

The New Criterion

February 2024

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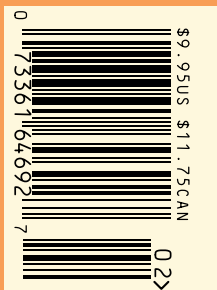
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Volume 42, Number 6, \$9.95 / £9.50

The New Criterion *February 2024*

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The New Criterion. ISSN 0734-0222. February 2024, Volume 42, Number 6. 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: \$58 for one year. For Canada, add \$14 per year. For all other foreign subscriptions, add \$22 per year. Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY, and at additional mailing offices. Postmaster and subscribers: send change of address, all remittances, and subscription inquiries to The New Criterion, P.O. Box 3000, Denville, NJ 07834. Notice of nonreceipt must be sent to this address within three months of the issue date. All other correspondence should be addressed to The New Criterion, 900 Broadway, Suite 602, New York, NY 10003. (212) 247-6980. Copyright © 2024 by The Foundation for Cultural Review, Inc. Newsstand distribution by CMG, 155 Village Blvd., Princeton, NJ 08540. 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.

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Notes & Comments: February 2024

Gay science

The public is by now well acquainted with the threnody of Claudine Gay, the embattled former president of Harvard University. Since before Gay resigned in disgrace on January 2, her case has been the subject of a veritable cataract of commentary. The proximate cause of her departure was plagiarism. (We say “departure,” but Gay only left the presidency, not Harvard. She maintains her tenured professorship and a salary of almost \$900,000.) The university at first dismissed the charges of plagiarism with the brilliant, if mendacious, coinage “duplicative language.” *There’s nothing to see here, move along. Just a few missing quotations marks:* that was the gambit. Harvard even sicced its lawyers—the firm that had recently extracted more than \$700 million from Fox News—on the *New York Post* when its reporters began sniffing around the story. The lawyers said the charges were “demonstrably false” and threatened extensive damages. That had a temporary chilling effect. But the terriers of the press had been unleashed, and soon enough some fifty instances of “duplicative language” in Gay’s exiguous oeuvre were uncovered. There were also, according to the commentator Christopher Brunet, possible instances of data falsification. Shakespeare’s Aulolycus, that “snapper-up of unconsidered trifles,” would have been impressed.

We doubt that the tort of plagiarism would have gotten much traction had it not been for Gay’s appalling performance, along with those

by the presidents of MIT and the University of Pennsylvania, before the House Education Committee in December. Following the savage October 7 attacks on Israel by the Sunni Muslim terrorist group Hamas, pro-Palestinian and anti-Israel agitators took to the streets, and to the campuses of elite universities. At Harvard, some thirty student organizations signed a “joint statement” by the Harvard Undergraduate Palestine Solidarity Committee condemning Israel and supporting Hamas. The virulence of the protests and demonstrations ratcheted up after Israel mobilized to defend itself and eliminate terrorists from Gaza. Jewish students were harassed. Protestors chanted “Death to Israel,” “Gas the Jews,” and “Hitler was right.”

Asked by Representative Elise Stefanik whether calling for the genocide of Jews would contravene their institutions’ rules of conduct, all three presidents temporized and said that would depend on the “context.”

“Context.” Clearly, the three stooges had all been prepped by the same lawyers. “Does calling for the genocide of Jews violate [your university’s] code of conduct?” You would think, as Stefanik said, that this would be an very easy question to answer forthrightly in the affirmative. It tells us a lot that none did.

The public response was quick and brutal. The president of Penn, Liz Magill, was forced out within days, as was the chairman of Penn’s board. Meanwhile major donors across the country, appalled by the spectacle of anti-Jewish demon-

strations by students and faculty, reacted with outrage, disgust, and a conspicuous snapping-shut of their checkbooks. The billionaire Leon Cooperman, for example, had given \$50 million to Columbia, with more promised. He pulled his support. Pershing Square's Bill Ackman had been a major donor to Harvard, his alma mater. When he learned about the angry pro-Palestinian demonstrations and harassment of Jewish students there, he went to Cambridge to see for himself. He has written about his experiences several times. In comments published in the immediate aftermath of Gay's resignation, he touches on a key feature of the phenomenon.

Ackman is clearly a sophisticated man. But his reflections betray a touching naiveté. He has, he tells us, always regarded diversity as a virtue. And so he was inclined to accept that initiatives taken under the rubric of "Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion" would actually foster the values of broad-mindedness, fairness, and equal opportunity. "The more I learned," he laments, "the more concerned I became, and the more ignorant I realized I had been about DEI, a powerful movement that has not only pervaded Harvard, but the educational system at large." Indeed. And because, as he concludes, the DEI movement is essentially a political-advocacy movement, its tentacles reach far beyond the educational establishment. Educational institutions are merely a convenient and effective port of entry—the American southern border of the mind—for the project of total societal transformation. The motto of the French Revolution was *Liberté, égalité, fraternité*. It was the DEI of its day. But what it delivered was not liberty, equality, and fraternity, but conformity, aggressive rewriting of history, and terror.

Curiously, Gay herself touched on the deeper significance of her defenestration in the headline of a bitter, self-justificatory aria she published in *The New York Times*: "What Just Happened at Harvard Is Bigger Than Me." Forget the shaky grammar. Gay is right that Harvard's travails far transcend her fate as president.

She is completely wrong, however, in her explanation of why she was forced to resign. It had nothing to do with "racial animus," as she said

in her letter of resignation. Nor is it part of "a broader war to unravel public faith in pillars of American society." That faith has unraveled, all right, but not because of "demagogues" attempting to "weaponize" her presidency. Gay says that such efforts begin "with attacks on education and expertise, because these are the tools that best equip communities to see through propaganda." At stake here, however, were not "education and expertise," but a failure, a hollowing out, of both, precisely, and ironically, by their subordination to the partisan demands of propaganda.

Again Gay is right that "trusted institutions of all types—from public health agencies to news organizations" have seen their "legitimacy" and "their leaders' credibility" challenged. But these institutions are not victims of "coordinated attempts" by nefarious "extreme voices." On the contrary, the crisis of legitimacy is a self-inflicted wound, the natural by-product of the institutional embrace of the ideology of DEI, for which values like truth, accuracy, and competence must be systematically subjugated to politics.

Bill Ackman seemed stunned by the real agenda of DEI. It is much worse than he thinks. Claudine Gay, as everyone knows though not everyone will admit, is a DEI personage. That is, she was hired, groomed, and promoted by Harvard not because of her scholarship, which would hardly qualify for tenure at the University of Southern North Dakota at Hoople. It wasn't for her fund-raising prowess or her educational vision that she was made president of the most prestigious university in the galaxy. It was because she was a black female whose parents were Haitian immigrants. True, her uncle owns the biggest concrete company on that unfortunate island and she went to school at Exeter. But the fact that Gay grew up in a bubble of wealth and privilege is but a small liability. She may have benefited from the free market. But she did not let that impinge upon her support for the entire smorgasbord of anti-capitalist, woke attitudes about race, gender, race, climate change, race, identity politics, and . . . race.

In other words, Gay was the right kind of black. She labored both as a dean and then as president to be what one commentator called

“the enforcer-in-chief of wokist orthodoxy at Harvard.” As has been widely noted, as dean she buried complaints that one Harvard scholar, Ryan Enos, had falsified data in a study about public housing. Why? Because Enos had come to the right (i.e., the left-progressive) conclusions in his study.

At the same time, Gay went out of her way to destroy the career of the economist Roland G. Fryer Jr. because, though black, he published a study showing that there are “no racial differences” in the use of extreme force by police. When Fryer was implausibly accused of sexual harassment by an assistant whom he had fired, Gay asked Harvard’s then-president to revoke his tenure. That didn’t happen, but Gay helped engineer his suspension without pay for two years as well as the shuttering of his research lab.

The point is the DEI agenda is an agenda with teeth. Its operation is naturally coercive. It is the latest name for that essentially Marxist—which means essentially totalitarian—project that Gramscians looked forward to when they spoke of the “long march through the institutions.” A critical part of that march is the subordination of everything to politics. Saul Alinsky, the “community organizer” who so inspired Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton, summed it up in *Rules for Radicals*. “All life is partisan,” he wrote. “There is no dispassionate objectivity.” Whatever else can be said about that formula, it articulates a sentiment that is thoroughly antithetical to the aims of the university—and, indeed, to a free society.

Supporters of Claudine Gay cannot understand why such a fuss was made about her plagiarism. There were even articles charging that criticism of plagiarism was simply the latest weapon in the armory of conservative polemic. In 2020, when she was a dean at Harvard, Gay was devoted to promulgating “racial-justice initiatives” designed “to address racial and ethnic equality—including faculty appointments and the addition of an associate dean of diversity, inclusion, and belonging.” (A dean of “belonging”?) That was precisely the sort of thing that led Harvard’s governing board to conclude that she was the right person “to address the very serious societal issues we are facing.”

As James Hankins, a professor of history at Harvard, noted in *The Wall Street Journal*,

“From such a perspective, academic honesty seems to matter less than having the right progressive values, and the refusal to disclose underlying data is permissible so long as conclusions support a preferred narrative.”

To the extent that it succeeds, the ideology of DEI is fatal to the project of education as traditionally understood. DEI is in fact a tool in the workshop of *re*education, also called “indoctrination.” Its purview is global. In the practice of medicine, DEI is the goal of the moment. The Association of American Medical Colleges enthusiastically pushes programs to advance “Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Medical Education.” “Don’t back down on diversity in medicine,” they cry. It is imperative, one doctor said, to “bolster the pool” of students from historically disadvantaged racial groups. *The Journal of the American Medical Association* runs articles on “Strategies and Best Practices to Improve Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Among US Graduate Medical Education Programs.”

Then there is the airline industry. As Fox News has reported, the FAA has been aggressively pushing diversity initiatives that include hiring people with “severe intellectual” and “psychiatric” disabilities because such people “are the most under-represented segment of the federal workforce.” Further, it was recently reported that, starting in 2022, Boeing began to reward executives not for maintaining safety or increasing profits but for meeting DEI targets. We note that the Alaska Airlines plane whose door blew off in flight was a Boeing 737. Meanwhile, Scott Kirby, the CEO of United Airlines, has said that his goal is to have 50 percent of his company’s hires be “women or people of color.”

The culture that produced Claudine Gay has infiltrated every institution of our society. Patients will die needlessly, and planes will plummet from the skies, but cheer up: diversity quotas will have been met. DEI is like Soviet Communism: it caused everything else to fail until, at length, there was nothing left to fail except Communism itself.

The importance of Homer

by Joshua T. Katz

Homer is often called the—or at least a—“father of Western civilization.” This is not a new idea. To take a prominent example, already before the end of the first century A.D., the Roman rhetorician Quintilian had these laudatory words for Homer in Book 10 of his *Institutes of Oratory* (trans. Donald A. Russell, very lightly revised):

Like his own conception of Ocean, which he says is the source of every river and spring, Homer provides the model and the origin of every department of eloquence. No one surely has surpassed him in sublimity in great themes, or in propriety in small. He is at once luxuriant and concise, charming and grave, marvelous in his fullness and in his brevity, supreme not only in poetic but in oratorical excellence.

By conventional reckoning, Homer lived about three-quarters of a millennium before Quintilian. That’s almost twice the temporal distance between us and Shakespeare and a greater distance than between us and Chaucer, the “father of English poetry,” who died in 1400, just one year into the reign of Henry IV, the first English monarch since the Norman invasion to have English as his native language. So, the ancient Greek poet to whom are attributed two monumental epics, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, certainly had staying power. And he still does.

There is no shortage of Greek authors from the second half of the first millennium B.C. who quoted or mentioned Homer: the fifth-

century Herodotus, for instance, whom Cicero (more on him later) called the “father of history” and to whom is attributed—quite wrongly, alas—the longest ancient biography of Homer (it almost certainly dates to well after the time of Quintilian). If, however, we are to give credit for Homer’s reputation today to an ancient author other than the proverbial blind bard himself, that person is a Roman: Publius Vergilius Maro (70–19 B.C.).

Virgil’s final and most famous work, the *Aeneid*, might be called the Latin counterpart of, and response to, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* together. It is a simple fact that Virgil could not have written this other great pillar of our culture without Homer’s model. But that is just one early part of a much longer story.

Some 1,300 years later, Dante could not have written his *Divine Comedy* without Virgil (who could not have written without Homer). Sixty or so years after that, Chaucer could not have written his *Troilus and Criseyde* without Dante (and Boccaccio, who himself owes a considerable debt to Dante) or without those classical authors he explicitly acknowledges toward the end of the fifth and final book, including “Virgile” and “Omer” (whose name he spelled without the initial aspirate, as would the Nobel Prize-winning Saint Lucian poet Derek Walcott in his 1990 novel-length epic poem *Omeros*). And to come to the greatest of English bards, in his play *Troilus and Cressida*, Shakespeare, besides owing an obvious debt to Chaucer, probably also took inspiration from George Chapman’s then-brand-new transla-

tion of the *Iliad*, a work of 1598 that inspired one of the best-known Romantic sonnets in English, John Keats's "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer" of 1816.

To continue: almost three centuries after Chaucer, John Milton could not have written his *Paradise Lost* without the *Divine Comedy*. And to come to America, Herman Melville could not have written *Moby-Dick* and other works without Milton—who could not have done without Dante, who needed the guidance of Virgil, who could not have written without Homer. I could, of course, go on to trace this tradition into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries—James Joyce's *Ulysses*, Joel and Ethan Coen's *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, and Alice Oswald's fascinating takes on the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, titled respectively *Memorial* and *Nobody*—but you get the idea.

The effect of all this is dizzying, but as Harold Bloom famously put it in 1975, "Everyone who now reads and writes in the West, of whatever racial background, sex or ideological camp, is still a son or daughter of Homer." Homer really is everywhere—and not merely in the West. We can be certain that his influence will not wane any time soon. The tradition will continue (I like to think) for thousands more years.

Tradition: few concepts are more important to society. Yes, there are bad traditions as well as good ones. But the way individuals, families, and polities move ahead—the way civilization itself thrives—is by respecting and building on the wisdom of the past, which in a functional society is handed down through the generations. This is what the word "tradition" literally means: English has taken the word from the Latin *trāditiō*, the noun that corresponds to the verb *trādīt* (hands down), which is itself historically a compound of the verb *dat* (gives) and the prefix *trāns* (across). The idea is that tradition is what is given across the generations: parents impart knowledge to their children, who grow up and impart, transmit, and transfer knowledge to their children in turn—and so on and so forth over the decades, centuries, and millennia.

Consider a Latin verb similar to *trādīt* in both form and meaning: *trānsfert* (bears across, con-

veys), which has landed in English as "transfer." Its past passive participle is *trānslātus* (that which has been conveyed). And this is the source of our "translate."

Which brings me back to Virgil and to a specific example of Homeric influence—of the transfer and translation of the Greek tradition into the Roman. Many people can quote the first words of the *Aeneid*, even in Latin: *arma uirumque cano* (Of arms and a man I sing). Few, however, know the last words. This is a pity because, although not quotable in the same way, they deserve nonetheless to be familiar to careful readers of the poem.

Verses 951–52 of Book XII close the epic with infamous abruptness as Aeneas kills his antagonist, Turnus: *ast illi soluuntur frigore membra/ uitaque cum gemitu fugit indignata sub umbras*. Here's the English translation by my former Princeton colleague, the late Robert Fagles: "Turnus' limbs went limp in the chill of death./ His life breath fled with a groan of outrage/ down to the shades below." And that's it.

The ending is so unceremonious that some have wondered whether this is really how Virgil wished to tie up his epic, whether there was supposed to have been a thirteenth book, and more. For my part—and this is not an idiosyncratic opinion—I am happy with the ending. Whatever the case may be, Virgil's description of Turnus's death is unquestionably a light adaptation of a repeated pair of Greek verses that describe the two most consequential deaths in the *Iliad*: the death of Hector at the hands of Achilles in Book XXII near the end of that poem (this is the analogue of the slaying of Turnus by Aeneas in the *Aeneid*) and, six books earlier, the death of Achilles' companion Patroclus at the hands of Hector. Here's the Greek (to which we shall return), followed again by a Fagles translation:

*psychē d' ek rhethēon ptamenē Aidosde bebēkei,
hon potmon gooōsa, lipous' androtēta kai hēbēn*

Flying free of his limbs
his soul went winging down to the House of
Death,
wailing his fate, leaving his manhood far behind,
his young and supple strength.

Furthermore, Virgil has already used the words about life fleeing to the underworld with a groan of another death in the *Aeneid*: that of Turnus's ally Camilla in Book XI. The move is intentional. Homer uses his formulation exactly twice, for thematically connected deaths, with the first prefiguring the climactic second—and then Virgil does the same.

This is an adaptation—a shorthand translation, so to speak—of Greek material into Latin. But plenty of other ancient figures quote Homer directly. Interestingly, it is not just Greeks who quote Homer in Greek but also Romans.

Let me offer two examples, beginning with a Greek many of us still care deeply about who liberally quotes Homer: Socrates (*ca.* 470–399 B.C.). Now, when you think of Socrates, you are likely to think in the first place of his student Plato, and it is undeniable that Plato's view of Homer is complicated: this philosopher believes that poetry can be harmful and that it is thus entirely wrong for people to revere Homer and many other poets besides—and yet, seemingly paradoxically, he quotes Homer extensively throughout his works. As Plato famously puts it in Book X of the *Republic*, “there is an old quarrel between philosophy and poetry,” and he banishes Homer from his ideal city-state ruled by the philosopher-king, a utopia he calls Kallipolis, literally “Beautiful City.”

But what did Socrates himself think about poetry? Questions about the so-called historical Socrates—as opposed to the literary figure—are necessarily tricky, but it is a matter of record that both Plato and his contemporary Xenophon regularly have Socrates speak about, and quote directly from, Homer.

A particularly interesting tidbit comes from Xenophon's *Memorabilia*, a collection of Socratic dialogues that act in effect as a defense of his friend by someone renowned as a military commander in addition to being a historian and a philosopher. From this work, we learn that an accuser of Socrates reports that the philosopher “often” quoted a description of Odysseus from Book II of the *Iliad*.

What is this Homeric passage that so evidently grabbed Socrates? It describes how Odysseus roams through the people, telling men of note

that it is unseemly to act like a coward and using both his rhetoric and, yes, his scepter to inform common men who are making a ruckus that they should listen to their betters. According to his accuser, this demonstrates that Socrates approved of chastising, even beating, ordinary people. But, as Xenophon says, this is not at all what Socrates thought. Rather, Socrates “showed himself to be one of the people and a friend of mankind,” and

what he did say was that those who render no service either by word or deed, who cannot help army or city or the people itself in time of need, ought to be stopped, even if they have riches in abundance, above all if they are insolent as well as inefficient. (trans. E. C. Marchant)

From Homer's Odysseus to Xenophon's Socrates to America after the dreadful year 2023: if you wish to understand the importance of Homer today, you can do worse than to take these wise words to heart. We are all able to recite the names of people in power who fail to use their literal and metaphorical fortune for the common good, whether through inefficiency or, worse, insolence. My exhortation: write out Homer's and Xenophon's wisdom of the ages, tape it above your desk, and then go out and be brave, not cowardly.

And now a second example of a direct quotation of Homer, this time from a Roman about whom many of us also still care deeply: Marcus Tullius Cicero (106–43 B.C.). Cicero, who was an exceptionally learned man, quotes Greek regularly, and it is not surprising that the poet whose words he echoes the most, by far, is Homer. What is perhaps surprising is that there is one passage in the *Iliad* that Cicero quotes six times, in whole or in part, in letters he exchanged with his close friend and occasional patron Atticus: *aideomai Trōas kai Trōiadas helkesipeplous* (I feel shame before the Trojan men and the Trojan women in their trailing robes).

Why would Cicero have cared so much about these words? What are they all about? The verse appears twice in the *Iliad*, both times in the mouth of Hector, the greatest of the Trojan heroes. Hector speaks it first in one of the most moving scenes in the epic. Toward

the end of Book VI, Andromache, Hector's dear wife, begs him not to return to war but to stay behind lest she be widowed and their son orphaned. He is sorely tempted, for he loves his family, but the honorable thing is to fight to the death. And this is what he says: "I feel dreadful shame before the Trojan men and the Trojan women in their trailing robes if like a coward [the word he uses is *kakos*, literally 'a bad man'] I skulk apart from war." Then, in Book XXII, Hector's other two closest family members, his parents Priam and Hekabe, beg him to retreat. He refuses, says the same words to himself—and goes to meet his fate.

Cicero, like Socrates, was no coward. He may well have imagined that he would end up like Hector, slain on a battlefield. (In fact, he was assassinated by henchmen of his political enemy Mark Antony.) So, then, what an extraordinary use of Homer this is: a phrase of honor, a phrase of defiance, a phrase in defense of country that Cicero used repeatedly, for well over a decade, in letters to a friend.

Both Socrates and Cicero have had a profound influence on American life. It will suffice to note that Martin Luther King Jr. mentions Socrates three times in his "Letter from Birmingham Jail" and that Cicero was a model for the founders: Thomas Jefferson, Alexander Hamilton, and above all John Adams, who wrote in *A Defense of the Constitutions of Government of the United States of America* that "all the ages of the world have not produced a greater statesman and philosopher united in the same character." My aim is not to defend Adams's enthusiasm, which many will regard as excessive. Rather, the point is a variation of something I have already said: without Homer we would not have Socrates and Cicero, and without Socrates and Cicero, we would not have America as we know it—the best of America, I mean, rather than the appalling polarization that characterizes so much of our politics and so many of our day-to-day personal interactions in this age of deep discontent.

