservatives in each of the countries, in each period, and gives an account of the role they played in the political condition of their countries.

Fawcett's references to others' accounts of conservatism are extensive and exceptionally helpful for both scholars and general readers. Reading the book makes obvious that the author has consulted a wide range of books, views, and articles in the relevant languages. The accounts themselves, however, are seriously flawed journalistic sketches of particular conservative viewpoints.

One problem is Fawcett's approach to the subject. He forthrightly acknowledges that he is "a left-wing liberal" and that, although he does "not claim that this history is neutral," he "trust[s] it is objective." As to its objectivity, Fawcett begins in the preface by assuming that "conservatism began life as an enemy of liberalism" and that it "endured in modern politics by cooperating with liberalism." The assumption is that liberalism was in place, and then along came conservatism as a reaction to it. This is nonsense, ignoring that the historical roots of the conservative tradition go back to antiquity, far before the formal rise of liberalism in the seventeenth century.

It is absurd to claim that the views of conservatives like Aquinas, Hobbes, Madison, Hamilton, John Adams, and Hume, among others, emerged only as a reaction to liberalism. It is similarly absurd to claim, as Fawcett does, that the later conservatives who did react to liberalism—such as James Fitzjames Stephen, Michael Oakeshott, Enoch Powell, and John Finnis in England; the first Roosevelt, H. L. Mencken, William Howard Taft, Barry Goldwater, Russell Kirk, and William F. Buckley Jr. in America; Joseph de Maistre and Charles de Gaulle in France; and Justus Möser, Carl Schmitt, and the formidably learned German conservative historians—"endured in modern politics by cooperating with liberalism." None of them cooperated with liberalism, and all of them repudiated it.

Surely, a reasonable understanding of a political view is to begin by giving an account of it that its defenders would find acceptable. Instead, Fawcett requires conservatives to explain why they reject liberal views, which he assumes are right. Fawcett's approach is like giving an account of religious belief as a misguided response to atheism, or of the tragic view of life as a regrettable deviation from optimism. It wrongly assumes that liberalism is the established status quo that requires no justification, whereas conservatism is an unjustified deviation from it.

Fawcett discusses conservative viewpoints but leaves largely unexamined the ideas behind them. There is no discussion of conservatives understanding or misunderstanding their political context. The book is largely a list of views Fawcett attributes to conservatives without reference to the sources, the contexts, and the cultural, economic, international, moral, political, religious, and technological circumstances to which they have reacted.

Fawcett writes that in his book "'the right' and 'conservatives' are used interchangeably." Yet the left–right distinction is French in origin, certainly not American or English, and it confuses everyone and maligns conservatives who are unjustly lumped together with people like the French fascists and Poujadists; the American Ku Klux Klan; the English fascist Oswald Mosley; or the German post–World War I revanchists. Given Fawcett's malicious usage, all these political extremists are understood to be conservatives. This is not a verbal quibble. It maligns conservatives by putting them in the same camp with extremists they condemn.

Fawcett's book covers a great deal of various conservatives in the four countries and various historical periods he discusses. Yet the discussion omits centrally important aspects of conservatism. There is no discussion, for instance, of the often acrimonious political controversies among conservatives about the proper distribution and limits of religious and secular power and authority during the centuries between the birth of Christianity and the beginning of the Enlightenment. Nor does Fawcett mention the conservatism of the natural law tradition that began with Aquinas in Italy, spread to France and to a lesser extent Germany, and from there to England and America. The book says next to nothing about the crucial importance of the Constitution to both conservative and liberal politics in America, nor of the *Rechtsstaat* in German politics. And, more generally, in the Anglophone world, it fails to take notice of the formative influence of the common law tradition on conservative politics, and the quite different influence of the Roman law tradition on French and German conservatism. Fawcett largely ignores the significant differences between Continental and Anglophone conservatism that are to a great extent the result of different understandings of the rule of law to which they are both committed.

Fawcett takes no notice of how the tradition of political realism—represented, for instance, by Dean Acheson's foreign policy, the academic works of Hans Morgenthau, and the many books and political stances of Henry Kissinger—have shaped the conservative American response to the Cold War, anticommunism, and foreign policy in general. It does not discuss the formative cultural influence of the Mugwumps in nineteenth-century American politics. The influence of Hobbes and Hume on the philosophical foundations of conservatism is mentioned, but their importance is not discussed. There is nothing about Tocqueville's *The Old Regime and the French Revolution*, nor about his significant role in French political life. Clarendon's lifelong conservatism and pivotal role in the English restoration are ignored. Nor is there a discussion of the largely English conservative historians, like Herbert Butterfield, who were sharply critical of the Whig interpretation of history, of which Fawcett's book is a poor specimen.