So far what I have done is call attention to the importance of Homer by giving examples of the tradition of which he is at the head—or

so people generally maintain. But Homer was not, of course, the first poet, in this tradition or, for that matter, others. In his dialogue the *Brutus*, none other than Cicero points out that there's no reason to doubt that there were poets before Homer, making the perfectly obvious remark that, after all, Homer himself in the *Odyssey* describes bards of old and their lays, most famously Demodocus in Book VIII, who sings Iliadic songs about Odysseus and other heroic figures. Indeed, this singing takes place at the Phaeacian court of King Alcinous, where Odysseus, whose identity is unknown to his hosts, is actually in the audience: a touch of *mise en abyme* that, were this not a poem from thousands of years ago, one would be inclined to label postmodern.

The fact is that when people speak of Homer as a traditional poet, which he certainly is, what they mean is not that he is at the head of the tradition I have been describing from the eighth century B.C. to the present via Socrates, Virgil, Chaucer, Milton, and MLK. Rather, this designation indicates that Homeric poetry itself is the product of a tradition. From one perspective—which I describe briefly in my piece "The beginnings: first words, first lines, first stories" in the November 2022 number of *The New Criterion*—Homer is right smack in the middle of a tradition, the so-called Indo-European tradition: a tradition that dates to around 3500 B.C., some 2,750 years before Homer, who (it is conventionally said) lived some 2,750 years before now.

A traditional poet is one who takes old material and passes it along orally. Think, if you will, of jam sessions, folk festivals, and campfires, with one generation transferring—handing down—the words and music to those who come next, maintaining the themes, structure, and most of the rhetoric, but always improvising, tweaking here and there. A consequence of this perspective, albeit one it would be unfruitful for me to explore properly in the present context, is that there almost certainly was not one blind genius named Homer who composed the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*—never mind both, an idea that most scholars reject anyway on linguistic grounds. Instead, the epics are products of a deep tradition, oral

poems that at some point, probably in the sixth century B.C., were codified in more or less the form we now have them in diverse scholarly editions: 15,693 verses for the *Iliad*, 12,109 for the *Odyssey*.

You may be sad to hear this. You may think that somehow these great poems are less great if there is no single Homer with both a birth- and a death-date whose name is attached to them. But if you think this, you are wrong. Let me quote something that John Agresto writes in his excellent 2022 book *The Death of Learning: How American Education Has Failed Our Students and What to Do about It*, a book, by the way, that has as the title of its introduction “The Great *Iliad* Question.” (I won’t tell you what the question is—or the answer. Go read the book!) This is what Agresto says:

My hunch is that only second-class books are truly captives of their time; great works are more universal; they speak to us effectively as timeless. First-class works would mean no less if their authors were known only as “anonymous” and their date listed as “unknown.”

No reasonable person would deny that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are first-class works—and how wonderful it is, in my view, that they spoke to Greeks in the Iron Age, that they speak to us in the Internet Age, and that, in some form or another, direct predecessors of their words and themes also spoke to our Indo-European ancestors around the advent of the Bronze Age. In some ways, we are very different from people back then, but in other ways we are the same. It is important to understand how, for better and sometimes maybe for worse, the mores of their cultures and ours often seem at odds—but it is at least as important that we recognize our shared humanity.

This shared humanity, coupled with the excellent tales the works tell, is presumably what explains the veritable glut of translations on the market. About a dozen translations of the *Iliad* into English have been published in the nearly thirty-five years since Fagles’s in 1990, and even more of the *Odyssey*. As I write, Emily Wilson’s 2023 *Iliad* (which follows on her 2017 *Odyssey*) is a bestseller.

Presumably some people who buy these translations actually read them. Regardless, such a level of commercial interest is surprising in view of the steep decline in respect for the ancient world at most American colleges and universities. (Moves to “decolonize the curriculum” and calls to “burn it all down” are wreaking both intellectual and social havoc on campus, and many outside the academy have condemned Princeton’s decision in 2021 to allow undergraduates to major in classics without taking so much as a single semester of either Latin or Greek.) Meanwhile, though, classical schools are popping up everywhere, so the battle may yet be won.

I believe in reading original texts when possible—please, go learn Greek and Latin and other foreign languages if you don’t already know them—but there is no doubt that a good translation, with just the right turn of phrase, can be illuminating even to someone who does not need it. And in much the same way, I contend, understanding what lies beneath a text can illuminate a so-called original, especially when it comes to traditional oral poetry, where the very concept of “the original” is murky.

With that, I return to the phrase that describes the deaths of Patroclus and Hector in the *Iliad*, the one that Virgil appropriated to describe the deaths of Camilla and Turnus in the *Aeneid*. There is a linguistic problem with the Greek verse that Fagles translates as “wailing his fate, leaving his manhood far behind,/ his young and supple strength”: in brief, it does not scan. This is obviously not the occasion for a lesson in the Homeric hexameter. But what is important to understand is that the verse in question appears to be hopelessly unmetrical, entirely beyond repair, since one of its syllables, which needs to scan short, consists of a vowel followed by not one, not two, but three consonants, which makes it not merely heavy but extra-heavy—and it must therefore scan long. At issue, to be specific, is the initial *a* of the word *androtēta* (manhood), whose first element, *andr-*, we have borrowed into English in such words as *android* (a man-like robot) and *androgynous*

(having the characteristics of both man and woman). You'll notice that that initial *a* is followed by an *n*, a *d*, and an *r*.

You may be muttering to yourself, “So what?!” And, in a way, that’s a fair reaction—except that the verse is a doubly pivotal one in the story of the *Iliad*. This is the death of Patroclus, which is what impels the greatest Greek warrior, Achilles, back into the fray! This is the death of the greatest Trojan warrior, Hector, slain by the now-over-the-top-furious Achilles, the death that will bring the decade-long war to its conclusion! It is one thing, maybe, for there to be a minor metrical anomaly in what one might think a throwaway line. It is quite another for there to be a major metrical anomaly in one of the most thematically important verses in the most famous of Greek poems—a verse that Virgil went on to pick up for the very final words of the most famous Latin poem.

Fortunately, a solution exists. It is, in fact, a straightforward solution—though straightforward only if you understand the tradition. In short, when the verse was first composed—many hundreds of years before the shadowy eighth-century B.C. figure we are used to calling Homer—it *was* metrical and it *did* scan. This is a linguistic fact, not magic: the sequence *andro-* of *androtēta* used to be *anr-*, with no *d* and with a so-called syllabic *r*, which is a vowel (as in the pronunciation in most American dialects of the *-er* in *batter*, *better*, *bitter*, and *butter*) rather than a consonant. In other words, the initial *a* of that word for “manhood” was once followed by just a single consonant and thus scanned as it was supposed to: short. While there is much technical controversy over the details, the basic idea is clear enough. And the point for now is this: behind the Roman rhetoric of Turnus’s death lies the Greek rhetoric of the death of Hector; and behind this lies the underappreciated tradition of pre-Greek—call it Indo-European—rhetoric.

I have used the term “Indo-European” three times now. What does it mean? Greek is a so-called Indo-European language, as are Latin, French, Norwegian, Irish Gaelic, Armenian, Sanskrit, Farsi, and dozens of others—including

English. Once upon a time, around 5,500 years ago, probably on the Pontic–Caspian steppe, north of the area between the Black and Caspian Seas, all these now-separate languages were one. As time passed and as members of the population moved in different directions, further and further away from one another, what had started as different dialects became what no one could fail to call entirely different languages: though sisters, French, Norwegian, Irish Gaelic, Armenian, Farsi, and English are today mutually incomprehensible.

Mutually incomprehensible and yet, after millennia apart, these languages still have words, phrases, and literary and cultural concerns in common. Indeed, one reason it makes sense to study the Greek and Latin classics together is that they share a preliterate tradition far deeper than the dialogue between powerful people who interacted with each other in historical time while occupying huge swaths of land across much the same part of the world. It is because of this shared inheritance, because they belong to the same tradition, that the Sanskrit noun *bhrātā* sounds like and is fundamentally the same as English *brother*, Latin *frāter* (whence Old French *frere*, which we borrowed as “friar”), Irish Gaelic *bráthair* (whose basic meaning has shifted in recorded time from “brother” to the more general “kinsman” and also “friar”), and Ancient Greek *phrātēr*, the last of which doesn’t refer to your sibling even in the earlier texts but instead has more or less the sense “frat bro.” It is because of this shared inheritance, because they belong to the same tradition, that the Sanskrit verb for “carry” *bhar-*, sounds like and is fundamentally the same as English *bear*, Latin *fer-* (as in “trans-fer”), Irish Gaelic *beir-*, and Ancient Greek *pher-*.

Nothing against family members and basic verbs, but let’s look at something more linguistically interesting. In Book IX of the *Iliad*, Achilles speaks to his would-be comrades about his “twofold fates,” not unlike the way Hector has already spoken so poignantly to his wife in Book VI. His choice, Achilles muses, is between returning home to live a long life without renown or fight-

ing against the Trojans, dying, and thereby achieving “imperishable fame.”

One of the most famous collocations in the poem, “imperishable fame” is a remarkable product of the tradition I have been describing. On its own, the word for “fame,” *kleos*, is a buzzword in the *Iliad*—and in addition to being related to the English adjective *loud* (you’re no one if people don’t talk about you with great volume), it is the second element of such compound names as *Sophocles* (Famed for Wisdom), *Pericles* (Famed All Around), and *Heracles* (Having Hera’s Fame), perhaps better known in his Roman form, *Hercules*. But joining the noun *kleos* with the adjective meaning “imperishable” yields Achilles’ unique *kleos aphthiton*, and this is sound-for-sound cognate with—that is to say, historically exactly the same as—the Vedic Sanskrit phrase *śrávas . . . ákṣitam*, which petitioners request of Indra, the highest god in the pantheon of ancient India, in a hymn in Book I of the *Rigveda*, the oldest sacred text of the Hindus. Something of what would become the heroic warrior code was thus there already in the language before the split between Greek and our earliest language of the Indian Subcontinent. To me, as a classicist and as a linguist and as a humanist, few things are lovelier and more meaningful than such soundings in the deep well of tradition.

In the Greek imagination, the Trojan War was a massive event, a decade long, involving tens of thousands of soldiers and their families. (I pass over the question of the historicity of the *Iliad* and the connection with the societal collapse around the Eastern Mediterranean that ended the Bronze Age in the first quarter of the twelfth century B.C.) How, then, to tell such an expansive tale vividly, especially when everyone in the eighth and later centuries B.C. was already intimately acquainted with the plot—a fact that allows Homer to mention the act that started it all, the Judgment of Paris, only in passing, in the twenty-fourth and final book of the *Iliad*; to ignore the Trojan Horse in the *Iliad* and mention its existence only once in the *Odyssey*; and to fail entirely to depict the death of Achilles by Paris’s arrow to his eponymous heel? (For

more on the wider story of the Trojan War and how it came down to us, see “The lost Homeric” by Edward N. Luttwak in *The New Criterion* of last month.)

Homer’s solution to how to tell the tale is to give his listeners—these days, usually, his readers—snapshots: the *Iliad* takes place over only a little more than fifty days, and mostly just five, in the course of the tenth and final year of the war; the *Odyssey* is set over only forty days at the end of its protagonist’s journey home from war ten years later on. If you had to distill the stories of Homer’s epics into one word each, you would probably say that the *Iliad* is about “wrath” (in Greek, *mēnin*) and the *Odyssey* about a “man” (*andra*—and there’s that *andr-* again): “wrath” is the opening word of the first poem, which can be read as an extended meditation on the consequences of one human being’s destructive emotion; “man” is the opening word of the second, which is an extended account of the many twists and turns, the ups and downs, of another multifaceted human being. Aristotle in the *Poetics* famously praises Homer for his narrative focus, and this focus does indeed bring the massive down to a human scale and make all the complicated goings-on easier to relate to.

And relate to Homer’s poems we all do—and have done for almost three millennia. It would have made little sense for me to have written this essay without a discussion of Virgil, but I could easily have decided not to mention Xenophon’s Socrates or Cicero and instead dilated on, say, Herodotus and Ovid.

There is, however, a specific reason I chose to treat the authors I did. Last year, I was invited by Hillsdale College to deliver the final talk in a series of six on the theme “Classical Greece and Rome.” (Blessedly, Hillsdale is bucking a deplorable trend by not dumbing down its classics department one bit.) Three of the other five talks were Anthony Esolen’s “The Importance of Virgil,” Peter Ahrens Dorf’s “Xenophon’s Socrates,” and Walter Nicgorski’s “Cicero and Stoicism.” It seemed to me sensible to explain the importance of Homer with reference, in part, to what the audience had already heard from these distinguished colleagues. Had I had

more time, I would have brought in material from the other two as well: David West's "Pericles and Athenian Democracy" and Barry Strauss's "The Rise and Fall of the Roman Republic." Which goes to prove my point: take pretty much any classical author or topic and it is easy to adduce the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. That is why Homer is important.

Should I have used these pages—and my time at Hillsdale—to wax eloquent about a few of my favorite scenes or about grand themes in one or both of the epics? Perhaps. But what makes these tales excellent—and, to speak to my title, important—is what I have already called their humanity, the fact that they contain so much of human experience, so much that each of us knows from personal highs and lows. They tell of gods and men, of valor and defeat, of love and jealousy, of pride and piety—all the emotions are in there, all the complexities that make

people people. Even the best of us have flaws, sometimes grave ones, and even the worst of us are nonetheless human. When you read these poems, you see the best in our world and the worst. And maybe this act of reading makes all of us engage in the important task of trying ourselves to be better and to do the right thing.

It is said that Alexander the Great, who had Aristotle as his tutor, slept with the *Iliad* under his pillow. I'm not going to tell you to do that. After all, like Achilles and Hector, he died young, though great. But it and the *Odyssey* are truly grand poems, with a lifetime of lessons to impart, and I urge you—especially if you are young—to keep them close, both now and for decades to come. In particular, when you pass along your and our traditions to your children, and to your children's children, I hope you will remember that Homer both is and, in a wondrous way, is not the beginning of so many of these traditions.

Galaxy brains

by Gary Saul Morson

Count on Russian thinkers to formulate imaginative theories that no sensible person could believe. Proud of their distinctive style of doing philosophy, social theory, mathematics, and even hard science, Russians repeatedly breach the bounds of common sense. Sometimes they make important discoveries, but they more often produce sheer nonsense, closer to science fiction than to science.

Russia has given the world its greatest novels, but no one admires its economy. And as Michel Eltchaninoff observes in his recent book, *Lenin Walked on the Moon: The Mad History of Russian Cosmism*, it offers visionary schemes, not practical improvements.¹ There is no Russian Thomas Edison or Steve Jobs. When was the last time you bought something made in Russia? When it comes to technology, Russia is weak, except for weapons and, at one time, space travel.

When I was growing up, people laughed at Russian claims to have invented almost everything. Only recently did I discover from the authoritative historian Loren Graham that there is something to these claims: believe it or not, Russians “did transmit radio waves before Guglielmo Marconi . . . they did pioneer in the development of transistors and diodes; they did publish the principles of lasers a generation before any others did,” and much more. What they did not do was

¹ *Lenin Walked on the Moon: The Mad History of Russian Cosmism*, by Michel Eltchaninoff, translated by Tina Kover; Europa Compass, 256 pages, £14.99.

bring these inventions to market or make them generally usable.

As Walter Isaacson observed in his biography of Steve Jobs, “In the annals of innovation new ideas are only part of the equation. Execution is just as important.” Russians are bad at execution not only because great thinkers regard it as beneath them but also because the Russian social environment ensures that ideas are left on paper. For ideas to have a practical effect, society needs to value innovation, foster investment, secure property rights, and reward inventors. Politics and bureaucracy must not suffocate the new. Perhaps one reason Israel has been so amazingly successful technologically is that its many Russians work with people adept at turning ideas into practice in favorable circumstances.

It is not as if Russians are unaware of all this. Russian literary classics frequently describe dreamers or revolutionaries who disdain practical work. Very rarely do they offer sympathetic portraits of businessmen. The eponymous hero of Ivan Goncharov’s brilliant comic novel *Oblomov* (1859) spends all his time daydreaming—it takes him over a hundred delightful pages to get out of bed—and could not be more unlike his practical boyhood friend Stolz, who succeeds in almost everything except changing Oblomov’s ways. As his name indicates, Stolz is not ethnically Russian. Doing things, it seems, is German. In Eugene Vodolazkin’s recent novel *The Aviator* (2015), the hero, suffering from a disease

his doctors cannot cure, travels to a German clinic. “Expect no miracles from our clinic,” the doctor immediately tells him.

“That’s so there are no misapprehensions. We will do all we can.”

I felt that I was smiling broadly, showing my teeth:

“But it’s miracles I came for . . .”

“Miracles, that’s in Russia,” said [Dr.] Meier, his gaze growing sad. “There you live by the laws of the miracle, but we attempt to live in conformity with reality. It’s unclear, however, which is better.”

“*When God wishes, nature’s order is overcome,*” I said, expressing my main hope, but the interpreter could not translate that.

As the economic historian Alexander Gershenkron pointed out, Russians pride themselves on relying not on methodical planning, as Germans do, but on *avos*, a term with no English equivalent. It means, roughly, sheer luck, a happy chance, a windfall, something desirable one has no right to expect, utter perhapsness. Early in the nineteenth century, Pushkin referred to “our Russian *avos*,” and from his time on Russians have regarded the kind of thinking it suggests as a distinctive national characteristic, responsible for both their greatest successes and most significant failures. Chekhov saw it as a fundamental flaw, a form of laziness bound to lead to unnecessary suffering. Solzhenitsyn’s novels about the events leading to the Bolshevik takeover depict Russia’s real heroes not as revolutionists who disdain everything bourgeois and practical but as engineers who actually build things. In *August 1914*, General Martos knows that Russians must overcome their characteristic way of thinking if they are to defeat the Germans. He “could not tolerate Russian sloppiness, the Russian inclination to ‘wait and see,’ to ‘sleep on it,’ and leave God to make the decisions.”

Is it any wonder, then, that Russians have been inclined to utopianism, mysticism, and pseudoscience? In tsarist times, intellectuals commonly imagined revolution in mil-

lenarian terms, as a transformation not just of society but also of the universe. When the anticipated revolution happened, many presumed that this political upheaval would instantaneously change everything else. Wealth would be abundant within days. Suffering would instantly become a thing of the past. And, before long, mortality itself would be overcome, just as the Book of Revelation promised, only without divine intervention. These atheists anticipated that strictly scientific laws, as outlined in Marxist–Leninist philosophy, would accomplish everything that mystics had foretold.

Science is traditionally understood as skeptical inquiry, in which ideas are tested experimentally against reality, which may not confirm them; when they prove mistaken, they are changed and tested anew. It isn’t enough for them to seem persuasive, let alone highly desirable. Since Francis Bacon, scientists have presumed that nature operates by efficient causes rather than providential goals. But in Russia, science is often viewed—even by scientists themselves—as a kind of mystical insight or magic. According to Soviet philosophy, matter itself contains a dynamic guaranteed to lead eventually to Communism. Leon Trotsky was, by the standards of the day, one of the more down-to-earth thinkers, but even he presumed that the coming revolution would transform both the natural world and human nature.

These transformations would happen, Trotsky argued, because human effort would no longer be exerted “spontaneously” and at the whims of the market. No longer would people be subject to economic forces; they would be the masters thereof. In a planned economy, everything happens according to human will, so progress would be immeasurably faster. That reasoning applied not just to the economy, since in the society Bolsheviks were creating literally *everything* would be planned.

“Communist life will not be formed blindly, like coral islands, but will be built consciously,” Trotsky memorably explained. “The shell of life will hardly have time to form before it will burst open again under the pressure of new technical and cultural inventions and achieve-

ments.” Nature will be shaped according to human desires:

Through the machine, man in Socialist society will command nature in its entirety, with its grouse and sturgeons. He will point out places for mountains and for passes. He will change the course of rivers, and he will lay down rules for the oceans.

Is it any wonder that the USSR became an environmental disaster?

People will also redesign themselves, Trotsky continued. They will bring the unconscious and semiconscious processes of the body, like breathing, circulation of the blood, digestion, and reproduction, under conscious control:

The human race will not have ceased to crawl on all fours before God, kings, and capital, in order later to submit humbly before the dark laws of heredity and natural selection!

Socialist man will master his own feelings and learn “to extend the wires of his will into hidden recesses, and thereby create a higher social biological type or, if you will a super-man.” In short,

man will become immeasurably stronger, wiser, and subtler. . . . The average human type will rise to the heights of an Aristotle, a Goethe, or a Marx. And above this ridge new peaks will rise.

According to Bolshevik philosophy, these predictions are not mere hopes but are entailed by science itself, especially the science of sciences, Marxism–Leninism. In Western Europe, socialism settled down into social-democratic parties of the center Left. In Russia, it became a mystical communion with the materialist divine, a pseudoscientific realization of Biblical promises.

The philosophy now called cosmism, which was born a century and a half ago, infused its spirit into Marxism–Leninism and now competes with Eurasianism and other ideologies to replace it. Unlike most Russian visionary schemes, it has actually influenced prominent

Americans, particularly the “transhumanists” of Silicon Valley. Eltchaninoff points to the role that Russians like Sergey Brin (the cofounder of Google) and Robert Ettinger (the inventor of cryogenics) played in developing New Age thinking and its technological successors. He cites an impressive list of people, including Elon Musk, Michael Murphy (the founder of Esalen), Max More (the author of such essays as “The Philosophy of Transhumanism”), and many more who have been inspired by one or another of the key cosmist thinkers: Nikolai Fyodorov, Vladimir Vernadsky, Konstantin Tsiolkovsky, Alexander Chizhevsky, Vasily Kuprevich, and Danila Medvedev.

It all began with Fyodorov (1829–1903), the supremely weird librarian of the Rummyantsev Museum (now the Russian State Library). As did so many inspiring Russian thinkers, Fyodorov attracted hagiographers who all but canonized him. He was said to know the location and contents of every volume in the library, so that if a reader requested a book on some topic, he would receive a few more he had not known about. Fyodorov, we are told, lived a totally ascetic life; owning and eating almost nothing, he slept on a packing crate. Contemptuous of bodily discomfort, he refused to wear an overcoat even during the coldest days of the Russian winter and yet was never ill. When he was at last persuaded to don one on a particularly frigid day, he caught cold and died!—in a hospital for the indigent, of course.

Deeply disturbed by the “unbrotherly state of the world” characterized by human “disrelatedness,” Fyodorov traced these maladies to the separation of the “learned” from the “unlearned,” among whom he strangely counted himself. The learned pursue knowledge for its own sake while forgetting about human welfare. Instead of working together to eliminate evil, they dissipate effort into ever more fields and subfields. In short, “there is division [among people] only because there is no common task.” The learned must unite to perform that common task, which is important both in itself and for joining people to accomplish it. The task Fyodorov proposed was not just one desirable project among many, but, in his view, the *only* proper goal for humanity:

“There can be no other obligation, no other task for a conscious being.”

That “common task” was raising the dead: humanity must set aside all other concerns and discover the technology to bring our forefathers back to life. Otherwise, Fyodorov opined, we resemble children dancing on the graves of our “fathers.” Fyodorov was an illegitimate child who bore the name not of his father but of his godfather, and so it is more than curious that he writes as if the world consisted entirely of men. He was not exactly a misogynist, because misogynists are supremely conscious that women exist. We never hear from Fyodorov about resurrecting our mothers, and when he faulted the learned for inventions that foster “the manufacturing industry” (which is “the root of disrelatedness”), he accused them of “effeminate caprice.” By the same token, he regarded childbearing as a sign of our enslavement to the laws of nature.

Like the most enthusiastic Bolsheviks, Fyodorov imagined that humanity could overcome natural laws if only they were guided by a single, conscious will. Raising the dead entails our liberation from the dictatorship of nature. Only when it takes place will people truly regard each other as “brothers” (not brothers and sisters) and eliminate war along with all other strife. In this way alone can the world overcome “stateness” (*gosudarstvennost*) and achieve “fatherlandness” (*otechestvennost*). Altruism, the paltry goal of today, involves helping and favoring a few people, but the common task of raising our forefathers unites all.

A religious man, Fyodorov imagined that his common task would fulfill the Gospel promise to raise the dead—only people must not wait passively for divine intervention but act themselves. “We must understand and define Orthodoxy as the universal prayer of all the living for all the dead, a prayer that then becomes action,” Fyodorov instructs.

By the same token, the millennium will be achieved only by human effort. Here Fyodorov’s views align with Lenin’s. Today’s learned patriots, Fyodorov explains, take pride in their forefathers’ achievements instead of

feeling “contrition for their death”—as they should, because they have still not bothered to resurrect them. Only the unlearned already know that

as soon as the earth is seen as a cemetery and nature as a death-dealing force, just so soon will the political question be replaced by the physical question; and in this context the physical will not be separated from the astronomical, i.e. the earth will be recognized as a heavenly body and the stars will be recognized as other earths. The unification of all sciences under astronomy is the simplest, most natural, unlearned thing.

What does astronomy have to do with raising the dead? The answer, believe it or not, is that atoms of our ancestors have escaped into outer space. Before we can resurrect the dead, we must retrieve their atoms. Only then can we achieve the “patrifaction” (not “matrifaction”) of matter. Hence the “common task” is inextricably linked to space travel.

I remember the late George Kline, an expert on Russian philosophy, pointing out that it is not particular atoms that make us who we are but their organization. Atoms, after all, are replaceable and constantly change within us. A less obvious objection is that even if we could produce an exact copy of a person, how do we know that a duplicate of me would subjectively be me? If someone copied me while I was alive, would I be located somehow in two places, or would, as with twins, there be two distinct versions of me? Such questions did not trouble Fyodorov and his followers.

The need for women will disappear because men will “replace the bringing into the world of children . . . with the restoration to our fathers of the life we received from them”—from them only, because women apparently play no role in giving life.

One may also wonder at Fyodorov’s disparagement of “manufacturing” and “pure science,” as if they could never contribute knowledge useful for a project unlikely to be attained by just ordering scientists to raise the dead. He did not suspect that, just as “conscious,” “orderly” central planning is actually much less efficient than the “spontaneous,”

“anarchic” market, so it is by encouraging people to exploit unforeseeable opportunities that the greatest advances are made.

Russians usually credit the mathematician and rocket designer Konstantin Tsiolkovsky (1857–1935) with founding (or at least inspiring) the Russian space program. “Fyodorov . . . believed that the stars didn’t exist merely to be contemplated and admired,” Tsiolkovsky wrote in praise of his predecessor, “but so that mankind could conquer them and settle among them.” What’s more, Tsiolkovsky enthused, Fyodorov “believed that the whole universe could be controlled by human will and consciousness.”

Once a cult figure for the few, Tsiolkovsky has become a national icon. When the USSR disintegrated, the Russian Cape Canaveral turned out to be in Kazakhstan, and so a replacement was built in the Russian Federation. It was named for Tsiolkovsky because, as President Putin explained,

one of the first people in our country, and indeed the world, to have pondered these questions [about humanity’s relation to the cosmos] was Tsiolkovsky—and yet we have no towns that bear his name. We are not going to build just a cosmodrome and a launch pad here, but a research center, and a whole city. I think that if . . . we call this future city Tsiolkovsky it will be only fitting.

“Cosmism,” Eltchaninoff instructs, “has come to be considered a philosophical discipline in its own right.”

Compared to Tsiolkovsky, Fyodorov almost seems, well, down to earth. Tsiolkovsky’s prose displays what Eltchaninoff aptly calls “metaphysical vertigo.” Tsiolkovsky began his article “Panpsychism, or Everything Feels” in the tone of an evangelist:

I am afraid you will leave this life with bitterness in your heart if you do not learn from me, a pure source of knowledge, that continuous joy awaits you. . . . I would want this life of yours to be a bright dream of the future, a future where happiness never ends.

The way I see it, my sermon is not even a daydream, but a strictly mathematical conclusion based on precise knowledge.

We sense ourselves thinking, Tsiolkovsky explains, but it is really each atom in the brain that thinks and feels. And not just in the brain: “in a mathematical sense,” every particle of matter feels and thinks. It’s only a question of degree. Thought does not stop with humans; to a lesser extent, dogs and rats think, and to a still lesser extent, plants. Why stop there, since the line between living and non-living matter is entirely arbitrary? “Can anyone deny that in nature we have a continuous chain of links which differ only quantitatively?” In fact, everything senses and feels. “The inorganic world cannot express itself,” Tsiolkovsky asserts, “but that doesn’t mean it doesn’t possess a primitive form of sensitivity.”

Atoms have rudimentary feeling, like that of a sleeping person. They awake into full consciousness when they become part of something complex, like a brain. Although everyone dies and their brains disintegrate, the part of them that really feels, their atoms, lives on and eventually becomes part of other brains. In the interim they sleep and do not sense time passing, and so, when they awake, even if after millions of years, life will seem to have been continuous. In that sense, we are truly immortal. Since the universe extends infinitely in time and space, we will have an infinite number of lives. Indeed, we have already had an infinite number! “What exists is a single, supreme, conscious, happy life that never ceases.” We can be sure of happiness because, Tsiolkovsky preposterously asserts, “the ethical code of the cosmos dictates that there be no suffering anywhere.”

As life extends indefinitely in time, so humanity will conquer ever more space. First, people will harness the sun’s energy, only a tiny portion of which is actually used, and so multiply human powers billions of times. People will use that energy to eliminate deserts and increase population exponentially. When they at last need more room, they will establish colonies on the asteroids and planets, then on worlds throughout the Milky Way, and then move on to other galaxies.

People will also perfect themselves. Like so many progressives of his time, Tsiolkovsky believed in eugenics. He envisaged central planners controlling mating to produce a superior species. Humanity will at first be divided into two parts, the chosen ones living together by conscious planning while the others endure spontaneously. Gradually, everyone will belong to the chosen, and then

all will be happiness; all will be contentment. And those who cannot be helped will be subsumed into nirvana, or non-being (temporarily, of course).

Perfect happiness demands that atoms not be subjected to imperfect experiences in inferior beings, “such as our monkeys, cows, wolves, deer, hares, rats, and the like,” whose existence “is of no benefit to the atom.” We must therefore

eliminate the animal world Likewise, the atom’s rare potential existence in the body of modern man encourages us to improve and eliminate all backward [human] breeds.

But what if humans are themselves an inferior breed? If the universe has quintillions of worlds, and has lasted forever, then there must be civilizations billions of years ahead of us who regard us the way we regard rats. So why do they allow us to live? Isn’t the fact that we exist proof that something is wrong with Tsiolkovsky’s logic? As we might guess, he comes up with an entirely ad hoc answer. Every now and then, it seems, advanced beings “degenerate” and so “are eliminated as a result of occasionally occurring regressions. A fresh influx is necessary,” and so Earth and a few similar planets are allowed to develop “to replenish the losses incurred by regressive breeds in the cosmos.”

In short, we can begin to appreciate the significance of our existence only if we think cosmically. Then we will recognize that life is eternal. “Can we really doubt that the cosmos generally contains only joy, satisfaction, perfection and truth”?

The pantheon of cosmists includes numerous thinkers who propounded the preposterous as indubitable. Alexander Chizhevsky (1897–

1964) claimed to have established, by strict mathematical deduction of course, that solar cycles regulate history:

that the greatest revolutions, wars, and mass movements . . . constituting the turning points of history . . . have tended to coincide with epochs of heightened solar activity and reach their peak in the moment of the most intense solar activity.

Since the Bolsheviks utterly rejected anarchism, the anarchist Alexander Svyatagor (1889–1937) invented “anarcho-biocosmism,” which aimed to overturn not social but natural laws. Since this project demanded strict control of all human effort, anarchism morphed into its opposite.

According to Eltchaninoff, the embalmers of Lenin were inspired by the sort of thinking that eventually led to cryogenics (freezing of the dead until science can cure whatever killed them). The Bolshevik Alexander Bogdanov maintained that “mutual transfusion,” in which the blood of an old and young person is exchanged, would rejuvenate the former without aging the latter. This technique had the added benefit of transcending bourgeois individualism. When Bogdanov tried the process on himself, he (but not his young partner) died.

More recently, the futurologist Danila Medvedev, a founder of the Russian transhumanist movement and of the first cryogenic company outside the United States, argued that the universal immortality he promised would “create new possibilities for collaboration with the Russian Orthodox church,” which

has always had the custom of preserving the bodies and body parts of saints as relics. We’ll be able to offer them a service for preserving their saints, who will then be technically ready for resurrection.

What’s more, Medvedev continued, we will be able to unite spiritual and secular power in one person by

transplanting the head of Patriarch Kirill of Moscow onto the body of President Putin. Then we’d have a single, unified leader. And I don’t see any blasphemy.

Where but in Russia (or in Jonathan Swift's Academy of Lagado) could such ideas flourish? Some Russian thinkers agree with the former deputy prime minister Dmitri Rogozin, who became head of the Russian space agency Roscosmos, that cosmist thinking is an "intrinsic part of the Russian soul" and that it was "predetermined by the national character of the Russian people." Others stress how closely cosmist ideas resemble those circulating at the Esalen Institute and in Silicon Valley. Can there be more convincing proof, they ask, that Russian discoveries will conquer the world?

Russian cosmists proposed a "nooscope" that could intervene in human thoughts, and today Elon Musk's Neuralink project aims to train the brain—or, as the Neuralink website explains, the company will "create a generalized brain interface to restore autonomy to those with unmet medical needs today and unlock human potential tomorrow."

Paralysis will be a thing of the past, and, we may suppose, psychiatry as we know it will be superseded. It is also easy to see how intrusive government might create an unprecedented kind of tyranny.

"The link between cosmism and [American] transhumanism is pretty clear," the British philosopher and sociologist Steven Fuller observed. Eltchaninoff offers numerous examples of American techno-wizards and transhumanists who were directly inspired by Russian cosmism, but even if the two movements developed independently, the similarities should make us reflect. It is never good when Americans begin to think like Russians. Who can tell what young people educated to despise Western liberal values will do when they join a technological movement reflecting the cosmist "Russian soul"? The fact that, spiritually speaking, Silicon Valley borders on Moscow does not comfort me.

River of destinies

by *Jeremy Black*

“One might almost have walked over the Thames and through every part of it on the boats, which could scarcely pass by each other.” This description of a regatta in 1775 can be followed by one from “Paddler,” a newspaper correspondent, who, on July 3, 1880, seeking relief “in the enjoyment of a leisurely paddle on the river in these long twilight evenings,” faces “the noisy and immodest proceedings of the evenings” and their “foul and disgusting language which assaults one’s ears and serves to call attention to the immodesty which might otherwise pass unnoticed.” Or take T. S. Eliot, working diligently for the Colonial & Foreign Department of Lloyds Bank and finding, in Thameside London, intimations of the prospect of salvation described in *The Waste Land* (1922):

“This music crept by me upon the waters”
And along the Strand, up Queen Victoria Street.
O City city, I can sometimes hear
Beside a public bar in Lower Thames Street,
The pleasant whining of a mandolin
And a clatter and a chatter from within
Where fishmen lounge at noon: where the walls
Of Magnus Martyr hold
Inexplicable splendour of Ionian white and gold.

At once barrier and route, the Thames has been crucial to London’s history, development, identity, and imagination. It helps explain much about London’s role in the history of England and that city’s leading place in Britain’s interaction with the wider world.

Cities have to contend with water’s role as an obstacle, which is why they tend to be located at convenient bridging points. The use of water as a means for trade, by sea and river, is the other crucial factor. Until the development of bridges and tunnels able to cross large expanses of water, and of aircraft (more particularly air freight), there was a reliance on ships as the means to move people and goods overseas. That was crucially important for England and made it different from France. Moreover, as far as England was concerned, the problems of overland routes—including a dependency on horses, which had limited load capacity, as well as variable and often poor road surfaces—especially for the bulk movement of goods, made transport by water preferable. Such transport faced many problems, notably so prior to the application of engineering knowledge in the eighteenth century and of steam power in the nineteenth. In large rivers, it was not always easy to sail against the current. Variable water levels increased the hazards of navigation and brought perilous shoals into play. Winter freezing, snowmelt spate, and summer drought were all issues for aquatic transport. The large-scale canalization of rivers, so crucial to the flourishing of trade, did not begin until the eighteenth century.

All these issues posed potential problems for river-goers. They also ensured that particular rivers had attractions. The Thames was one such—its flow being more equable and its course easier to manage than those of most other major European rivers.

There was also the crucial issue of the hinterland, in the sense of the area abroad served by particular ports. For Britain, the significant land abroad for centuries was Continental Europe. Ireland, in contrast, offered prospects but not the same prosperity. It was a source for raw materials, but not a significant market. The westward-facing ports, first Bristol, did not rise in relative significance until England became a major player in the Atlantic economy.

Prior to that, the focus was on ports along the coast from Southampton, on England's south coast, to Leith, near Edinburgh. Ports such as Dover, London, Ipswich, King's Lynn, Hull, Newcastle, and Berwick all had a role to play in Britain's economy. There were opportunities and drawbacks for each of these ports. Leith, Berwick, Newcastle, and Hull all had useful hinterlands in Britain, but none on the scale of those ports further south, while the extent of the North Sea that had to be covered was greater, thus introducing more unpredictability for shipping. Anglo-Scottish hostilities also ensured that there were major protection costs in the case of the ports of Leith, Berwick, and Newcastle.

Had England's destiny been decided by links with the Viking world—as had seemed likely to be the case with the kingdom of York in the tenth century, and with Danish rule and Norwegian invasion in the eleventh—then Hull would presumably have had a greater role, providing as it did a direct passage to York. The success of the Old English monarchy in the tenth century, its revival under Edward the Confessor (r. 1042–66), and the triumph of the Normans successively ended this option. Power came to be located further south.

This ensured that a range of ports would have to be employed, from King's Lynn to Southampton. All were important, and had the Old English state continued to be based in Winchester, then Southampton would probably have been the key port in all of England. King's Lynn and Ipswich were well suited to serve East Anglia, and a host of ports existed to service Kent and Sussex. Yet all of these options faced problems if we look at a wider market, both politically and economically. The Midlands, and notably the West Midlands that

were the center of Mercia, were best linked to Continental Europe via the Thames Valley. From King's Lynn and Ipswich, there was much land to cover to get to Mercia, and a good portion of this territory was often waterlogged. Dover and the Cinque Ports faced major issues of distance, which were exacerbated by the Wealden Greensand and the need to cross both the Rivers Medway and Thames.

In London it was possible to draw on links with East Anglia, Kent, and Mercia, as well as Wessex, thereby covering much of England. London's potential, as at once a political and an economic center, had been perceived by the Romans, as had that of York. The concentration of wealth and power in the south of England, as well as its closeness to the Continent, ensured that, of the two, London won out. It was a city defined by crossing the Thames and developing links to the Continent. That first aspect has been represented most particularly by the famous bridge, but much traffic in and around the city was also by boat.

The significance of London Bridge was a testimony to the importance of the river. London was established at a strategic location on the north bank of the Thames, which was then much wider than it is today. Not only was the southern bank then characterized by marshy tidal inlets, but, on the northern shore, land has since been reclaimed over the centuries, and the riverbank has moved progressively out into the river, in part to allow the construction of successive lines of river defenses and new wharves. The waterfront the Romans found lay along the line of modern Upper and Lower Thames Streets. Today, the river is tidal as far west as Teddington, some seventeen miles from London Bridge. In Roman times, the river was tidal possibly not much further upstream than the low gravel banks on the northern side, which provided a good site for the Romans to build the first bridge—and which remains the site of today's London Bridge. The two low hills of Ludgate and Cornhill were also attractive factors in the choice of site.

The early balance between military and civilian uses for bridge, harbor, and settlement

would have favored the military, as lowland Britain was being conquered, but this balance rapidly changed. As the lowest bridging point on the Thames, London was a key place in the internal transport system and more suitable as a center of English life than the original official capital of Roman Britain, Colchester. The role of London as a leading port made it different from other major Roman centers, such as York, Lincoln, Chester, and Gloucester, although each of those was also a river port. Proximity to the English Channel ensured London a central role in British life.

The river's utility for trade helped foster English resilience in the Anglo-Saxon period. The locations of Anglo-Saxon settlement at first reverted to those of the pre-Roman centuries. In time, because of the advantages of the river, trade revived, and a new port town, Lundenwic, developed to the west of Londinium.

The revival of commerce in England in part reflected the improvement of conditions in Merovingian Gaul, with which there was considerable trade via the port of Quentovic, near Boulogne. There was also trade to the Low Countries. Initially, the two major water systems in England centered on the Wash/Humber in the northeast and Severn/Avon in the southwest, but the latter declined from the late sixth century as the related trade from the Mediterranean via Atlantic Spain and France to Cornwall fell. Instead, the Thames system centered on London grew in significance, a system that also benefited from tributaries such as the Lea, which runs north from London. The advantages of Roman London—which had linked a key water route to land routes along the better-drained ridges—were rediscovered. The greater role played by bridges in the period is suggested by the extent to which, from the 740s, labor service for bridge-building and repair became an important provision in legal charters. The Roman bridge in London was possibly rebuilt in the mid-ninth century and later repaired under Aethelred the Unready.

Moreover, the spreading authority, first of the Kingdom of Mercia, and then of Wessex, diminished the role of the Thames as a boundary from the eighth century onwards, which greatly benefited London.

London's dynamism interacted with that of England, both politically and economically. From the ninth century, English cloth exports were earning large amounts of Continental silver, which helped to make England particularly wealthy. The strength of the English monetary economy gave London a specific advantage as a commercial city and assisted the process of government. Money and politics have always gone hand in hand, and London's status as England's primary financial center cemented its role as the political capital. Control over London was important in the politico-military crises of 1016, 1052, and 1066 and a major factor in the city wars of Stephen's, John's, and Henry III's reigns, and later in the Wars of the Roses.

Commercial dominance remained a theme in England, a dominance that owed much to the opportunities provided by the Thames. London as a site allowed for links between domestic and international trade and more general opportunities via roads, the sea, and the conveniences that the urban environment offered for transshipment. London's profits derived from its intermediary role in multiple economies. The city benefited from its ability to play a major part in serving trades to the north of England and up to Scotland, to the Low Countries, and to the southern markets of France, Spain, and Italy. This primacy in transshipment also increased the gap between London's position and that of the other east-coast ports.

Moreover, growth in the Thames trade was helped by developments in commercial infrastructure and organization. The movement of anchorages downriver to Deptford, Wapping, and Ratcliffe provided more space for shipping. London's first dry dock was built at Rotherhithe in 1599, followed by another, for the expanding East India Company, at Blackwall in 1614–17. In 1661, the diarist Samuel Pepys took a barge to Blackwall and “viewed the dock and the new Wet dock, which is newly made there, and a brave new merchantman which is to be launched shortly.” Ships could be repaired and fitted out there, but the docks were not yet used for loading; that would have to wait for a later succession of dock schemes starting at the end of the seventeenth century.

The value of London's docks led Valentine Knight, in his proposal for rebuilding the City after the Great Fire, to suggest constructing a canal from the Thames via the heart of the City to the (now-subterranean) River Fleet in order to provide additional space for wharves.

Organizational sophistication, financial firepower, and the rule of law were all significant factors in the development of trading companies, such as the East India, Hudson's Bay, and Levant Companies, which could raise investment and share risk from a wide range of participants. The Thames economy also benefited from the protectionist legislation of the Navigation Acts of 1650, 1651, and 1660, and from measures to prevent foreign shipbuilding. Indeed, in 1698, Peter the Great of Russia came to the Royal Dockyards at Deptford to see shipbuilding in progress, as he searched for foreign models for the industry he intended to establish. Shipbuilding reflected the powerful role of the Thames, not only in shaping London and its transport links, within and outside the city, but also in its economy.