Fawcett writes about the "liberal attachment and conservative hostility to written constitutions," an absurd formulation in light of the American conservative commitment to the Constitution and of the American liberal tendency to want to "reform" the Constitution by bringing it into harmony with liberal views. Another of Fawcett's claims is that, "to conser-

vatives, power once 'established,' that is, settled and accepted, was just and hence authoritative, although legitimate holders of authority could act unjustly." Consider such a statement against the conservative New England abolitionists who opposed the established power of Southern slaveholders, the conservatives who fought against the established power of Hitler in Germany, the Cold War anti-communists who opposed Stalin in Russia, Mao in China, Castro in Cuba, and the communist dictators in East and Central Europe.

Early on in the book, Fawcett poses what he imagines are profound questions, to which conservatives supposedly give, at best, feeble answers:

> In the modern flux, what value should conservatives keep and pass down? Have conservatives an intellectual orthodoxy of their own or simply a set of anti-liberal criticisms and grievances? Is conservatism a substantive tradition with distinctive values or a stylistic tradition of prudent management? Those questions recur throughout the conservative story. Running through it, also, is an argument over how far to compromise with liberal modernity. That contest gives the story of conservatism vitality and shape.

Allow me to attempt a response to these questions. The aim of conservatism is to protect the political tradition of the society in which conservatives live, provided that the tradition has stood the test of time because it has attracted the voluntary allegiance of its citizens. Central to that tradition is the rule of law that establishes the limits within which individuals in that society can live as they rightly or wrongly suppose they should. The rule of law is needed because human beings are imperfectible; because the political values of liberty, justice, security, private property, and individual responsibility often conflict; and because society, facing internal and external threats, must find ways of coping with perennially changing conditions. These are the challenges to which conservatives must respond. And the vitality and shape of conservatism derive from the need to protect what we have and to cope with adversities that challenge it.

Conservatism thus understood is a constructive approach to politics. It certainly opposes liberalism, but it also opposes socialism, communism, libertarianism, egalitarianism, and religious fundamentalism. Conservatism is not a universal and impersonal theory about how a society should be organized, but a context-dependent, historically informed, and flexible attitude to politics. It does not aim to create Heaven on Earth. It is realistic about human nature. And it values the Western cultural tradition formed by the classic works of literature, history, philosophy, and religion from which individuals may learn to live a meaningful life. These basic conservative commitments are buried under the undocumented lists of supposedly conservative views this book provides.

Notebook

Richard L. Feigen, 1930–2021

by Marco Grassi

Here is a simple question I would want to ask anyone considering a career in the art trade: what are the personal qualities and character traits necessary to become a successful art dealer? The correct reply? *In primis*, and lacking a better term, a "prehensile eye." It is best described as the compulsion to hungrily grasp an object's image in all its varied particulars. This data, to be useful, must then be processed through the equivalent of a total-recall "hard drive"—nothing less than the combined visual information gathered over years of seeing, comparing, judging, and learning. It is a precious talent, not otherwise acquired but God-given. There are, to be sure, further imperatives: courage, ambition, steadfastness, patience, and a healthy dose of impertinence. Honesty, despite popular skepticism, is also a must. The above is not an easy combination of requisites, and that is the principal reason why "many are called but few are chosen."

Richard L. Feigen, who died on January 29, was undeniably one of the "chosen." Of a well-to-do Chicago Jewish family, Richard excelled at Yale. There, the young man was soon attracted to the visual arts, thanks to that university's outstanding museum and academic programs, but more importantly as a result of a year spent abroad. In Paris, together with his roommate and lifelong friend John Loeb, Jr., Richard assiduously haunted the city's numberless galleries and artists' studios. Uninterested in and unsatisfied with his brief encounter with the business world after graduation, Feigen possessed both the means and the competence to embark on his chosen career. After initial stints in more modest locations, while still in his mid-thirties Feigen audaciously established a commanding footprint in New York by commissioning Hans Hollein to renovate a townhouse on East Seventy-ninth Street in 1970. The new Feigen Gallery was a shocking addition to the neighborhood's sober streetscape. Glaringly white and dominated by a huge, two-story, glistening chrome column, the building soon became an admired (or deplored) New York landmark. To the dismay (or glee) of many, the house has, long since, reacquired its staid, well-behaved façade.

Actually, the Feigen Gallery's stock-in-trade was even more interesting and surprising than its premises. An innovative presence that began appearing there by the early 1960s was modern German art. For obvious reasons, American collectors and museums had never overly embraced it. It was, after all, the expression of a nation that had remained a fierce adversary throughout most of the twentieth century. Despite this, the gallery regularly exhibited works by then-little-known artists such as Emil Nolde, Otto Dix, Georg Grosz, and Ernst Ludwig Kirchner. They were part of the "German Expressionist" school, an artistic movement that had flourished in the early decades of the last century before being extinguished by Hitler's regime. Feigen was particularly fond of the painter Max Beckmann, a German artist who had fled Nazi Germany in 1937 and arrived in America, via Holland, in 1948. These artists were the masters of the so-called "Neue Sach-

lichkeit" (New Objectivity), who for the first time were revealed to the American public, an event that would, in itself, have assured for the gallery a place in the art historical firmament.

Remarkably, "the Germans" also occasionally made room on those sleek, modernist walls for "the Italians." These were generally large, Baroque compositions of explicitly religious subjects, thematically and stylistically a world apart from the likes of Beckmann. The artists' names were, if possible, then even less familiar than the Germans: Luca Giordano, Giovanni Francesco Barbieri ("Guercino"), and Orazio Gentileschi; it made for an exciting and provocative mixture. The presence of many German Expressionist and Italian Baroque masterworks in American museums today would not have been possible without their appearing first at the Feigen Gallery. Not content with what has been (somewhat dismissively) called the "secondary market," Richard, in association with his longtime associate Frances Beatty, also represented scores of contemporary artists, among them Roy Lichtenstein, Joseph Cornell, John Baldessari, and James Rosenquist. The gallery is entitled to further bragging rights for having given Francis Bacon and Joseph Beuys their first New York shows.

By any measure, Richard was a handsome and commanding figure. Tall, always carefully turned out, and forcefully assertive, he inevitably sucked all the air out of any room he entered. This, as much as his undeniable success, scarcely endeared him to his colleagues. And yet, with Richard, you got what you saw: he never affected those precious mannerisms and inflections prevalent in the art world. While he drove a hard bargain with clients and colleagues, no one ever accused him of skulduggery in his affairs. He never refused to partner with other dealers, as long as he trusted them, adhering always to appropriate etiquette in these relationships. In so many ways, he was invariably the foursquare, plain-dealing American businessman. As such, he was able to engage many of his clients and associates on an even footing; financiers, industrialists, top-tier art world professionals, and Richard always understood each other because they spoke the same language.

This was the man that I met in 1970 when I first returned to New York to continue my pursuit as a painting conservator in private practice. Not surprisingly, I was awed by Richard's prestige and the grandeur of his gallery. At the same time, Richard, being a card-carrying Italophile, may have been somewhat more amenable to engaging professionally with this visitor from Florence. It was the beginning of a long and fruitful relationship that made my further activity in New York possible. I now recognize how valuable his trust in me was at this crucial juncture of my career. Eventually, we became good friends and I was able to assess better his genuine passion for things artistic, a passion that could actually cause him occasional reverses and losses. It also became the driving force of his life as a collector. Richard's "prehensile eye" was, above all, aggressively acquisitive.

One episode is still legendary: the "Feigen–Simon face-off" over the purchase of *Reclining Danaë* (*ca*. 1622), a rare and magnificent work by Orazio Gentileschi owned by Tommy Grange, an English dealer. Norton Simon was the wildly successful California financier who had parlayed a tomato-canning business into a huge corporate conglomerate that included brands as diverse as Canada Dry, Avis, and Republic Steel. Simon had also made a noisy debut in the art world by purchasing Rembrandt's *Portrait of a Boy (Titus?)* (*ca*. 1655–60) in a 1965 London auction. It was an event that catapulted the hitherto obscure Californian into the art world stratosphere. Simon, inexperienced but shrewd, had worked out with Christie's a complicated set of "secret" signals to transmit his intentions to the podium during the sale. He had been too clever by half: the bidding for the painting got terribly muddled and generated an unprecedented and unseemly *bagarre*. Simon at last prevailed and, for the next two decades, went on to become the world's most voracious collector.