Around the time of Peter's visit, London and Britain's first commercial wet dock was constructed. Built at Rotherhithe, initially as a safe anchorage and ship-repair facility, it came to be known as Greenland Dock because of its links with the whaling industry.

The Thames, with its increasing dockage space, became important to a direct-trading economy, rather than an intermediary one dependent on the Dutch. This trading, which required more capital resources and expenditure, and a more sophisticated organizational structure, enabled the London merchants to bear the bulk of the transaction costs themselves, and also to take much of the profit.

By 1682, 70 percent of the coal shipped from the Tyne went to London. Water routes also remained crucial within England. At the start of the eighteenth century, cloth was generally taken from Stroud, in Gloucestershire, to London by Thames barge from Lechdale, seventy miles west of the capital. With the advent of turnpikes, road links developed for individuals, but water remained crucial for freight. It cost £1.67 a ton to move goods by road from London to Reading in 1792, but only 50 pence

a ton by water. That lower cost ensured the commercial dominance of water routes for years to come.

At the same time, the river's role as a barrier was increasingly tackled, reflecting the importance of London and the availability of resources to undertake the task. Several river ferries were replaced by new bridges, in a development that reflected human control over the environment, as ferries were subject to river conditions such as ice and other adverse weather whereas bridges held no such drawbacks. The first new bridge was built at Datchet, near Windsor, in 1706; demolished in the 1840s, this is the only Thames bridge that no longer exists. Datchet was followed by Putney (1729), Westminster (1738–50), Walton (1750), Hampton Court (1753), Kew (1758–59), Blackfriars (1760–69), Battersea (1771–72), and Richmond (1774–77). Although it challenged the passenger traffic by ferry, the building of Westminster Bridge markedly helped development on the southern bank of the Thames. But the halfpenny toll demanded from those who crossed Blackfriars Bridge led to a riot.

Meanwhile, the status and confidence brought by thriving trade led to the depiction of Father Thames as a reborn Neptune, for example in James Barry's paintings for the Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Commerce and Manufactures (now the Royal Society of Arts), executed between 1777 and 1783, and in John Bacon's 1789 bronze statue of George III in the courtyard of the riverfront Somerset House. As in Rome, where Father Tiber is an ancient symbolic figure, the derivation of the phrase (Old) Father Thames comes from the centrality of the river to the city's origin, fortunes, and growth. Malachy Postlethwayt, in his influential *Universal Dictionary of Trade and Commerce* (1766), referred to London as the "grand central mart," while the press focused its reports on grain prices on those at Bear Quay, where grain was landed.

In the nineteenth century, the growth of trade was accompanied by a major expansion in shipping and docks. Indeed, there was a drive for new docks in the first years of the nineteenth century. The first to open, in 1802,

was the pair of docks known as the West India Docks, which cleverly cut across the neck of the Isle of Dogs in order to provide entrances at both ends of the dock complex; the northern dock was used for ships unloading, while the southern, “Export,” was for loading. Meanwhile, the excavations for London Dock at Wapping had begun in 1801. Like the West India Docks, this twenty-acre dock was furnished with a comprehensive range of warehouses and was later extended to the east, in part to provide a second point of access from the river. Further downstream came the East India Docks, at the northeast end of the Isle of Dogs, in 1805. On the southern bank, work began on the Surrey Commercial Docks in 1807.

The dock-building reflected the acute congestion on the Thames and its wharves in the 1790s, as overseas and domestic trade expanded. In the year 1800, some 1,800 vessels were being moored in the river, rising to 16,000 in 1824. There were innumerable complaints of lengthy delays before a berth was available, which was exacerbated by the fact that whole flotillas of cargo ships would tend to arrive simultaneously when the winds and tides gave favorable sailing conditions. Vessels would moor in the river, their cargoes transferred to small, unpowered barges known as “lighters,” which would take the goods to the wharves. Before steam tugs began to be used to tow the lighters, they were maneuvered using only long oars known as “sweeps” and by taking advantage of the tides and winds, a highly skilled job that required considerable knowledge of the “set” of the tides. At low water in dry seasons, the Thames is not particularly deep, even today often less than seven feet in places. This depth could be reduced by silt deposition, and by ships dumping ballast, so dredging was important at a time when the river wharves were so busy.

Unlike at Liverpool, the building of the docks on the Thames was done by private companies rather than the municipal authority and was generally undertaken in an unplanned, rather chaotic fashion. A major factor in this was the “Free Water Clause,” initially a provision of the West India Dock that from

1799 on applied to the other dock schemes. This allowed lighters free access to the docks, where they could unload ships and move the goods out into the river to be landed at the river wharves, all free of toll or charge. This system cost the dock companies dearly but helped to preserve the bustling, congested, and chaotic trade of the many river wharves to an extent and in a manner not seen in any other British port.

The importance of the Thames within Britain’s commercial system was enhanced by canal construction, enabling greater quantities of goods to be transported to the City and port of London from elsewhere in England. By the late 1760s, London’s first true canal, the Limehouse Cut, had connected the ancient River Lea Navigation with the Thames. More important, from the 1790s, the Grand Junction Canal provided a link between the Thames at Brentford and the Midlands that eliminated the need for the long river journey up the Thames to Oxford to join the earlier Oxford Canal. A further connection was provided between the Grand Junction and the Thames at Limehouse Basin via the Regent’s Canal. Completed in 1820, the Regent’s also wound its way around parts of north London that were undergoing rapid development at this time, and therefore provided a transport link for them.

More docks followed the Napoleonic Wars. In a major development involving the demolition of 1,250 houses, the St Katharine Docks were shoehorned into the space between the Tower of London and the London Docks, becoming in 1828 the furthest upstream of the excavated docks.

As shipping increased in size and volume, new docks became ever larger and were built further downstream. The Royal Victoria Dock of 1855 was able to cater to the large steamships of the day and could handle massive quantities of goods; like Liverpool’s Albert Dock, it was a pioneer of hydraulic power for handling goods. Millwall Dock followed in 1868, the Royal Albert Dock in 1880, and Tilbury Docks, around twenty-five miles downstream in Essex, in 1886. The total in-

vestment was formidable. Royal nomenclature reflected the grandeur of the docks as well as official endorsement of their purpose. London's waterfront housed at any one time more vessels than any other port on earth and was a counterpart of the city's role in the financial architecture of the world.

Seaborne coal, mostly from Newcastle, was crucial to London's flourishing. Only in 1869 was the coal brought to London by sea matched by that moved by rail, and, ten years later, some 3.5 million tons still entered the city by the Thames via ship. By now, however, the Thames had become less important than hitherto for shipbuilding, which was more in evidence on the Clyde, the Tyne, and the Wear, each near centers of ironworking. London's shipbuilding was also hit by the greater costs of industry in London, including higher wages and overheads.

Those factors help to explain the failure in developing a broader base of heavy industry in London's downriver. Meanwhile, a cosmopolitan maritime population crowded the riverside areas, embarking on, or disembarking from, vessels. This was very much an environment molded by man. In 1913, Arthur Sarsfield, a crime reporter who, under the pseudonym Sax Rohmer, published the successful novel *The Mystery of Dr. Fu-Manchu*—about a sinister Chinese master-criminal based in Limehouse—described a journey down the Thames, with the “oily glitter of the tide,” while “on the Surrey shore a blue light . . . flicked translucent tongues against the night's curtain,” a gasworks. The pollution had already brought the fishing industry on the river to an end.

Maritime trade ensured specialization, and it helped to diversify the industrial base. Individual wharves specialized in particular trades: Hubbuck's Wharf in paints, Morton's Sufferance Wharf in preserved foods, chocolate, and confectionary, and Millwall Dock in grain. Canary Wharf, now the site of many financial-services firms, handled fruit from the Canary Isles.

The situation on the docks was very much less favorable by the late twentieth century.

In part, this was due to factors general to the British economy, but it also owed to more specific issues. After being targeted and damaged in the Blitz, the docks were again thriving in the 1950s. But they declined rapidly thereafter with the redrawing of global trade routes as imperial flows ebbed. These challenges were exacerbated by the failure of the port to match competitors benefiting from post-war development.

In particular, militancy by trade unions encouraged the shift in freight business to Rotterdam. The first British container ship sent to Australia, the *Encounter Bay*, sailed from Rotterdam in 1969 because of an industrial dispute at Tilbury. Moreover, ports such as Felixstowe and Dover proved better able to respond to the challenges and opportunities of containerization because they were less unionized, whereas the London docks faced serious and persistent labor problems. Aside from containerization, there was a rise in roll-on, roll-off trade, with trucks driving directly onto ferries, which benefited Dover, Felixstowe, and Harwich.

With London's maritime trade focused nearly thirty miles downriver at Tilbury, the derelict Docklands provided an unprecedented development opportunity near the center of a major city. The redevelopment of St Katharine Docks, closed to commercial traffic in 1968, was followed in 1981 by the establishment of the London Docklands Development Corporation. By 2003, Canary Wharf contained 13.1 million square feet of office space.

The river meanwhile lived on in a variety of ways, with the first salmon caught in the Thames in a century in 1974. Very differently, installed between that year and 1982, the Thames Barrier was designed to prevent excessively high water levels from reaching central London.

The Thames remains a central challenge to London's future, even if this challenge is far less apparent to its citizens than it has been in the past. Modern cities, like London and New York, may turn their back on the water, but to do so is to neglect the living history and prospects for varied futures it represents.

“Breakfast Special”: a new story *by Woody Allen*

When I say the story is unbelievable, I use the word not to amaze, as in, “Our new au pair has an unbelievable body,” but to warn the reader that the events depicted may seem like the plot of a bad movie: a black-and-white Forties movie, a definite B picture. And yet, everything noted actually happened to Murray Tempkin, a slim, bespectacled thirty-year-old writer, who on a good hair day resembles a scientist or an intellectual but should the weather turn humid looks more like some kind of *meshuggener*. Unlike the noir tabloid crime thrillers of yesteryear, with their cheap dames, seedy hotel rooms, and broken, blinking neon signs, this unlikely tale unfolded in living color in one of Manhattan’s toniest zip codes.

Tempkin, the protagonist, takes his breakfast at eight o’ clock each morning at the same coffee shop on Madison Avenue in the Seventies. Almost invariably he sits at a table next to the plate-glass window. The ritual is a freshly squeezed OJ, coffee, and toasted English. He reads the *Times* on his cell phone, and, as his window gives a wide view of passersby, he enjoys watching the 1 percent come alive. Denizens of the Upper East Side parade by on the avenue en route to their daily adventures: successful business types, stylish women, and uniformed kids off to pursue their private-school educations while mom scoots to her Pilates.

Tempkin’s own digs were just around the corner, and after breakfast it is always back to the modest three rooms where he lived alone since his divorce. Shimming into position between his chair and the walnut desk that

housed his Olivetti portable, he then sits to challenge Dostoevsky and Kafka, Bellow and Salinger. His first novel had gotten some encouraging reviews, and his second was almost half done. Jessica, his ex-wife, was a pretty Boston girl, from a well-to-do family. She had attended Bard College and after graduating worked for a photographer. Jessica was social, always up for dinner parties, clubs, the beach, and travel: all the things that kept him from staring into the middle distance over a blank page and dreaming up emotional intrigues to beguile or amuse.

When she left him for her photographer boss, he wasn’t totally shocked, as they had discussed a split and agreed the hots that fueled their romantic beginning had come down to room temperature. Jessica moved out and Tempkin returned to the single man’s playbook. In short order, he was back at the typewriter full time, eating General Tso’s chicken from takeout containers by himself. He dined out with friends now and then, but as far as slipping back into the social ramble, he never had been at ease in the dating world and appreciated the freedom to work uninterrupted. Tempkin was by nature shy, an introvert, most comfortable at his desk fabricating storylines and agonizing over just the right word. The few women he met or was introduced to or fixed up with by his friends were pleasant but nothing special. But who was this new person?

On a cool summer morning she walked past the plate-glass window of the coffee shop during his breakfast, and he noticed her right

off. And now she was gone. She was kind of great, he thought. For a few seconds the juices flowed, but it was a transient moment in a town full of transient moments. Two days later she passed again. Still great. Adorable. The third time she passed, wiggling just enough, her pheromones penetrated the glass right through to his English muffin. She passed the next day too, and by the following week he was waiting for her to pass, looking forward to the buzz she ignited. She was pretty in the very special way that had been fatal to him since high school. Her looks reminded him of his first and only love, Lexi Riggs. Her face was fresh and natural like Lexi's. No lipstick, no makeup, white skin, huge blue eyes—or if he could get a better look, possibly green. She was like a farmer's daughter or some beautiful Polish peasant. Of course, Lexi had been anything but a peasant. She had been a cultivated intellectual who had helped educate Tempkin culturally and in ways I won't get into. His heart disintegrated when she chose Jerry Simmons to go off with and eventually marry. Word was she lived in Provence and was the mother of two. This woman had Lexi's luscious haystack look. The other girls in high school were mostly versions of each other, but Lexi was artsy, not commercial, with Greenwich Village silver earrings dangling from her pierced ears. This stranger, filling out her short, light-colored cotton slip dresses was like God himself had taken over and told his angels, “Step back, guys, let me complete her figure.” What a treat, Tempkin thought. I wonder who she is? Married? Probably. Or a boyfriend. How could she not? Still, I'd love to strike up a conversation and find out for myself. Of course, going up to a beautiful woman on the streets of Manhattan, given the amount of sleazeballs and head cases walking around, could easily be very off-putting to her. And let's face it, he was the least comfortable, least experienced male human at picking up women. Technically speaking, he had never actually picked up a woman in his life and didn't think he could start by accosting a total stranger with some bumbling pitch. Much as he longed to speak to her, the direct approach was definitely not his thing. Each day

he watched the woman pass, casting her in a smorgasbord of delightful scenarios. One morning, fate, trying to convince him the universe did not single him out for special mistreatment, caused her to pause in front of the coffee-shop window and pull out her cell phone to make a call. In the moment she stood dialing there was enough time to see that she also wore silver earrings, that her eyes were not blue or green but violet, and the cherry on the cake, that she wore no rings, marital nor engagement. Tempkin thought—now is the time to run outside, and, however inept, which he knew he would be, say something. Or would I be interrupting her call? Of course, I'd wait till she hung up. But if she decides to talk while walking, what do I do, shadow her and hope for an opening? Perhaps this is not the best moment after all. On the other hand, she may not walk and talk. Meanwhile, in the time he debated the pros and cons in his mind, Hamlet could have killed the king twice over. And suddenly she was gone, striding down Madison Avenue talking animatedly on her call and vanishing into Manhattan.

That night, dining with his friend Al Trochman, the bass player, he laid the details on the musician.

“Of course, you should go up and speak to her,” he advised. “So, she'll turn out to have a boyfriend and she'll tell you to get lost. So what? What do you lose?”

“I know. I'm making too much of this, but it's easy for you,” Tempkin said. “You're smooth initiating banter, but I get coffee nerves. I hate the sound of my voice.”

“You're too sensitive, man. Just say hello and tell her that you couldn't take your eyes off her. When it comes to women you never got out of high school. I'll bet she'll find the whole thing flattering.”

“You think so?”

“She'll think it's romantic. Shall I remind you that you met your ex-wife in a stalled elevator and had no trouble talking to her?”

“Well sure, alone, between floors, just us two. It was very natural. But this—”

“Your trouble is you're pathologically shy. That's why you're a writer. You're only com-

fortable in your room alone with your Olivetti. When I hear you suffer so, I change my mind and say pass. There’s enough great women in this town so you don’t have to pick one up on the street. I could do it, but you’re a whole different neurotic.”

“Maybe you’re right.”

Like all hypochondriacs, Tempkin went for a second opinion.

Ruth Mayer, his painter friend, said, “You said it yourself. She reminds you of your first love. But Murray, use your head. She’s not that same bohemian high-school girl you talked Proust with way back when. You’re reading too much into a look, into violet eyes. What if you hit on her and she’s a zombie. What if she’s never read *The Waste Land* and prefers bungee jumping?”

Tempkin knew they were both right, but who should he listen to? Wise friends with sound advice, or the frantic lunacy of his irrational heart?

The following morning Tempkin forewent his breakfast routine and loitered in front of the coffee shop. He didn’t know exactly what he would say, but he hoped maybe the words would flow as they did when he wrote dialogue for characters in his prose. He told himself spontaneity would work better than if he’d rehearsed and memorized a speech, that true art proceeds from the unconscious. It all made sense till he saw her approaching and the butterflies took flight. He suddenly became aware of people around. What if she reacted badly, panicking, or caused a scene? He had never experienced writer’s block, but as she got close his mind went blank, and, quicker than he expected, she was past him. He stood frozen, missing the moment. Unsure of the right next move but still determined to meet her, he took off in her direction. He asked himself, am I acting or acting out? He knew one was healthy and one was bad. Navigating his way past assorted pedestrians, he ping-ponged between the existential and the Freudian and lost her. Then he spotted her crossing Madison heading east, and, of course, he got stuck at a red light. What the hell am I doing?, he thought. I’m following

her. How is this different from stalking? When he finally managed to cross, she had turned on Park Avenue and was gone from sight. He came to the corner, went round, and there she was with two men and a woman standing and chatting. Not to appear suspicious, he was forced to keep walking and go right past them. All he heard her say to the man and woman was, “This is my husband, Doug. He loves tennis too.” And with that Tempkin was plunged into the world of the actual, the world where despair is emperor. He continued his pace without skipping a beat, taking the body blow and disappearing ignominiously around the first corner he could turn. She was married. No ring, but taken nonetheless. Her husband was Doug. Tempkin made him out to be one of those cookie-cutter, mass-produced hedge-fund types who lived in a co-op on Park Avenue, played tennis at the Southampton Tennis Club: a blond, fit WASP. Tempkin had laid eyes on him for only a few seconds, but that was all his frantic creative mind needed to assign him a philistine résumé. An assembly-line Park Avenue Republican was how he would phrase that character for the reader, a liberal on cultural issues but a fiscal conservative. Her choice said something about her he didn’t want to hear. He marched on deflated, even crushed, yet relieved of the discomforting need to confront her and do his wooden spiel. He would not have to go through a forced, transparent attempt to chat her up. He had only one or two moments thinking about what might have been if the ball had bounced differently, the tennis ball. I play tennis too, thought Tempkin, though I could never master the serve. Later, at home, after a Cutty, he thought maybe he shouldn’t rush to judgment. What if she wasn’t happily married? For example, where does she go every morning that she’s walking down Madison? Tempkin had a theory. The Seventies through the Nineties on the Upper East Side were honeycombed with shrinks, he reasoned. Maybe she’s seeing an analyst. Maybe she’s got some personal issues, marital stuff. Tempkin refilled his glass, but, hard as it was to part with his pipe dreams, he knew the handwriting on the wall read *get real, move on*.

“Sad,” he told his friend Trochman, “she was the first woman I got excited over, and I didn’t even know her. Ruth Mayer said just because she reminded me of Lexi, I shouldn’t fool myself. I should tell Ruth she’s not into bungee jumping because she was carrying *The New York Review of Books* in her bag. I have to face it, it’s over. Before it began, it’s over. To quote the Bard of Peru, it was ‘one of those bells that now and then rings.’”

Okay—so, finally having set the table, we come to the part of our story that reads like a B movie.

Dissolve to two months later. Tempkin has resigned himself to the fact that the lovely creature who passes his coffee-shop window each morning will never be his. Then one day he is downtown on Nassau Street. Why Nassau Street? He is at a fishing-tackle store because he has a sister who has a kid who loves fishing, and, as the dutiful uncle, Tempkin is getting the kid certain feather flies and plugs the kid has requested for his birthday. Tempkin buys a Royal Coachman, Parmachene Belle, some Arbogast lures, a Hula Popper. He had gone on his lunch hour and now it is past the time he usually has downed his tuna melt and pie and he’s hungry. Unfamiliar with the neighborhood, he ducks into the first decent-looking restaurant he comes to. The place is almost empty, as most of the Wall Street crowd is back at work. He is seated at a back booth, takes out his phone to read the *Times* on it, and orders a bowl of clam chowder. He sits quietly in his nook and spoons it up. He orders coffee and rice pudding and is about finished when he happens to look up from his portion and sees a couple enter. He twigs on the man, at first unable to place him, and then he realizes it’s her husband, his dream girl’s blond WASP tennis-playing, cookie-cutter guy. That’s where I’ve seen him, Tempkin thinks. On Park Avenue and Seventy-second. But who’s the woman with him? The one he’s so lovey-dovey with? That’s not his wife. She doesn’t compare to the Polish peasant with the violet eyes. This woman is more sophisticated, coolly attractive: a tall redhead, definitely not my type, not artsy-looking in the Lexi mold but more commer-

cial. Then, as if dreamed up by a Hollywood hack, they sit down in a booth next to Tempkin but do not see him. That’s right—they do not realize that he’s there. You can see what’s coming. They order margaritas and although they are separated by a partition, it consists of open wood slats with assorted potted plants screening off one booth from another. I can’t explain this any better, but the bottom line is that while they can’t see Tempkin, he can hear them. Especially as the drinks take effect and he is making a concerted effort to listen. From their conversation it becomes clear they are lovers. Christ, they’re all over each other, he notes, discreetly stealing a safe peek now and then through the complicated foliage. Much romantic, flirtatious smooching and intimate talk, some of it dispositive. “What were you thinking after we made love?” she asks.

“That I need you. That it’s never the same with my wife.”