Feigen had long admired the *Danaë* and, in 1979, came to an agreement with Grange for its sale. The problem was, Simon believed he, too, had bought the painting. Despite the fact that Feigen counted Simon among his best clients, he did not relent in the tug-of-war that ensued. Unmoved by threats of lawsuits, Fei-

gen held fast and, finally, prevailed: proof that steadfastness is, often, a dealer's most precious virtue. I was privileged to have been able to enjoy the sumptuous and sexy nude on many occasions as she hung in the upstairs drawing room of Richard's elegant Fifth Avenue duplex. Nearby, in the hall, was Beckmann's stark, monumental *The Bark* (1926), a sort of "Ship of Fools." What an astonishing juxtaposition—impossible to find in any museum! In the expansive ground-floor dining room were rows of precious fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Italian panels—yet another, though somewhat later, pursuit of Richard's collecting career. As always, his sense for quality and unerring taste guided him in a field where "names" mean little and historical connections are generally lost.

There is simply no period or region of Western European art that did not attract Richard's "prehensile eye." While "the eye" was trained on art, it never strayed too far from other targets of opportunity—potential clients. A number of years ago, I was in Jamaica with my family in the vicinity of Port Antonio, and we happened to cross paths with Richard on an enchanted, but somewhat crowded, spot called Frenchman's Cove. The area is undoubtedly one of the island's highest rent districts, sprinkled with lovely villas and exclusive clubs. We tried to lure Richard to nearby San-San, a magical and almost deserted beach. Nothing doing: he was ensconced front and center, ready to intercept any and all nabobs who ventured to the water's edge. Clearly, he was engaged in a very special kind of "fishing" and wanted no distraction.

Once a year, in conjunction with important sales or exhibitions, Richard and his wife Isabelle hosted a lavish "Chinese buffet." It soon became a tradition, and every dealer, scholar, or collector in town would gather, as if at a convention, to gossip, conspire, and collude. I often thought that it was a real-life manifestation of the "Ship of Fools" metaphor in the next room. But, of course, Richard was no fool. He was the greatest dealer of his generation, whose only rival was Eugene Thaw. "Gene," unlike Richard, was from the "wrong side of the tracks": a Jewish boy from Brooklyn who started with a modest print dealership off the lobby of the Algonquin Hotel and progressed to a discreet "maisonette" on Park Avenue and Seventy-first Street. This small, conventionally appointed apartment became a destination for every serious collector, scholar, and art professional—a stop that would inevitably alternate with one to Seventy-ninth Street. For several decades starting in the mid-1960s, E. V. Thaw & Co. and the R. L. Feigen Gallery became two irreplaceable fulcrums of New York's art establishment. Visiting each of them was an experience that could not have been more different: high-volume flamboyance uptown and hushed intimacy at Gene's eight blocks down. As a dealer, Thaw was brilliant but took few risks, preferring to collaborate with experienced connoisseurs such as David Carritt in London and Rudolph Heinemann in New York. He also looked for advice from the conservators, specifically Mario Modestini and me. A shy and complicated person, Gene remained steadfastly closed-off and always spoke in a low-key, slightly halting manner that emphasized his conviction and sincerity. I worked with Gene on many projects and admired the mastery of his presentations. He was simply the best salesman I have ever encountered. Although Richard and Gene naturally knew each other, they rarely cooperated on joint projects. I happen to have been privy to a few of Richard's hilarious tantrums when Gene's occasionally sanctimonious posturing got the best of him.

An enterprise such as the Feigen Gallery can have no successor; its existence is wholly intertwined and dependent on the personality and character of its founder. Richard remained active in the trade and dynamic in his personal life until recently. A measure of his wisdom is that, when the time came, he knew how to take a step back, in effect ending a brilliant run spanning well over six decades. Perhaps it was just in time. It is difficult to imagine that an imaginative, courageous dealer like Richard Feigen could survive, let alone thrive, in this contemporary world of instant connectivity, wiki-knowledge, relentless "branding," and fame-mongering. New York, and the greater art world, are certain to be far less interesting places without him.