My god, thought Tempkin, no one will believe this. What are the odds? As he strained and listened to the affectionate, sometimes passionate up and back, it couldn’t help occurring to him: he may have been right in thinking she had marital problems. Clearly he’s unhappy, tired of the woman he’s married to. Maybe there’s a glimmer of hope in all this for Mrs. Tempkin’s little boy, Murray. Wouldn’t that be something? If their marriage is on the rocks and I could actually pursue her?

“I should never have signed that prenup. It’s far too generous. I’m far too generous. It was on the advice of my lawyer who is now history,” the husband says.

“Who knew things would work out between us?” says the woman.

“It’s frustrating,” he says.

“Unless you bite the bullet and get the divorce—and—”

“And what? And pay out that kind of money? Give her a fortune I really can’t afford to give her?”

“Maybe we’ll catch a break and she’ll meet somebody and initiate the divorce herself.”

“Wishful thinking. But I’d still be on the hook financially. I have to say that, more and more, I think about that accident we discussed.”

“Let’s not get into that,” says the woman. “I told you that when you first brought it up.”

“I’ve given it a lot of thought and I know I can make it seem very natural.”

“Yeah. That’s what they all think. Next thing you’re wearing an orange jumpsuit.”

“I don’t see any other way to really be rid of her. She has an accident, and it’s over, and can I tell you something? The sooner it happens the better off we are.”

“You’re a little drunk.”

“I’m perfectly sober and I know exactly how I’m going to do it and when.”

“Well don’t tell me about it. I don’t want to know about it.”

“Hey, don’t pout. Although you are very pretty when you pout.”

Tempkin sat there listening, taking it in, his mind at the moment a Jackson Pollock. Breathing deeply, he had once read, calms oneself. He inhaled and exhaled silently over and over and then softly he slid, ever so delicately, to the edge of his booth. Easing away, melting away, from the adjoining space where the cheating twosome were much too involved canoodling and drinking to suspect he even existed. Slowly he moved to the cashier and mutely paid his check. Then he walked out into what passes for fresh air in New York and just stood there immobile. I don’t know what word to use here: stunned, shaken, mortified. But you get the idea. When the neurons in his skull finally stopped firing off like Roman candles, he called his friend Trochman, told him he absolutely must see him right now, and Ubered uptown. Panting like he’d just run the whole distance on foot, he blurted out the events of the afternoon sounding like the old vaudeville comedian Al Kelly, whose specialty was doubletalk. When Trochman soothed him and digested the lurid particulars, he advised Tempkin to go directly to the police.

“And tell them what?” he bleated. “That a man whose name I don’t know is planning to kill a woman I don’t know? What’s their names? I don’t know. Doug. Doug what? I don’t know. Where do they live? I don’t really know. He said he’s going to kill her? Not

in precisely those words, but he said he was going to arrange an accident. When? Where? What kind of accident? Who said this? I don’t know. You see my point?”

Trochman gave it some thought and finally agreed. The information was not much for the police to go on. And they certainly wouldn’t book a man for a crime that hadn’t yet been committed on Murray Tempkin’s hysterical say so.

“That’s the trouble with the police,” Tempkin said, “they’re stymied when it comes to that whole preemptive thing. They never can arrest a criminal till after he’s done his dirty work.”

“Well, you certainly have to warn the woman.”

“But how?”

“What do you mean, how? She passes the coffee shop every morning. Go up and tell her what you just told me.”

“What? That her husband is planning to kill her? That I’ve been obsessing over her? That she reminds me of a high-school sweetheart that I never got over? That I’ve been eyeing her, following her? Stalking her? That I saw who she was married to and by chance I overheard him say he plans to murder you because he’s having an affair with a tall redhead?”

“That’s exactly what you tell her.”

“They’ll take me away in a straitjacket.”

“Hey, man, you were looking for a chance to meet her. Here it is. Wouldn’t it be romantic if this brought the two of you together and she fell in love with you?”

At this point Tempkin realized the jazz player was a little high and perhaps not the most judicious sounding board.

“I won’t sleep tonight,” Tempkin said. And of course he didn’t. The few times he did drift off for a moment, his dreams were classics of anxiety. Though he should have been exhausted, by morning he was full of manic energy. He shaved and dressed, hitting the coffee shop well before she usually showed. Waiting and pacing, he ran through the various win/lose fantasies over and over. It occurred to him it might already be too late. She could by now be lying face down on the pavement outside some high-floor open window. Or floating down the Hudson, or permanently asleep from carbon monoxide. And then she

appeared looking robust and beautiful. As she came close to him, he fell in stride and moved along with her.

“Excuse me,” he said in a small, fragile voice that she either didn’t hear or ignored. “Excuse me, miss? Excuse me, miss?”

“Are you speaking to me?” she asked without stopping.

“I have to explain something and I need just a moment of your time,” he said.

“I’m in a rush,” she answered, trying to be polite and also giving the brush to this unwelcome stranger.

“What I’m going to say may be shocking,” Tempkin said. “Shocking, and I’m sure very disturbing. It’s about your marriage.”

She kept walking, realizing he was one of the assorted head cases that wander the streets either panhandling or with some delusional axe to grind.

“Please, I have no time,” she said, quickening her pace in an effort to lose him.

“I don’t want anything from you. No money, not your phone number. I just want to warn you. You’re in mortal danger.”

The thought that he was a well-dressed psychotic flashed through her mind, and she hoped she wasn’t in for trouble.

“Please leave me alone,” she said. “I’m late.”

“I know how this must sound, but I assure you, I’m no threat. I’m a writer. Murray Tempkin. Short stories and novels. I’m not a troublemaker. You may have even read my first book, *The Blue Mosque*, about a woman’s summer in Istanbul. It was reasonably well received. A promising new voice, they said. Not that it sold a lot. What I’m trying to tell you is that I came into possession of a plot to murder you. And when I tell you the details, you’re going to be shocked.”

“I’ve asked you nicely several times to please leave me alone,” she said.

“I’m only trying to rescue you. I have to confess, I’ve had a crush on you—for a while now from afar.”

Tempkin at this point was starting to lose his composure.

“I hate to be the one to tell you, but your husband is having an affair and is planning on

making sure you have an accident, a fatal one so you don’t get the prenup.”

She had her phone out now.

“I’m dialing 911,” she said as some passersby were beginning to notice a small drama unfolding.

In for a penny, Tempkin let it all come pouring out.

“See, your husband, Doug, and some tall red-head who doesn’t compare to you were talking and I happened to overhear the conversation.”

“How do you know my husband?” she said, brought up short by the mention of his name.

“I followed you and saw you with him and another couple chatting on Park Avenue. This was a while ago. You may remember, I passed you. I mean, how could I expect you to remember? But you walk by the coffee shop every morning, and of course I didn’t know you were married. I go to the same shop every morning and order an OJ, coffee, and toasted English muffin. Same drill. You’d think I’d get tired of it, but I vary the jam. Sometimes marmalade, sometimes strawberry—”

“You followed me?” she said, making that face people make when they’re absolutely appalled.

“I’m telling you—I fell in love with you through the plate-glass window. You remind me of an old flame. Lexi Riggs, my high school sweetheart. You’re beautiful in the exact same way. It’s a sad story. I was so damn in love with her. I didn’t know where you were going every morning. I wondered maybe it was to a shrink. Maybe you were unhappy about something, maybe your marriage. Which now makes perfect sense considering what he’s planning to do to you.”

Now he was really lost, babbling, the ranting of a street crazy.

“You shouldn’t be walking around the city following women,” she said. “You need help. What you need is a good psychiatrist.”

She was approaching Ralph Lauren’s sidewalk coffee café at Madison and Seventy-second, where it turned out she was meeting her husband.

“Hi, sweetheart,” he said. “How was your mother?”

“Much better. Let’s go inside. This person is bothering me.”

“This guy?” he said, lamping Tempkin.

She nodded toward Tempkin and rolled her eyes.

“Er, Cuckoo time,” she said *sotto voce*. “He thinks you’re planning to kill me.”

Her husband looked squarely at Tempkin; they were only a few feet apart, and that’s when the wheels came off.

“You better move on, buddy,” her husband said politely but firmly.

Except her husband was not the man with the other woman Tempkin overheard in the restaurant. He had mistaken that man for Doug. Both her husband and the man could have come from the same assembly line. Certainly, in Tempkin’s eyes, they were both cookie-cutter, mass-produced hedge-fund types.

“I said beat it,” Doug barked at Tempkin, clearly meaning business as he got deeper in the smaller man’s face.

Tempkin realized he had made a mistake, a colossal mistake, and edged back slowly, muttering, “I’m sorry, excuse me. Sorry.”

Reeling from his error, his voice cracked with embarrassment; he slowly retreated, backing away dazed. Like a shell-shocked victim, he wandered mechanically to nowhere, to anywhere, to his morning coffee shop. He ordered his OJ, his muffin, and coffee. He sat by the window and thought about what a boob he was. What a stupendous blunder he had made. It occurred to him that somewhere in the city, some unlucky woman may well wind up the victim of a planned accident by her sinister husband. There was nothing he could do about it. Evil exists, he thought. Hapless lovers who make idiots of themselves exist. Looking out the window, people were going to work.

New poems

*by Nicholas Friedman, Jessica Hornik &
Michael Spence*

Arrhythmia

Discharged again, his wrist still braceleted,
he shows up, box in hand, to help replace
my faulty garbage disposal: days before,
the sink backed up with a primordial boil
of garlic marinade and chicken slime,
and though the motor hummed it failed to grind
our slop, then roared again. “A dead man’s bounce,”
he’d said, already scrolling replacement parts.
This newer model looks identical
but whirrs with an intense suburban vigor,
shredding the rotten orange that we force
down past the rubber gasket as a test.
The smell is sick and sweet, a garish candle’s
overcompensation. It works so well
I feed it a woody avocado pit,
not wondering if it’ll fail again. It will.

—*Nicholas Friedman*

Osprey

I thought I saw an osprey
out of the corner of my eye—

the one from last summer
that flew most afternoons

west to east across the lake.
But all there was

was an empty sky.
That bird wanting

to feel the sun, the high
air, was memory.

—*Jessica Hornik*

Antigenitor

I've got no children. In his wisdom, God
Determined that's the number I should have.

I accept his judgment, feeling no regret
For the twisted roads of all my ancestors

Dead-ending in my cul-de-sac. I raised
No daughter who would see herself gripped

By an electric, buzzing mirror in her hand,
No bullied son who'd raise a gun to send

Other schoolkids into their own culs-de-sac.
The acre-feet of water they'd have drunk,

The plots of land and tons of meat chewed up—
All saved because they never lived. And think

Of children and grandchildren they'd have had.
One could conclude I am a saint of restraint.

If any build a statue in honor of me,
It will be raised by hands free of my blood.

—*Michael Spence*

Letter from London

Elections & expectations

by Simon Heffer

It is possible that, five days before the United States chooses its next president on November 5, the United Kingdom will choose a new prime minister. Unlike America, Britain (following a cynical and unsuccessful experiment with fixed-term parliaments in the 2010s) can have a general election out of the blue, but one is required to happen in the next year. In the Westminster village, the popular view is that it may occur on Halloween, but that can be but a guess: even the tradition that British elections are held on a Thursday is only that, a tradition. Under the Quinquennial Act of 1911—now in force following the repeal in 2022 of the Fixed-term Parliaments Act—a general election must be called not later than five years to the day after the outgoing parliament first met. That means by December 17 this year, and it must be held within twenty-five working days of its calling—therefore, by January 28, 2025 (a Tuesday, for what it's worth).

But no one believes that the present administration, which increasingly resembles a crippled dog whose owner is reluctant to have it put down, can drag on for that long. The ruling Conservatives are between fifteen and twenty points behind the Labour opposition in most opinion polls. A big ministerial reshuffle in the autumn has fulfilled the old adage that a reshuffle never won an election; this last one certainly won't. Promises to make better much that is wrong in Britain remain almost entirely rhetorical. Many Conservative MPs, even in the party's heartland, fear losing their seats; meanwhile, fifty-three of the eighty-three MPs

(out of a total of 650) who have announced they will not fight again are Conservatives, most of them relatively young and running up the white flag. It is only the fact that Sir Keir Starmer, the leader of His Majesty's Loyal Opposition, has all the charisma of a paving slab that seems, for the moment, to be preventing a landslide such as the one Tony Blair secured in 1997, when his party had 418 seats to the Conservatives' 165. And even that could change. As it is, no one seems to expect Labour to lose. And although autumn remains the favorite time for the poll—to allow tax cuts expected in the budget on March 6 to have time to work their magic on the economy and on the morale of the public—some MPs are convinced that, as things probably can't get better, it would be best to have the contest in April or May, to get the punishment out of the way. This would allow the Conservatives to start rebuilding in opposition as soon as possible, and in a comprehensive way unfeasible while in government, and would give Labour an early opportunity to show that they will find it no easier to govern Britain in the present circumstances than the Conservative Party has. Such an early poll seems, however, less likely than an autumn one.

For all the problems besetting his party, the present prime minister, Rishi Sunak, is at least something of an improvement on his recent predecessors. A Conservative-led administration has been in power since 2010: in coalition with the Liberal Democrats until 2015, and in the past nine years on its own. The consensus—

especially among Conservative supporters—is that it has achieved precious little. The great event of those fourteen years—the decision by the British public, in the largest vote ever held in the United Kingdom, to leave the European Union—was accomplished in the teeth of opposition from the then–prime minister, David Cameron, and most of his colleagues. Cameron left office in a huff hours after this defeat, but it was not to be the last British public life would see of him, of which more in a moment. His successor, Theresa May, was incapable of making a decision and thus incapable of uniting her party and of leading it. Miraculously, she lasted three years before her parliamentary party threw her out. Her replacement was Boris Johnson, who also lasted three years and whose name has now become a byword among many for lying and incompetence. He left office in chaos, and subsequently Parliament itself in disgrace, resigning from the House of Commons a year after leaving Downing Street when it became apparent he risked being suspended from the house for so long that his constituents could force a by-election. The suspension, which was never enforced because of his resignation, would have come on account of his lying to and intimidation of the committee examining his breach of lockdown regulations during the pandemic: lockdown regulations that his government had instituted, of course. And then, just when the Conservative Party thought things couldn't possibly get any worse, it chose (perhaps it is fairest to say in the middle of a collective nervous breakdown) Liz Truss to be its leader.

She lasted forty-nine days: the shortest duration of any prime ministership in British history. Her crime was sheer incompetence. Nothing happened for the first fortnight or so of her brief tenure in office because of the death of Queen Elizabeth II. Then, however, there was a financial statement in which her administration promised £45 billion in tax cuts, with no indication of where the money to make up that deficit in government revenue would be coming from. The markets, of which Truss claimed to be a disciple, reacted accordingly. The final days resembled a particularly bad West End farce.

Sunak, who had been the chancellor of the exchequer under Johnson until a resignation that precipitated the latter's downfall, had tried to become leader in his place. Stupidly, however, the party believed Truss's promises of an economic miracle, rather than Sunak's more cautious approach. Following the Truss debacle, the Conservatives at last realized the national laughing stock they had made of themselves. Sunak was installed within days, unopposed. No one forced him to become prime minister; he is an intelligent man, as well as a competent one, and he knew very well the poisonous legacy he would have to handle. Nonetheless, the theme of the sixteen or so months that Sunak has led his party and the United Kingdom has been one of missed opportunities. He has certainly not been dishonest, and it would be fairer to brand him as over-cautious rather than indecisive or incompetent. But his administration is regarded as ineffectual, especially when it comes to addressing the main problems facing Britain. His party lags in the polls not least as a consequence of this perception.

Some of those main problems facing the United Kingdom are unique, while some are common throughout the West. In the former category come a burden of taxation higher than at any time since the late 1940s, not least because of over-generosity and wastage during the pandemic; failing public services because of poor political and official management; shoddy infrastructure because of investment becoming a lower priority than rampant and poorly directed welfarism; and a growing law-and-order problem, blamed on earlier cuts in police but having as much to do with poor police leadership. In common with other Western democracies, Britain has an underperforming economy (though, unlike Germany, Britain has no recession and is likely to escape one); grave international tensions caused mostly by the Russia–Ukraine conflict; and underpowered armed forces that are, along with those of several other European countries, making less than their necessary contribution to NATO and therefore to the security of the West. Resting somewhere in between domestic and

international policy problems is that of seemingly uncontrolled illegal immigration, with a massive backlog of asylum claims and an apparently nonexistent deportation policy for those deemed ineligible to stay in Britain. All of these things, especially economic management and national and border security, are what the Conservative Party is supposed to excel at. As such, it has monumentally crashed.

Illegal migration is perhaps the government's worst failure, and it persists despite Sunak and his senior ministers using every possible opportunity to claim it is being tackled. There is already a housing shortage, and emergency accommodation for these people (many of whom turn out not to be genuine asylum-seekers, therefore having no right to be in Britain) is expensive. They strain an already buckling National Health Service, and there are neither the school places nor the specialist teachers required for their children. One particular group—Albanians—is now said by the police to have taken over organized drug crime in every English city apart from Liverpool (give them time). Almost all the illegal migrants arrive from France, which claims to be cooperating with Britain but allows the flow to continue and, with huge social problems of its own, is patently delighted to be rid of such people. The British government's incompetence on the question of border control must be seen to be believed—the courts have blocked a plan to have asylum seekers processed in Rwanda, of all places—and, short of televised daily deportation flights for the next few months, it is hard to envision how the matter can be meaningfully improved.

Sunak's reshuffle removed one incompetent home secretary, Suella Braverman, and replaced her with another, James Cleverly, who seems to spend most of his time in media interviews apologizing, usually for ludicrous things he has said. He called a northern town a "shithole," which was not tactful, and told a joke about feeding his wife a date-rape drug. Sunak appointed Grant Shapps, a man with no experience of military matters whatsoever and whose sole talent appears to be to agree with those

who employ him, to be the defense secretary at a time when the forces are gravely underfunded and Britain risks being sucked into a war. But perhaps most bizarrely of all, Sunak gave David Cameron a peerage and made him foreign secretary in his new cabinet, despite Cameron's main foreign-affairs triumph being to have accidentally paved the way for Britain to leave, against his wishes, the European Union. Lord Cameron (as we must now learn to call him) is widely disliked in his party and is associated with the collapsed empire of the Australian financier Lex Greensill, for whom he used to work and who is still undergoing investigation and facing lawsuits. Even in a parliamentary Conservative Party as barren as the present one, there were MPs capable of being foreign secretary. When asked why Sunak brought Lord Cameron back, a minister told me "he wanted to do something for him."

And in the first days of 2024 a new threat, long feared, was confirmed. The Reform Party—the reincarnation of UKIP, which led the successful drive to get Britain out of the European Union—has confirmed it will seek to fight all 632 seats available in England, Scotland, and Wales at the coming election. If it does, that move could trigger a slaughter of Tory MPs, as it will split their vote. The Reform Party's trump card could be to install Nigel Farage, the architect of Brexit, as its leader, in which case matters could become even worse for the Conservatives. The Tory Party is already pleading with Farage to support them and not Reform, or at least to have Reform stand only against sitting Labour MPs. Neither of those pleas seems likely to succeed. Things are so desperate on this front that some MPs are suggesting Sunak should offer Farage a peerage and give him a ministerial job to bring him inside. I doubt that would work either. Farage understands that many British Conservatives have had enough of their delinquent party and want it punished. Farage has been their executioner of choice before, and they would be quite happy for him to do the job again.

Squeeze-box for sale

by James Como

Nearly seventy years after being given my accordion, I've decided to sell it: an artifact of an American cultural period and a personal past both troubled and treasured, a relic of enduring identity and, far above all, a totem of supernal gratitude. I can no longer play it, but someone should, and I have no one to give it to as a gift. Its playing was an embrace, an intimacy beyond the playing of any other instrument and one which, alas, I too easily took for granted (so that selling it now seems something of a betrayal). Letting it go is not a simple thing, nor trivial.

The pipe organ and the piano are complex instruments, but they are not portable. The accordion is portable, though, and yet is not much less complex an instrument than either. At full size, the piano accordion has a three-octave keyboard for the right hand and 120 bass buttons (unseen by the player) for the left. Its notes, selected by the keys and the buttons that are pressed, are powered by a bellows—that is, by the musician who must keep squeezing and withdrawing the bellows, sometimes to spectacular effect—with the air thus blown passing through either one, two, or three reeds within and then, by way of resonators, into the air.

A skilled accordionist may walk about as he or she makes music, a music far richer—almost orchestral—than that of any other portable instrument, especially if the accordion in question contains variations of registers, such as bassoon, clarinet, organ, and the like (mounted for the right hand; the left hand too may have certain variations of register). Its versatility is unmatched.

Historically a folk instrument, the accordion has been used in the making of popular music, too. Especially in the 1950s but also into the Sixties, small bands would often include one, and accomplished accordionists—Dick Contino, Myron Floren—frequently appeared on popular television shows. Then, of course, came the flourishing of rock, and the guitar reigned supreme. Outside of folk settings, the accordion virtually disappeared.

Still, one can find accordion bands and small groups from Eastern Europe to Latin America, as well as accordion festivals and museums, and virtuosi can be found on subway platforms and street corners. In fact, some genuine geniuses play worldwide, for example Ksenija Sidorova and the astonishing Nick Ariondo. So the accordion is not dead.

Why my father decided, in the mid-Fifties when I was nine years old, that I should take accordion lessons was not immediately clear to me. Unschooled and unable to read music, Pop could play just about any instrument he touched, the guitar being his primary one, but he mostly stuck to chords and brief runs. He would hook a harmonica—there came the melody—into a holder that mounted around his neck so he could play both instruments at the same time. During a “break” he would sing, quite well too. (When he played piano it was, somehow, mostly on the black keys.) So music lessons for me made a kind of sense; but why the accordion? It was the Fifties, I suppose, so perhaps a better question was “why not?” It also occurred to me later that my father wanted an accompanist.

Mr. DeBellis charged three dollars for a half-hour lesson (eventually rising to three dollars fifty), which included the loan of a small (twelve-button bass) instrument to practice with at home, weekdays, for one hour a day. (“Jimmy, come on down. We’re choosin’ up for stickball.” “I can’t. Gotta practice.”) I had to put Pop’s guitar case on the floor beneath my feet, thus raising my lap where I set the instrument. Mr. DeBellis would sell his students numbered instruction books (which included songs, scales, and finger exercises), a series of increasing difficulty. After seven years I had made it to book five; then, as I began college, the lessons stopped.

Angelo DeBellis was firmly in the tradition of Italian accordionists and accordion teachers. Pedestrian at both, he sometimes showed me technique (for example, “thumb under”) or a useful trick (e.g., to notch the E button on the left side; on all accordions the C button is already notched). Though patient, he was rarely encouraging, sometimes even moving me on from a song I had not yet mastered to another song, the sheet music for which I would, of course, have to buy from him.

That sheet music, having survived through household moves and fires, is a record of my rapid progress at the beginning, my slow decline as other interests intervened (ball-playing, literature, writing), and finally my abandonment, not of the instrument per se (more on that anon) but of lessons. I zoomed through the beginner’s book, *First Adventures in Accordion Playing*, which included diagrams, chord exercises, and actual songs in very large print. What I did not realize until later is this: the beginning was intellectually engaging and musically so simple that, together, those two elements—rapid understanding and simplicity—masked my lack of talent.

Our primary course—those five books—was the Palmer–Hughes Accordion Course. I went through each successive installment at a pace slower than its predecessor. Along the way were exercise books: *Characteristic Etudes for the Accordion* by Sedlon (one of the few non-Italian names on any accordion music sheet or book), *Big Note Velocity*, *School of Velocity*, and

the like. Aldini, Gaviani, Ettore, and the tireless Pietro Deiro—a virtuoso and an influential teacher—were the names I learned to trust.

Genre song books also had their place: *Western and Folk Program*, *Easy Popular Standard Waltzes*, *Swing Your Polka*, *Christmas Carols*, and *George Gershwin Made Easy for the Accordion*. One of my favorites was *The Modern Accordionist* (in two books) by Sedlon. These books were helpful both for their discussion and diagramming of technique (e.g., the “bellows shake,” not easy) and for the music included, which I had heard nowhere else. Finally, there was sheet music for individual songs: “Tango of Roses,” “Heart of My Heart,” “Tea for Two,” “The Man I Love” (a real challenge, that: lots of left hand). By the way, no single sheet of music ever cost as much as a dollar (commonly each was forty cents), and no instruction or song book as much as two dollars. The satisfaction of acquiring (I do not say “mastering,” though that sometimes happened) a song is beyond description; the closest I can get is “fulfillment.”

And yet . . . as a member of Mr. DeBellis’s accordion band—did you not guess that there was one?—I never rose above third accordion, having begun at the bottom, fourth accordion. We rehearsed assiduously and gave concerts. All I can say is that I was dutiful and, as far as formal instruction progressed, became more and more so, until Pop realized his progeny would never break through the bellowed ceiling. Over the course of that instruction, however (and this is a very big “however” indeed), another avenue of music-playing opened, an avenue that made all of it—every hour of practice, every finger-exercise vexation, every stickball game missed—worth it.

In my view, the Fifties were a decade as good as any during which to come of age: playing baseball and rooting for the Yankees (Mickey Mantle walked on water in those days), or watching far too much television on a small black-and-white screen: sitcoms with whole families, children’s shows, and selected Westerns. Comic books mattered, including Classic Comics, collected with brother Joey, four years older than I. And practicing my accordion. That other avenue I

mentioned—playing along with Pop—came in 1960 when I was thirteen. But by then life had changed cataclysmically.

I do not intend a bildungsroman, so I will add only these few memories. My mother died when she was thirty-four years old and I was eight. Having relocated us from some housing projects in East Harlem to our own home in Hicksville, Pop, after a while, had to sell that house and move us to Astoria, where I grew up. Very quickly Joey spiraled into episodes of violence, then drug-taking, then alcoholism, which lasted until ten years before his death at age seventy-five. He fought my father, he fought me, he fought his sons.

I had my own handful of street fights, but I never took to chemicals or to anti-social behavior. I applied myself to schoolwork, to the accordion, and to ball-playing. At age thirteen I had a breakdown marked by unexpected and unprovoked spells of weeping. The only respites from this depression were ballgames and, of all things, the television show *You'll Never Get Rich*, with the great Phil Silvers as Sergeant Bilko.

Pop bought a fake book, so called. Back then such books were illegal, breaking Lord knows how many copyright laws. It cost a whopping forty dollars. (I'm told that, now, they cost about the same but are legal.) The book contained hundreds of songs: melody lines, chord indications, and lyrics, three to a page. Always composers were named, and the alphabetical index made finding a song simple. Much later, especially when I came to chair an academic department that included music, I realized that knowing music technically, as well as song traditions, is like knowing a second language: a portal to polycultural conversations.

So Pop and I began to play together, and it was always a pleasure, with such songs as "Sweet Georgia Brown," "In the Mood," "Twelfth Street Rag," and "Heart of My Heart." These were joined by songs from sheet music: "I'm Gonna Sit Right Down and Write Myself a Letter," "Beer Barrel Polka," and "That Old Gang of Mine," among very many others. We had our "standards" list but every now and then would add a new song.

We did this irregularly, averaging twice a week for about forty-five minutes each session, not always at his suggestion. Now at last I was first accordion.

Only late in my adolescence did I realize our playing music together was Pop's solace. While I was occupied by my own playing (of accordion and baseball), by television, by religious instruction and church-going (almost always alone), by reading and writing, and by school (but not yet by girls or, when the time came, The Girl), this most genial and gracious of men, who could find oases of delight in good company, quotidian pleasures, family, much reading, and music—this man was fundamentally sad.

A widower raising two sons is tough enough, even with support. But one of those sons, I, was extraordinarily alienated (think Clyde Griffiths of *An American Tragedy*), though not from my father, with whom I formed an unusual bond. He was safety; I could tell him everything. Pop would tell people that his younger son would be a writer: "He writes a very fine letter, but he doesn't know how to mail it," an assessment still true in its essentials. He lived to see me graduate college, get my first master's degree, and find my lifelong full-time teaching position. He did not live to see me finish my Ph.D. and publish books.

The other son—continually though not continuously—was a source of grief. Therein lay the need for solace. Once, after Pop died at the age of fifty-four (I was twenty-seven and married with one child), my sister-in-law called me (as she would Pop) for help with Joe, who was menacing. This was the first and only time a blow was struck between Joe and me. I became enraged at his cocaine-addled bullying, shouted that he had shortened our father's life, and hit him with a straight right hand to the jaw. He registered surprise just before his eyes rolled up and he fell back onto the branch of a tree. His three children were already out of the house, and I took his wife to a women's shelter.

I do not recall the first time Pop and I played music together, but I do know we played right up to when I, my wife, and our son went to Oxford for my first sabbatical. Pop, who had

been ill but was now seemingly healthy (he had lost much weight and was no longer smoking), dropped us off at JFK Airport. I never saw him again: on our first night in Oxford, my brother called to say he had just died. I flew back to New York. All was desolation, and, though I pressed it down, it lasted for quite a while, especially bursting forth in the one hundred dreams I recorded the year following. That all ended when a priest suggested that Pop had to move on, and so I had to let go, which I did.

To this day, one night of music-making stands out in exquisitely memorable detail. I loved girls but, being shy around them, didn't date. Then a coworker (Pop had gotten me a job in his office) who spoke only Spanish, in which I was fairly strong, set me up with her roommate, a Peruvian beauty. It was a blind date, and so began my personal *vita nuova* (still going strong after fifty-eight years). That first night Pop waited up, in my memory pumping me with questions on my return; in his telling, I was unable to shut up. When I was about to marry, he said, "I knew on the first night that this day would come." "Really, oh omniscient one?" I answered, "and just how did you know?" "Because," he replied smugly, "you said three times, 'don't worry, Pop, I'm not going to marry her.'"

Now, this part of the tale is not about that courtship but about the first time Alexandra, some weeks after our blind date, visited my home. Though it was not the last time my father and I played together, it is the last time I can recall in any detail. As he took out his guitar, he suggested that I take out the accordion and that we play, and so I did. It was, as they say, a good set—varied, exuberant, error-free. We must have played a dozen songs, our surest hits. Years later, my snotty daughter asked, "Mother, how could a beautiful woman like you marry a nerd like dad?" Alexandra, recounting that first night in my home, said she'd never imagined a father and son getting along with such love and joy. And so it was.

After my father's death I played some, and then I stopped. Wherever we moved, the accordion came along. Then, after a few decades, I decided to break it out once again. I had to

have a single key repaired, but otherwise its condition was near-mint, as was the sound. It was smaller than I remembered, but I found that scales and arpeggios came back quickly, as did many of the songs—many, but not all.

Some that I had played very well eluded me, and I could not acquire new ones with anywhere near the facility of the old days. I did learn a new thing or two about technique, especially about managing the bellows (for example, the infinitely varying dynamics of pressure and rapidity when pulling out the bellows then pushing it in; the bellows is actually an instrument within an instrument). Then my fingers and hand would cramp.

That memory, of playing music with my father for my future wife, is detailed, concrete, and permanent. But there is one other, as graphic and particular but even more persistent. I was in a rehearsal room with Mr. DeBellis and, for some reason, my father. Maybe he was paying, or discussing an accordion I could borrow, or wondering about my progress. It was the spring; I was ten years old. Soon I would make my First Holy Communion. As I sat in my customary chair, Mr. DeBellis and my father talked of my need for a full 120-bass accordion. What was to be done?

Mr. DeBellis opened a case that I had not noticed lying flat on the floor, pulled back the red velvet covering, and said, "How about this, Jimmy?" It was beautiful, actually breathtaking, but the penny did not drop. Then Pop said, "How would you like that?" And I said, "You mean how would I like it for me?" The room was small, Pop was standing, and Mr. DeBellis was seated next to me, and he said, "Well, it has your name on it." And that's when I noticed *Jimmy* in chrome script on the front. I could only stare, nearly breathless. I looked up at Pop, who was grinning, as Mr. DeBellis lifted it out and helped strap it onto my shoulders. I could not have known that this gift—a Communion gift, as I would soon learn—would give so richly for so long, so much more resonantly than any madeleine.

And there we are. Thanks, Pop. I hope to be a while, but do keep the guitar tuned.

Questions of character

by Kyle Smith

Written in 1961, Tennessee Williams's *The Night of the Iguana* (at the Pershing Square Signature Center through February 25) is essentially an Episcopalian Graham Greene story: we're in sweaty, dissolute 1940 Mexico, where a defrocked minister alternates between torturing himself with alcohol and taking advantage of teenaged schoolgirls he subsequently enlists in his penitential prayers. I find Protestant guilt to be merely a decaf version of Catholic guilt, but perhaps that is just the bias of someone formed by the Church of Rome. Nevertheless, the play finds Williams at his best, with penetrating psychological insights but not much of the campy histrionics of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, although its climax does feature the unintentionally comic spectacle of its ranting protagonist being bound up in a hammock to prevent him from hurling himself suicidally into the ocean.

Since almost the entire play is an inquiry into the soiled soul of its lead character, the ex-minister T. Lawrence "Larry" Shannon, it stands or falls on the strength of its lead performance. Shannon must be both piteous and seductive, poisoned yet charismatic, a glorious shipwreck of a man. He could have been written specifically for Richard Burton, who in the 1964 film version set the standard to which all others will be compared. Unfortunately, the veteran stage director Emily Mann's production is saddled with the guy from the long-running but quickly forgotten 1990s sitcom *Wings*. Tim Daly, who is no longer young but remains blandly handsome and as thin as a runway model, plays the blustery Shan-

non so diffidently I couldn't decide whether, several evenings past opening night, he hadn't quite committed his lines to memory or he had elected to play the part sputtering like an engine on a cold winter morning. Delivering those lines in a stop-and-go cadence, he dilutes the quality of the writing and makes his character seem small.

That's a shame, because the production has much to recommend it. Beowulf Boritt's single set superbly establishes the milieu, which is the veranda of a luxury-challenged hotel in Puerto Vallarta. The doors look as if they haven't been painted since the nineteenth century. The owner-manager Maxine Faulk, played by a perfectly cast Daphne Rubin-Vega, has recently lost her fisherman husband after he got infected by a hook, but such is the spirit of careless decay that she doesn't much miss him. People come and go. What does it matter in the end? Have another drink.

Her husband's friend Shannon, a downwardly mobile tour guide who has arrived at nearly the lowest rung of the ladder for a self-styled gentleman (the playwright's grandfather was an Episcopalian rector with whom he traveled in Europe), is in the midst of one of his regular existential breakdowns when he makes an unscheduled stop at the hotel, about to desert a bus full of seething Baptist women's-college students and their mannish matron (Lea DeLaria of *Orange Is the New Black*). On behalf of her charges, she demands he continue the tour and take them to a comfortable hotel in the city as arranged. Instead, Shannon pockets the key,

wallows in his despair, and accepts some drinks from the nurturing Maxine. Honking noises can be heard in the distance, but Shannon isn't budging. A storm is coming overnight, and he hopes to be stricken dead by the Lord's wrath in retribution for his sins, which include the statutory rape of a sixteen-year-old girl on the tour.

Shannon's original disgrace, it turns out, was triggered not only by a dalliance with another girl, but also by a charge that he gave one or two "atheistical sermons." This he denies; when he referred to the Almighty as a "senile delinquent," he says he was merely describing the false way world religion perceived Him. Knowing what he knew about man's capacity to transgress, he chafed at the idea of God as

the sort of old man in a nursing home that's putting together a jigsaw puzzle and can't put it together and gets furious at it and kicks over the table. Yes, I tell you they *do* that, all our theologies do it—accuse God of being a cruel, senile delinquent.

The hotel's status as a sort of roach motel for the woebegone is reaffirmed when a proud but penniless New England spinster approaching forty, Hannah Jelkes (Jean Lichty), arrives, wheeling her ninety-seven-year-old grandfather, Nonno (Austin Pendleton), up a hill and begging for a room on credit. Hannah, all Old Boston airs and graces, gradually reveals that despite her finishing-school manners she is a sidewalk sketch-artist who manages to stay afloat, barely, by selling portraits to tourists. Her nodding, semi-coherent aged relative, who at his absolute peak might generously have been described as a minor poet, is composing one last work, whose incongruously beautiful lines he occasionally yelps out. Hannah at first seems like a scheming counterpart to the louche Shannon, but in the second act, when she sadly reveals that she has never come close to having a sexual relationship, her dignified purity seems like a possible source of salvation to the ex-priest. After the unwashed, groaning Shannon has spent much of the play writhing in his hammock complaining of his torments, she astutely notes that he isn't particularly gifted at this business of suffering:

There's something almost voluptuous in the way that you twist and groan in that hammock—no nails, no blood, no death. Isn't that a comparatively comfortable almost voluptuous kind of crucifixion to suffer for the guilt of the world, Mr. Shannon?

If Shannon comes across as a shallower version of the Whisky Priest in Greene's *The Power and the Glory* (which was published in 1940, the year of the action in the *The Night of the Iguana*), that could be by design. He's such a failure that he isn't even very good at scourging himself. Meanwhile, some of Maxine's spirited young staffers have captured a large iguana and tied it up under the veranda, intending to eat it later. The offstage noises it makes in its angry thrashing are a suitable metaphor for Shannon's trapped bitterness. Perhaps all he needs is the gentle guidance of a good woman such as Hannah?

A 1940s Hollywood solution would, however, be too sentimental for Williams, who manages to steer events to a dramatically acceptable conclusion aided by a sudden spurt of lucidity from the poet Nonno. Even more than the lizard scuttling under the veranda, his words capture what's going on with Shannon:

O Courage, could you not as well
Select a second place to dwell,
Not only in that golden tree
But in the frightened heart of me?

Last year's most adorable Broadway show, *Kimberly Akimbo*, which went on to win the Tony Award for Best Musical, was a teen tale with a wrenching twist: one of its high schoolers suffered from a bizarre accelerated-aging disease that was guaranteed to kill her by age twenty or so. This year's successor is *How to Dance in Ohio* (at the Belasco Theatre), another big-hearted charmer about young people, this time with the dark cloud being autism. The seven central characters, who are in their late teens or early twenties, have the condition, as do the performers playing them. The setup seems to demand a certain generosity of spirit on the part of the audience—as if we weren't being generous enough already by paying Broadway ticket

prices—but the cast is stellar. All of the principals are gifted singers and more than adequate actors. They're playing people with autism, but if we hadn't been told they had that trait in real life, we wouldn't necessarily have guessed it.

Based on the 2015 documentary film of the same title, *How to Dance in Ohio* features a cute array of pop-rock songs (music by Jacob Yandura, book and lyrics by Rebekah Greer Melocik) that serve chiefly to define the characters of the seven young folks who come together for regular sessions with a family therapist, Dr. Amigo (Caesar Samayoa), whose non-autistic daughter Ashley (Cristina Sastre), a budding ballerina, has returned home to Columbus from Juilliard after suffering an injury and now assists him at his practice. The movie focused on three young women: Marideth (Madison Kopec), an introvert who says she loves facts and often communicates by sharing trivia she finds in her reading; Caroline (Amelia Fei), a college student who brags that she has a boyfriend (though we don't meet him); and her best friend Jessica (Ashley Wool). The stage version has filled out the cast with four fictional characters: Mel (Imani Russell), who works in a pet shop; Remy (Desmond Luis Edwards), an aspiring costumer who hosts a dress-up show on an internet channel; Drew (Liam Pearce), who has been accepted to the University of Michigan but isn't sure he wants to attend; and Tommy (Conor Tague), who is eagerly preparing to take his driver's test and join the ranks of licensed motorists.

The wisp of a plot concerns the kids' hopes for a successful night out at a spring formal, an ersatz prom staged by Dr. Amigo solely for his therapy group. The idea is to give the youngsters, several of whom are being overly sheltered by their parents, a goal that prompts them to learn basic social skills associated with growing up—asking for dates, learning to dance, and picking out appropriate clothing for the occasion and wearing it without complaint. (One young lady has a problem with zippers.) The show places a thick, glossy coat of sugar on autism—all of these kids are relatively well-adjusted, none of them has a tantrum or otherwise causes much in the way of problems, and when Tommy crashes a car

it's played for a laugh, with no one getting hurt. But the overall effect, especially in the superb first act, is not to define what's unusual about autistic people but instead to universalize their experience. If autism manifests as social awkwardness, who hasn't felt that? Who, especially when young, has never felt left out of a joke, or thought the boss hadn't given clear instructions about what was expected on the job? Above all: what could be more mortifying than being a lovestruck teen asking for a date? The show endearingly reminds us that every color is on the spectrum. Songs such as "Today Is," about the kids' morning routines, and "Under Control," in which Drew tries to talk himself past his anxieties, pop with energy. "Building Momentum," which seeks to recapture the spirited optimism of "Defying Gravity" in *Wicked*, is a plucky can-do anthem about overcoming adversity, broadly applicable and thoroughly appealing.

Unfortunately, after the first act races toward a climax—one day until the spring formal!—the second act drags, with several numbers stopping the plot dead. Mel, for instance, sings a pointlessly off-topic number about the afterlife, "Reincarnation." The major development of the second half is a contrivance in which secondary and even tertiary figures threaten to derail the dance while the seven principals wait offstage for things to be sorted out. The device turns out to be a mere detour whose only effect is to delay the dance by a single day. Most of the second act seems added merely to pad the running time so that the show is long enough to include an intermission at which drinks and merchandise can be sold. At a brisk ninety minutes or so, in a single act, *How to Dance in Ohio* would have been just about perfect. As it is, at two hours and twenty-five minutes, its strengths are partially undone by its digressions.

It doesn't make a great deal of sense for a man to deliver Lady Macbeth's "unsex me here" speech, unless being turned into a eunuch is a previously unreported trigger for masculine aggression, but Patrick Page nevertheless begins his one-man show *All the Devils Are Here: How Shakespeare Invented the Villain* (at the DR2 Theatre through February 25) with Mrs. M.'s prayer

for the resolve to do evil, mainly because it's too juicy for him to turn down. Page is a shameless ham who has spliced together a theatrical highlight reel of damnation and calumny spoken by the Bard's most notable malefactors. Coming in from nowhere, detached from the stories in which they take place, these addresses have little dramatic pungency; the evening is more of an actor's exercise and a tasting platter for some of Shakespeare's most chilling lines. Page, who is best known for playing Hades for six years on Broadway in the musical *Hadestown*, which brought out his demonically low singing voice (he went as low as a G1 in the performance), is a longtime Shakespearean who, by putting a dozen of the most harrowing declamations in a single show, gets to bounce happily from Shylock to Iago to Macbeth to Prospero, tying the passages together with what amounts to a lecture on Shakespeare's creative process and his legacy.

Page makes an enthusiastic case for the notion that Shakespeare advanced the concept of villainy as depicted in simple Elizabethan morality plays by making his miscreants seductive and enticing, burrowing into their psyches to imagine circumstances from within rather than simply denouncing them from without. Before the villain, Page reminds us, there was "the vice"—the character who stood for a sin, such as covetousness, and had no other dramatic function or interior motivation. Such symbol-men would simply tell us how evil they were and audiences would respond appropriately.

Page's show—"this little séance," he calls it, promising to conjure malevolent spirits—is diverting enough, balancing introductory information about Shakespeare (such as *Macbeth*'s reputation as "the cursed play," hence the superstitious actorly preference for referring to it as "the Scottish tragedy") with his own insights gleaned from many years of performance. Page is steeped in the theater, which means he is given to exaggeration for the sake of spectacle, and tells us he finds playing the villains "terrifying." Really? Upon all evidence, he finds such work to be exhilarating. He comes across as a likably nerdy high-school teacher smitten with the Bard and trying his best to make his words exciting to a new generation in terms they might be able to relate

to. So he rolls out mentions of *House of Cards* and Tony Soprano and tells us that the Bard's works are all around us, in differing forms. True, if banal:

Any Trekkies in the house? OK, how about *Star Wars* fans? You may not agree on much, but you all agree on one thing—you simply expect your villains to have complex psychologies, believable backstories, and meaningful motivations, but none of that—none of it—existed before Shakespeare began writing in 1590. And all of it—every single bit—was firmly in place when he wrapped up his exploration of human evil in 1611. Twenty-one years to raise the villain from infancy to adulthood. How the hell did he do it? And what did he learn along the way?

All the Devils Are Here (from *The Tempest*: "Hell is empty, and all the devils are here") runs through a potted analysis of each of the great villains in chronological order, starting with the soon-to-be Richard III's soliloquy, after murdering the titular king, in the third part of *Henry VI*. Ripped out of context, and without Henry lying bleeding out on the stage, the speech doesn't carry nearly as much freight, but Page decides that his thundering can make up for the deficiency.

So the show, if it isn't aimed at the devoted Shakespearean, is an amusing and punchy introduction for those who have only a passing familiarity with its subjects. Toward the end, Page hints at a more personal, and more interesting, piece, when he tells us that in portraying these villains he is moved not by the force of Shakespeare's words but by the self-questioning tendencies they shake loose: "I have all their darkest qualities in me: Richard's self-loathing, Shylock's thirst for revenge, Malvolio's ambition, Claudius' cowardice." If Page loathes himself, there is certainly no evidence of it in this play, which only a performer deeply in love with himself would have even dreamt of. Personal anecdotes of moral failure as related to the flaws of Shakespeare's villains might have made a uniquely compelling evening, but this is as close as Page ever comes to exploring his own character. Otherwise, it's all oration and gesticulation.

Art

The Met's grand tour

by Karen Wilkin

Finally! We've been waiting years for the renovation of the Metropolitan Museum of Art's European galleries to be completed, enduring reduced exhibition space and leaked noise from the endless skylight repairs, so simply having the collections accessible again, in full, after this long period of near-austerity, would be reason enough for rapturous applause. In addition, the statistics alone could make the project noteworthy: thirty thousand square feet of skylights renovated and improved, forty-five reconfigured galleries, more than seven hundred works from 1300 to 1800 displayed in new relationships, and upgraded environmental systems throughout. If all that isn't sufficient to provoke excitement, we can also take into account the presence of new acquisitions, promised gifts, and important loans among the paintings and sculptures on view, as well as newly conserved works, and we can add engaging sightlines created by altered doorways. But what is most impressive and warrants joyous celebration is that the Met got it right!

Directed by Stephan Wolohojian, the Met's curator of European Paintings, and opened to the public on November 20, the installation, which seamlessly acknowledges chronology and geography, with occasional thematic moments and a few surprises, is both visually satisfying and illuminating. Deservedly acclaimed works are recontextualized by their placement in the proximity of less frequently seen examples, not only newly acquired ones, but also many less-known candidates from the Met's own collection, so

that we see the familiar ones freshly. The canon has been judiciously expanded by greater attention to once-neglected areas—a gallery devoted to “The Art of Spanish America,” adjacent to those displaying the Met's notable holdings of works by Diego Velázquez and his contemporaries, for example. (It's a nice touch that “The Art of Spanish America” is, conveniently, adjacent to the American Wing.) Perceived gaps in the collection, such as the representation of works by women, have been filled by recent acquisitions, including a meticulously rendered bouquet of flowers by the seventeenth-century Dutch painter Clara Peeters, and by significant loans of highly desirable but mainly unavailable paintings by such now-sought-after artists as the sixteenth-century Italian Sofonisba Anguissola and Peeters's far better-known compatriot and contemporary Judith Leyster, neither of them present elsewhere in the museum. A similar gap is filled by a promised gift, a small but significant painting on copper by Antoine Le Nain, *A Peasant Family* (ca. 1640–48), with an uncanny group of children gathered uneasily around a seated musician, an addition that enhances our understanding of French seventeenth-century painting. It's exciting to see a picture by one of the three Le Nain brothers, who worked as a sort of proto-collective and whose vernacular subject matter challenges our conception of the courtly Baroque.

The object labels and wall texts, which many of us feared might modishly emphasize sociology rather than aesthetics, are informative and interesting. The unsavory sources of

some collectors' wealth are acknowledged, as are historical attitudes towards women and people of color, when appropriate, but never to the point of overwhelming information about the works of art as works of art. There's even a color-coded labeling system that alerts visitors in a hurry to what are termed "collection highlights," which I suppose is a good idea for casual attendees. And everything looks wonderful in the excellent lighting, against sumptuous wall colors ranging from an ethereal blue to a Pompeii-inspired red to a glorious fusion of eggplant and dark chocolate that makes Venetian paintings, in particular, sing.

We enter, as we always have, at the top of the grand staircase leading up from the Great Hall, through the anteroom with Giovanni Battista Tiepolo's mural-size paintings of Roman military heroics, once the pride of a Venetian palazzo — we can still greet the artist's self-portrait, at the extreme left of *The Triumph of Marius* (1729) — and move into a generous gallery in a wash of diffused light. A capsule introduction to the development of European devotional painting is offered by representative works from the formative years of the Italian Renaissance: gold-ground paintings and some triptychs including a modest, solemn, half-length *Madonna and Child* (possibly 1230s) by the obscure Tuscan painter Berlinghiero, Giotto's *Adoration of the Magi* (ca. 1320, possibly), and Giovanni di Paolo's altarpiece *Madonna and Child with Saints* (1454). But we are jolted out of our ruminations on how Italian artists were beginning to respond to the world around them when we encounter yet another three-panel canvas, this one not by a Renaissance master but by the German Expressionist painter Max Beckmann: *The Beginning* (1946–49), an acerbic, intensely colored, modern-day triptych, a recollection of the artist's childhood and school days with an admixture of fantasy. The tightly packed, flattened figures remind us of Beckmann's interest in German religious images from the early Renaissance, but more generally, the presence of the twentieth-century work vividly asserts the fact that art, whatever else it deals with, is always about other art on some level. A trio of small, aggressively

distorted self-portrait heads by Francis Bacon (1979) hung nearby more or less makes the same point, but not quite as convincingly.

The Beckmann and the Bacons also alert us to what is to come. Every now and again, we come upon modern works among the Old Masters. The effect, at its best, is rather like seasoning, a squeeze of lemon, that sharpens our perceptions. As we move through the installation, we discover early works by Pablo Picasso and a Paul Cézanne canvas in the gallery titled "El Greco and European Modernism," evidence of the enthusiasm modernist artists had for the Baroque master's expressively posed figures and fractured space. The modern works heighten our awareness of the formal audacity of a crowded, dramatically lit *Adoration of the Shepherds* (ca. 1605–10) and of the great *Vision of Saint John* (1608–14), with its enormous kneeling saint, arms reaching up, and its crowd of agile nudes. We think about Cézanne's subtly adjusted planes, the spatial complexities of Cubism, and the exaggerations of Expressionism. (It would have been informative to see the Met's holdings of Jackson Pollock's rapid drawings after El Greco with the paintings he studied, but I suspect they are absent because skylights and works on paper don't mix.) More problematic is the presence, further on, of that ghastly Salvador Dalí *Crucifixion* (1954) in a gallery of Spanish religious painting that includes celebrated works by Velázquez and Francisco de Zurbarán, among other luminaries. All I could think of to justify the infelicitous addition was an Italian friend's comment about the plethora of flambéed dishes at a fashionable Roman restaurant: "It doesn't hurt the food much and the tourists love it."

Happily, the jarring note struck by the Dalí is an exception. There are exciting, instructive moments throughout. A room titled "Faces of the Renaissance" enlarges our understanding of Europe in the fifteenth century by including portraits by both Italian and Netherlandish artists, underscoring and graphically illustrating the complex connections between Italy and the North at the time. As modern scholarship has revealed, despite Giorgio Vasari's insistence that everything was invented

in Italy except oil paint, there was intense cross-fertilization. (Vasari was wrong about oil paint, too, the use of which traced back much further than he realized.) The installation makes us think about the Italian bankers and merchants resident in Flanders and the works of art they acquired there. The message is delivered succinctly by the well-known portraits of the Florentine banker Tommaso Portinari, for four decades the Medici's agent in Bruges, and his very young wife Maria Maddalena Baroncelli—she of the gorgeous necklace—painted about 1470 by the Netherlandish master Hans Memling. Glorious as the portraits are, they stand for more than their own excellence. The Portinari's patronage of Netherlandish painters wasn't just for their own delectation. About 1475, they commissioned and sent to Florence the spectacular *Portinari Altarpiece* by Hugo van der Goes, an enormous triptych, once installed in the hospital founded by a Portinari ancestor and now among the glories of the Uffizi. It's a stunning image that profoundly impressed Florentine artists on its arrival. I suspect that's why Van der Goes is represented, nearby, by his well-known *circa* 1475 portrait of a young man with high cheekbones, heavy lids, and a shadow of beard. A charming profile portrait by Piero del Pollaiuolo, *circa* 1480, of an elegant young woman, her hair entwined with extravagant jewelry, along with Fra Filippo Lippi's *Portrait of a Woman with a Man at a Casement* (*ca.* 1440), the pair oddly nose to nose through the window opening, attests to what was happening in Italy during the decades that Tommaso Portinari spent in Bruges. North and South are similarly associated, a few galleries on, by the pairing of sleek, incisive sixteenth-century portraits by the Florentine Bronzino and his Swiss German contemporary Hans Holbein.

The richness and depth of the Met's holdings are made clear by the thematically organized galleries. In "Early Netherlandish Painting," Jan van Eyck's acclaimed pair of complex, densely populated panels, *The Crucifixion* and *The Last Judgment* (*ca.* 1436–38), coexist with the equally

familiar portrait, *circa* 1460, of the severe, aristocratic, hawk-nosed Francesco d'Este, by Rogier van der Weyden, among other fine examples. Elsewhere, in "Trade and Transformation in Venice," Vittore Carpaccio's mysterious *The Meditation on the Passion* (*ca.* 1490) is paired with Andrea Mantegna's *The Adoration of the Shepherds* (shortly after 1450), both notable for their intimate scale, stage-set landscapes, and wiry drawing. In "Behind Closed Doors" we are confronted by all five of the Met's works by Johannes Vermeer, from the iconic, intimate scenes of domestic duties and leisure *Young Woman with a Water Pitcher* (*ca.* 1662) and *Young Woman with a Lute* (*ca.* 1662–63), both with their shafts of cool light, to the dramatic *Allegory of the Catholic Faith* (*ca.* 1670–72), with its heavy curtains, complicated symbolism, and magical transparent sphere. If that remarkable array weren't sufficient to absorb our attention, the opposite wall boasts a choice selection of paintings by Vermeer's contemporaries.

Moving through the galleries, we meet all the paintings we expect to find, such as Pieter Bruegel the Elder's tawny vision of late summer labor *The Harvesters* (1565), along with the important Titians, Veroneses, Rubenses, and Rembrandts that the Met's collection is known for. We can find our favorite Chardins, the still life with the terribly dead rabbit and the inquisitive cat, and the one with the absorbed young man blowing soap bubbles, keeping company with Antoine Watteau's seated musician, the somber hues and casual subject matter of the former contrasting with the delicate pastels and playful, theatrical mood of the latter. We can savor the rigorous classicism of Nicolas Poussin's *The Abduction of the Sabine Women* (probably 1633–34) and, further on, Jacques-Louis David's *Death of Socrates* (1787). We can pay homage to Velázquez's glowing portrait of his Afro-Hispanic assistant Juan de Pareja (1650), recently the centerpiece of a fascinating exhibition about Pareja as a painter in his own right. But there is also the unexpected. Francisco de Goya's much loved, enchanting portraits of small boys, one in red with a magpie and a cat, the other in white silk and green velvet with an enviable hobby horse, are joined by his tribute to the

elegant Condesa de Altamira, in an embroidered gown of crackling pale pink silk. This tour de force of the rendering of expensive fabric is part of the Lehman Collection and normally lives in the collection's self-contained wing, so it is exceptional that we see the Condesa in the company of the other Goyas in the gallery. And to broaden the conversation, the gallery also includes the horrifying *Night-Hag Visiting Lapland Witches* (1796) by the Swiss British Henry Fuseli, its mysterious lighting and dead baby a reminder that Fuseli, like Goya in his *Disasters of War* and images of "the sleep of reason," explored disquieting subject matter in response to the political upheavals of his lifetime. A cool, meticulously rendered still life by Luis Meléndez of fruit, bread, and unpretentious objects, set against a distant landscape, counterbalances the unsettling Fuseli and provides more insight into Spanish eighteenth-century painting. Everything seems fresh in the enhanced lighting, against the often lush wall colors. Conservation work and cleaning have also been done on some works, making them look their best.

Elsewhere, we can immerse ourselves in the type of work that wealthy Europeans on a Grand Tour would have acquired. We can refresh our acquaintance with Dutch genre painting and British portraiture. We can learn about "Hierarchy, Gender, and the French Academy" in a gallery with an emphasis on accomplished female painters, many of them recognized in their lifetimes, some the focus of new attention. In other galleries, happily, works by women, such as the eighteenth-century Swiss painter Angelica Kauffman's scenes from the *Iliad*, are treated simply as representative works of art, integrated with examples by a variety of their peers, related by theme, chronology, or the like. Portraits of political figures remind us of the history of a given period. And. And. And.

A few "focus galleries," in spaces without skylights, are devoted to themes that unite works from different periods and places of origin. One is given over to oil sketches—the rapid, intimate works in which painters tested ideas and provided patrons with suggestions

of how finished works would look. Another focus gallery features small, portable devotional works in a variety of media. The tender Duccio di Buoninsegna *Madonna and Child* (ca. 1290–1300), with the sorrowing Virgin turned convincingly in space and the Child reaching up to grasp her veil, is the focal point. Yet another, which explores "The Artist's Studio," eases us into our own time by assembling works by artists of the recent past and the present. William Orpen's *Self-Portrait* (ca. 1910) gives us his full-length reflection, in bowler hat and smart overcoat, holding a paintbrush, with letters tucked behind the mirror frame and studio detritus below. Henri Matisse's intensely colored *Three O'Clock Sitting* (1924) presents a young female painter and her model; a reflection, a view out the window, textiles on the wall, and one of Matisse's sculptures turn a banal scene into a complex investigation of space and reference to the human figure. Kerry James Marshall's *Untitled (Studio)* (2014) is as brilliantly hued, but more complex still, with its loaded painting table, a work in progress, a reflection of a nude model, a seated figure being posed, a crouching dog, and various people contributing to the making of a work of art in a modern-day studio.

We leave "The Artist's Studio" and reenter the introductory gallery with the gold-ground early Renaissance paintings and the Max Beckmann, somewhat overwhelmed by the dazzling tour we've just been on. Repeat visits are essential.

Exhibition notes

"Medieval Money, Merchants, and Morality"
The Morgan Library & Museum,
New York.
November 10, 2023–March 10, 2024

While journeying through "Medieval Money, Merchants, and Morality" at the Morgan Library, take care not to fall at the first hurdle. Just inside the exhibition entrance is a glinting pile of coins from a late-fourteenth-century hoard found in Chalkis, Greece. These *torneselli*,

forged from copper-silver alloy and stamped with the lion of St. Mark, were used for everyday transactions in the Republic of Venice's Greek colonies.

After admiring the seductive shimmer of this loose change, visitors will encounter a quote on a nearby wall panel from Petrarch's *Remedies and Fortune Fair and Foul* (1360): "The shape of money is noxious, its glitter poisonous and destructive. Like a golden serpent it delights with shiny scales, pleases the eye and strikes the soul." Touché, Francesco. (The poet, a passionate collector of ancient Roman coins, perhaps felt this pull more keenly than any of us.)

Arranged by themes both faintly terrifying ("Will Money Damn Your Soul?") and encouraging ("Moral Responses to Money"), this exhibition of illuminated manuscripts, paintings, stone carvings, merchants' tools, and other artifacts reveals how people thought about wealth in late medieval and early Renaissance Europe, which saw a massive growth in coin production, international trade, and banking, all propelled by an industrious and newly ascendant mercantile class. Artists and writers grappled with the age-old sin of avarice while participating in a monetary economy that revolved increasingly around commerce, investment, and banking.

The objects in the first room—"Your Money or Your Eternal Life?"—present a stark choice between God and Mammon. *Death and the Miser* (ca. 1485–90), a Hieronymus Bosch oil painting of a gaunt man on his deathbed, draws from *Ars moriendi* (The Art of Dying), a popular fifteenth-century tract on avoiding temptation at the end of life. Competing for the Miser's attention in the painting is a crucifix hanging in a window and a small demon brandishing a moneybag at the edge of the mattress. An enrobed skeleton, Death, creeps through a doorway clutching a thin arrow. The end is nigh: will the Miser take notice of the angel who gestures upward toward the sunlight-bathed image of Christ? Or will he think only of money and fall into the Devil's grasp?

At the foot of the bed sits a strongbox. For comparison, the curators have displayed beside the painting an eight-hundred-pound steel example, complete with a sophisticated nine-bolt

locking mechanism. In the foreground, Bosch paints a slightly younger Miser dropping a coin into a pot of money held by a rodent-like demon inside the coffer. Hanging from the Miser's cloak are both a rosary and the strongbox's key, emphasizing his torn loyalties.

Artists often used the motif of a strongbox or moneybag to signify greed. If medieval Christians could not follow the example of Saint Anthony or Saint Francis and take a vow of poverty, they were still expected to donate excess money to the poor or use it in other fruitful ways, rather than storing it up where "moth and rust destroy." A man personifying avarice in a fifteenth-century book of hours, for example, carries a moneybag on his waist belt and carelessly empties gold coins from another onto the ground. In a twelfth-century limestone relief from a church in Limousin, France, a man mimics prayer while kneeling on a strongbox as a demon places a hand on his shoulder, sealing an unholy pact. The drawstring of a moneybag hangs like a noose around the man's neck, alluding to the suicide of Judas, known then as *mercator pessimus*, the worst possible merchant, for betraying Christ—thereby foregoing eternal life—for a comparably worthless sack of silver. The moneybag-as-noose motif reappears in a fourteenth-century manuscript illustration depicting the fate of usurers (naked, on burning sand, rained on by fire) in Dante's *Divine Comedy*.

The parables of Jesus were a common source of wisdom on monetary matters. Images of the Prodigal Son warn against spending money on sinful frivolities, as does a stained-glass window depicting the related figure of Sorgheloo, a character from Netherlandish morality plays who ends up destitute due to his own folly. In both a twelfth-century limestone carving from Burgundy and a sixteenth-century book of hours illustrated by Jean Poyer, we see contrasting scenes from the Parable of the rich man and Lazarus, in which the former refuses the leprous beggar crumbs from his table and is later tortured in hell as Lazarus enters heaven.

It is not all fire and brimstone, however. Medieval artists, we learn, were just as ready to

celebrate liberality as they were to condemn greed. The virtues of generosity and charity—which presumably included paying for gilded manuscripts and church decorations—are extolled in some of the most beautiful objects on display. A sixteenth-century prayer book of Queen Claude of France, for example, depicts King Louis IX distributing alms to paupers, while a page in a richly colored book of hours from the fifteenth century shows the Magi offering gifts to the newborn Christ.

Later sections delve into the material culture of commerce. We see coins, a balance and weights, and the remarkably well-preserved goatskin binder of Lanfredino Lanfredini, one of the wealthiest Florentine bankers. There are also several merchant portraits, including one by Jan Gossaert. Though by 1200 the sin of usury was understood as charging excessive interest on a loan—reasonable percentages were considered fair compensation for shouldering risk—amassing wealth without physical labor was still treated with suspicion. Merchants were understandably anxious to advertise their skills in literacy and numeracy and burnish their reputations for fairness. Gossaert's portrait thus contains many writing instruments but only a few coins, positioned next to a balance to suggest honesty.

Of the images of unscrupulous merchants on display, several contain disturbing anti-Semitic elements. As the historian Steven A. Epstein explains in the catalogue, medieval Jews in northern Europe were excluded not only from agriculture, but also from guilds of bankers and money changers, leaving them to pursue only the riskiest forms of moneylending, such as pawnbroking. They were often the target of damning caricatures, such as a sixteenth-century illustration of a tale that supposedly took place in the thirteenth. In the scene, a woman pawns a consecrated host for a dress; the Jewish pawnbroker stabs the wafer, causing it to bleed. Later in the story, he attempts to destroy it in other ways. While the host survives unscathed, the man is burned at the stake.

The image also points toward the anxieties surrounding the doctrine of transubstantiation at the time of the Reformation. Hang-

ing nearby are examples of indulgences, the controversial ecclesiastical permits relieving sinners of punishments in purgatory which could be bought and sold, provoking the ire of Martin Luther and other reformers.

While that particular debate has thankfully cooled, discussions about “income inequality” remain as heated as ever. The internal fight against envy and greed, too, rages on. For an exhibition on the Middle Ages, “Medieval Money” is surprisingly relevant.

—Jane Coombs

“British Vision, 1700–1900:
Selections from the Department of
Drawings and Prints”
The Metropolitan Museum of Art,
New York.
December 7, 2023–March 5, 2024

While most visitors see gallery 690 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art—“The Robert Wood Johnson Jr. Gallery”—as a mere corridor, there is art on the walls, too. Here the Department of Drawings and Prints has assembled a *mélange* of British pictures that collectively tell no grand story, save for a happy one about the breadth and depth of the Met's holdings and the ability of its curators to secure quality works of art, whether by gift or purchase. “British Vision, 1700–1900” brings together more than seventy works from the museum's collection, mostly watercolors and drawings, from what probably were the best centuries of British art (partisans of Van Dyck and Kneller might disagree, though it must be noted that neither was born in Britain). In those two hundred years, cultural confidence was high and many artists took advantage of increasing links with Continental Europe to see and sketch sights beyond the damp isle.

Which is not to say that there wasn't plenty to see domestically. Among the best items in the exhibition is Thomas Sandby's *The Moat Island, Windsor Great Park* (ca. 1754), rightly included in the show as Thomas and his brother Paul did much to popularize watercolor sketching in Britain. Their talents attracted royal patronage, and in 1746 Thomas was ap-

pointed deputy ranger of Windsor Great Park by the Duke of Cumberland, King George III's younger brother, after having served as Cumberland's private secretary. The sheet on display at the Met is a masterclass in the watercolorist's art, with foreground trees, their leaves a convincing medley of shades of green, and the faint water of the Bourne Ditch behind. Grazing cows and sheep give pastoral atmosphere and serve as guides to scale; the trees tower over them, ancient indeed.

Paul Sandby, younger by a few years, was always the more humorous of the two brothers, known for composing light verse and for sketching, in addition to landscapes, grotesque figures. Joseph Farington, the artist and diarist, recorded circumspectly in 1811, two years after Paul's death, that he

could not but sensibly feel the great difference between [Paul Sandby's] works & those of Artists who now practise in Water Colour.—His drawings so divided in parts, so scattered in effect,—detail prevailing over general effect.

That division in parts is on display in Paul's *Valle Crucis Abbey, Denbighshire* (ca. 1770–79), a large, detailed watercolor made on one of the artist's visits to Wales. The ruined Cistercian abbey slumps in front of a wispy mountainous background, trees overgrowing its disused fabric. On the lawn in front a bull charges a milkmaid, who flees with alacrity, while another milkmaid observes bemusedly from a plank bridge crossing a rushing foreground stream. The two women have the sepulchral aspect common to many of Sandby's human figures, adding a grimly comic tone.

A foreign note is struck by Edward Lear's *Peasant Women from Ragusa* (1866?), a sketch sheet with studies of traditional Dalmatian costume, the three central figures assuming a position almost like that of the Graces. Lear picks out their hats in a gauzy red, like spilled wine. That item is perhaps the best nineteenth-century work on display. The Victorian landscape watercolors on view, mostly located on the west wall of the gallery, are less appealing than their predecessors. These later works have a treacherously sheen that the sketchier Georgian ones

lack. Perhaps the Victorian watercolorists had learned too much, for their work became too studied and more self-serious.

Joshua Reynolds—here represented by a sketchbook from an early 1750s visit to Italy, turned to a page showing Bernini's colonnade at St. Peter's in Rome—told his students that a “mere copier of nature can never produce anything great.” The point is proven by the best works on display here, which take nature as a starting point and not an end.

—Benjamin Riley

“Van Gogh in Auvers-sur-Oise:
The Final Months”
Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

October 3, 2023–February 4, 2024

We are drawn to troubled artists (if not too precious); none comes more infamously troubled than Vincent van Gogh, he of the self-inflicted ear loss and of the self-inflicted fatal gunshot. The first occurred in sunny, paradisiacal Provence, the latter in the more subdued northern clime of Auvers-sur-Oise, about twenty miles north of Paris. Now just beyond the edge of Paris's suburban sprawl, Auvers was at the end of the nineteenth century the rural village where Van Gogh went to receive further treatment for his depression, an ailment no doubt intensified by his continuing lack of success as an artist. It is astonishing to think that, as far as we know, he sold only one significant painting in his lifetime (*The Red Vineyards near Arles* of 1888), four months before his suicide.

Van Gogh's move north was compelled by medical and personal reasons, not artistic ones. He wanted to be close to Theo, his brother and chief supporter (artistically and financially), who lived in the capital. Vincent's stay at the psychiatric clinic in Saint-Rémy-de-Provence (a hauntingly evocative place to this day) had not ameliorated his condition; indeed, on Christmas Eve of 1889, he had attempted suicide through poisoning—tellingly from the consumption of his own paints. Theo, combining wariness of having his unstable brother stay too long in his own house and solicitude

for the artist's ill health, directed Vincent to the care of Dr. Paul Ferdinand Gachet, a specialist in—and sufferer from—acute melancholia, living in Auvers-sur-Oise. Van Gogh left his southern asylum in May 1890 (his doctor there optimistically or self-servingly declaring him cured) and, via Paris, arrived later that month in Auvers-sur-Oise, where Gachet diagnosed the painter with “unfounded syphilomania.” Here, during the last two months of his life, Van Gogh worked at a Stakhanovite rate, producing some seventy-four paintings (averaging one per day) and more than fifty drawings, without loss of quality; indeed, most of the work is of an astonishingly high caliber, as clearly witnessed in the spectacular and comprehensive exhibition, “Van Gogh in Auvers-sur-Oise: The Final Months” at the Musée d’Orsay in Paris.

The large range of paintings on display from these intense two months creates an intimate bond with the viewer, who is able to follow Van Gogh's dramatic shifts of mood during such a short time span. The artist's letters reinforce his often febrile paintings: during the first two days of his arrival in Auvers, he wrote to his brother that the place is “gravely beautiful, it's the heart of the countryside, distinctive and picturesque”; three days later, another fraternal letter, this one unsent, has Van Gogh desolately declaring himself a “failure” and unable to “see a happy future at all.” It was around this time that Dr. Gachet, who advised Van Gogh to throw himself into his work (a prescription obsessively and immediately taken), concluded that the artist was beyond cure.

The show's great triumph is to lead viewers away from the familiar sunny skies and fields of Provence to the entirely different, and less-known, North. On display are two-thirds of Van Gogh's paintings from this period and over half his drawings, a good number coming from America and private collections. It is an abundance of riches, approximately organized by what might be called farms, flowers, fields, and faces. The rural depictions of the houses and farms of Auvers-sur-Oise are quite beautiful, although *The House of Père Pilon* (from a private collection) introduces a nervous vision of the landscape. Interestingly, his rendering of *Doctor Gachet's Garden* is far messier than *Daubigny's*

Garden seven weeks later; it is as if Van Gogh is making an extra effort to impress his fellow artist Charles-François Daubigny. He painted the latter scene twice: the first includes a clunky depiction of a cat (one presumes it is a cat) in the foreground; the second, however, which Van Gogh called “one of my most *deliberate* canvases,” paints over the offending animal (just about discernible) and is a controlled and calm masterpiece. It is extraordinary to consider that the creator of such a wonderful piece of art committed suicide just three days after its completion.

It is no surprise that the floral section impresses, too. But what is surprising is that those works on display from Auvers-sur-Oise are the first floral canvases he painted (barring a single exception) since his sunflowers in Arles eighteen months earlier. The petals of flowers were a particular gift to Van Gogh, who almost recreates rather than paints them with his thick slabs of oil, as demonstrated in *Glass with Carnations*, from a private collection. Arguably less successful here are his faces, despite his perhaps misguided belief that he was more passionate about portraits than any other painter. The second of his *Two Girls* paintings is frankly a little disturbing, the spooky young children looking more like something from *Children of the Damned* than delightful rustic offspring. (The first version, from a private collection, is considerably superior.) *Doctor Paul Gachet* is far more effective: a mutual understanding between sitter and painter of their shared depressive nature is made clear. The first of Van Gogh's three portraits of Adeline Ravoux, completed over three successive days, is the other highlight of this section of the show. It would be wholly unjust to deem the portraits ineffective; it is simply that they compare less favorably with the brilliance of the other works on display.

Nowhere is this brilliance clearer than in the landscapes. Here we encounter Van Gogh experimenting with his new approach of double-square works, canvases with widths twice as long as the height. These canvases naturally work well for the horizons, be they low or high, of his landscapes. Although these are among his finest works, his very last paint-

ing, *Tree Roots*, while adhering to this format, must be deemed a failure. Within a few hours of its completion on July 27, Van Gogh had shot himself in the chest. It is impossible not to speculate that this rather messy final work pushed him over the edge, regardless of the four or five masterpieces produced in the previous two and a half weeks alone. Perhaps the tangled confusion represented his state of mind. Sensibly, the exhibition does not end with this final work. Instead, visitors leave the exhibition by way of one last wall displaying three paintings of stupendous beauty, engagement, and accomplishment: *Landscape at Twilight*, *Wheatfield with Crows*, and *Wheatfield under Thunderclouds*. All fittingly capture the ominous, dark dives into melancholy of the

artist in his final days and affirm his greatness to the very end.

Curated by Nienke Bakker and Emmanuel Coquery, this is an important, major exhibition that allows for a fuller appreciation of Van Gogh beyond his more famous Provençal years. Alas, the problem with such blockbuster shows—as Benjamin Riley admirably addressed in his review of last year’s Vermeer exhibition at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam (“Dutch treats” in *The New Criterion* of June 2023)—is the occluding crowds that are drawn to them. This Van Gogh exhibition was even more rammed than the sold-out Vermeer show. Nonetheless, here is a truly spectacular event.

—Sean McGlynn

Forthcoming in *The New Criterion*:

A life in ballet *by Peter Martins*

Unmodern Bach *by John Check*

The nature of free speech *by Wilfred M. McClay*

The British army between the wars *by Leo McKinstry*

Forgotten writers of Père Lachaise *by Anthony Daniels*

Giorgione in the house

by James Panero

The arrival of a single painting in the United States is not often cause for a special exhibition. When the visitor, however, is a work by Giorgio Barbarelli da Castelfranco, better known as Giorgione (ca. 1477–1510), you make an exception. Only about ten paintings are attributed today to the enigmatic Venetian, and *The Three Philosophers* (ca. 1508–09), now on loan in New York for the first time from the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, is among his greatest achievements. So the appearance of this canvas at the Frick Collection's temporary home of Frick Madison is cause for a very special exhibition indeed. That this painting has been reunited—for the first time in some four hundred years—with its pendant composition, Giovanni Bellini's *St. Francis in the Desert* (ca. 1475–80), the masterpiece from the Frick's own collection that in the sixteenth century occupied the same Venetian palazzo as the Giorgione, is also cause for jubilation. This reunion is the occasion for a revelatory one-room show, "Bellini and Giorgione in the House of Taddeo Contarini."¹

The loan is the result of a pursuit that bordered on obsession for Xavier F. Salomon, the Frick's Deputy Director and Peter Jay Sharp Chief Curator. The exhibition is also a tribute to the Frick's outgoing director, Ian Wardropper,

who has set his retirement for next year, and his high-minded use of the collection's temporary digs on Madison Avenue—the former home of the Whitney Museum, onetime outpost of the Metropolitan Museum, and future headquarters of Sotheby's auction house. On March 3, the Frick will vacate these galleries that have functioned like private viewing rooms for its collection and move back to its mansion at One East Seventieth Street.

The installation of the Frick's permanent collection on Madison Avenue—and in particular the presentation of *St. Francis*—was the inspiration for Salomon's dream of reuniting the Bellini with the Giorgione. To underscore the worthiness of the unprecedented loan, in the accompanying catalogue published by D Giles Limited, Salomon collects everything we could possibly imagine about the creation, meaning, and provenance of *The Three Philosophers* and its relationship with *St. Francis in the Desert*.

Three years ago, I wrote about the effect of seeing *St. Francis in the Desert* in the light of Frick Madison (see "Sublet with Bellini" in *The New Criterion* of April 2021). A raking illumination fills the scene from beyond the left frame—unseen by us, but fully apparent to Francis, who exposes the symbolic wounds of the stigmata on his hands and feet. Flora and fauna fill this vision of his rocky hermitage as the rays seemingly melt its icelike outcropping into a stream, watering a kingfisher below. Kenneth Clark noted how "no other great

1 "Bellini and Giorgione in the House of Taddeo Contarini" opened at Frick Madison, New York, on November 9, 2023, and remains on view through February 4, 2024.

painting, perhaps, contains such a quantity of natural details observed and rendered with incredible patience: for no other painter has been able to give to such an accumulation the unity which is only achieved by love.”

At Frick Madison, positioned in its own alcove, the painting has been lit by one of Marcel Breuer’s trapezoidal windows in a way that accentuates the work’s own luminous dynamics. Light and shadow, depiction and reality glow together. *The Three Philosophers* has now been hung on this alcove’s opposite wall, which had been left empty before the arrival of the Giorgione. Again we are presented with figures in a rocky landscape, this time three men in colorful robes, with two standing and one seated. The similarities in these compositions of roughly equal size are striking, especially as the two paintings can now be observed together. The hills in the distance share uncanny form, as do the designs of the distant towns with their arched construction. The stepped stones in the foregrounds seem like mirror formations. Even the tiny pebbles appear to have been quarried from the same source.

The two paintings interact the more you move around them and take them in. Are we looking at the same scene depicting two different periods of time? Or are these two sides of the same outcropping, with the stone floor of Frick Madison now running between them? While the direct lighting of *St. Francis* leaves little doubt of its divine origin, the illumination of the Giorgione is more elusive. A sun low on the horizon seems to be setting, but the figures appear to be lit with an unexplained glow. Those “three philosophers” may be seen carrying scientific instruments and tablets relating to the sun and moon, but the lighting of the composition is non-Euclidian and otherworldly. It is almost as if the radiance of the Bellini is now bouncing off of the Giorgione in mystical, lunar-like reflection.

As is often the case with Giorgione, the more we look into this young painter’s work, the less we understand it. Anyone who has tracked down Giorgione’s small painting *The Tempest* (ca. 1508) in Venice’s Gallerie dell’Accademia can likewise attest to the

mystery of that strange and tender scene of a nursing mother, an idle man, and ruined architecture beneath a stormy sky. Who are they? Where are we? What are we seeing? The questions strike like a thunderclap emanating from the clouds above. Here is something more than just visual storytelling with known characters and stock symbols. Rather it is something absorptive, mysterious, and new.

The same goes for *The Three Philosophers*. The composition has warmed observers with its brilliance but also baffled scholars about its meaning since just about the time of its own creation. In 1525 a Venetian collector by the name of Marcantonio Michiel (1484–1552) was making a survey of art in the Veneto when he recorded a definitive account of these paintings together in what he titled his *Pittori e pitture in diversi luoghi* (Painters and paintings in different places). This manuscript was later published as his *Notizia d’opere di disegno* (Information on works of design).

In his account of the paintings “in the house of Messer Taddeo Contarini,” written in the Venetian dialect, Michiel lists ten works. One of them is “three philosophers,” he writes, a “canvas in oil of the three philosophers in the landscape, two standing and one seated who is contemplating the sun’s rays, with that stone finished so marvelously . . . begun by Giorgio from Castelfranco and finished by Sebastiano Veneziano.” Another is a “Panel of St. Francis in the Desert,” which Marcantonio Michiel identifies as an oil by “Zuan Bellini, begun by him for Messer Zuan Michiel, and it has a landscape nearby wonderfully finished and refined.”

Marcantonio Michiel’s account is significant for several reasons: for coining the titles of the two works (*3 phylosophi* and *S. Francesco nel deserto*); for its clear descriptions of the paintings (*dui ritti et uno sentado che contempla gli raggi solari cum quel saxo finto cusi mirabilmente* and *un paese propinquo finito et ricercato mirabilmente*); for information about their authorship and provenance (*Fu cominciata da Zorzo da Castel Franco, et finita da Sebastiano Venitiano* and *Fu opera de Zuan bellino, cominciata da lui a Ms. Zuan michiel*); and

for describing them together in one private collection (*In casa de Ms. Taddeo Contarino*).

Recorded some forty-five years after the creation of *St. Francis*, seventeen years after *Three Philosophers*, fifteen years after Giorgione's death, and nine years after the death of Giovanni Bellini (ca. 1424/35–1516), Michiel's survey is also revelatory for what it leaves out: the identity of those three philosophers, as well as the particular moment depicted in Saint Francis of Assisi's life. Both have been sources of discussion and conjecture ever since. For *St. Francis*, most scholars now agree that the image depicts the saint's stigmatization, not in the "desert" but rather at his Apennine retreat at La Verna. Still, two standard references are missing: the seraph delivering Christ's wounds, and Brother Leo. An alternative interpretation is that we are rather presented with Francis composing his Canticle of the Creatures, that prayer to "Brother Sun, Sister Moon, Brother Wind, Sister Water, Brother Fire, Sister Mother Earth, and Sister Bodily Death."

The Giorgione poses an even greater conundrum. "Apart from Giorgione's *Tempest*," writes Salomon in his exhibition catalogue, "very few Venetian Renaissance works have received as much attention and been as widely interpreted as *The Three Philosophers*." The identification of those "three philosophers," which was left unstated by Marcantonio Michiel even within two decades of its execution, has resulted in centuries of conjecture. Assuming the painting in fact depicts "three philosophers" from antiquity, the proposed combinations as collected by Salomon have included the following: Archimedes, Ptolemy, and Pythagoras; Aristotle, Averroes, and Virgil; Regiomontanus, Aristotle, and Ptolemy; Ptolemy, Al-Battani, and Copernicus; Aristotle, Averroes, and a humanist; and Plato, Aristotle, and Pythagoras. Alternatively, the figures might represent the Three Magi; or Marcus Aurelius studying with two philosophers on the Caelian Hill; or Abraham teaching astronomy to the Egyptians; or Evander and Pallas showing Aeneas the Capitoline Hill; or a meeting between Sultan Mehmet II and Patriarch Gennadios Scholarios in Con-

stantinople; or Saint Luke, King David, and Saint Jerome; or King Solomon, King Hiram of Tyre, and the master craftsman Hiram of Tyre as they plan the Temple in Jerusalem; or perhaps even the painters Giovanni Bellini, Vittore Carpaccio, and Giorgione. For Xavier Salomon, the most convincing identification, as proposed by the scholar Karin Zeleny, is that of Pythagoras with his two teachers, Thales of Miletus and Pherecydes of Syros, "the first three philosophers of the Western tradition shown while at the Oracle of Apollo at Didyma." I am more partial to the poetic approach proposed by the art historian Tom Nichols in his book *Giorgione's Ambiguity*, in which he suggests that our interpretation is meant to remain free-floating and open-ended. Deliberate ambiguities, he writes, are Giorgione's "visual traps set to capture the viewer's curiosity and speculation."

"Uncertain about authorship, patronage, dating, and the significance of both paintings," writes Salomon, "when it comes to Giorgione's *Three Philosophers* and Bellini's *St. Francis in the Desert*, we know much less than we think we do." What is certain is that these paintings occupied the same Venetian home soon after their creation, even if the specific location of Taddeo Contarini's residence in the neighborhood of Cannaregio has been up for debate. Marcantonio Michiel writes that Bellini painted his *St. Francis* for Zuan Michiel, and the painting was then acquired by Taddeo Contarini (ca. 1466–1540) soon thereafter. It is possible that Giorgione's *Three Philosophers* was a direct commission by this powerful and supposedly unscrupulous Venetian merchant—one even intended to complement the Bellini. While he may or may not have painted it for Contarini's collection specifically, Giorgione most likely studied with Bellini, and so *St. Francis* might still have been front and center in his mind.

The last time these paintings were seen in one place was between 1556 and 1636. Like a flash of light of some divine rapture, their being brought together in this spectacular exhibition makes their connections manifest once again.

Music

New York chronicle

by Jay Nordlinger

The New York Philharmonic played an unusual program. First, it had four pieces on it. Rarely these days does an orchestra play as many as four. Three is probably standard—and that includes the tried-and-true format of overture, concerto, symphony. (A format that has never been improved on, frankly.) You frequently encounter two pieces as well—one before intermission, one after. Also, one piece: a Bruckner or Mahler symphony, say, or a requiem. But four or more pieces is unusual. There are a number of shorter pieces in the repertoire that get short shrift, because they don't quite fit. Also, they may be judged less serious (and that judgment may be off).

There was something else unusual about that Philharmonic program: all four pieces were “classics.” They were all “mainstream,” even “canonical.” You could even call them “favorites.” Is that legal, to play such a program? In any event, the Philharmonic did, and well.

Conducting this program was Andrés Orozco-Estrada, from Colombia. We are accustomed to conductors from Venezuela—most prominent among them Gustavo Dudamel, who is the New York Philharmonic's music director-elect. But this one comes from the country to the west. In 1997, when he was about twenty, Orozco-Estrada went to Vienna, to study. He has lived in Austria ever since. But he has the jet-setting career of a conductor. He is best known for his tenure in Houston, from 2014 to 2022.

The first line of his bio reads, “Energy, elegance, and spirit—that is what particularly distinguishes conductor Andrés Orozco-Estrada

as a musician.” As I have noted many times, musicians' bios are not so much bios as publicists' puff. But that line about Orozco-Estrada is not untrue. He is a very musical person, with impressive physicality. He expresses, physically, what he wants from an orchestra—and does so in an exceptionally graceful and natural way.

This program began with Tchaikovsky: his *Romeo and Juliet* Overture-Fantasy. It is one of the composer's very best pieces. I have often said that if I could introduce a person to Tchaikovsky with just one piece, it would be *Romeo and Juliet*. It encapsulates him: the Classicism, the Romanticism, the discipline, the freedom. It is a taut, breathing, perfect composition. Furthermore, it tells the story of *Romeo and Juliet*.

Would I think this if the title did not steer me that way? No. But that is the nature of all music without words. And once you know that Tchaikovsky intends *Romeo and Juliet*—that's what you hear: that play, that story.

The Philharmonic's performance began with a clean woodwind choir—a blessed way to begin. Indeed, the entire reading was accurate, even the pizzicatos. Crucially, Orozco-Estrada did not give away too much in the early going. He let the story, the music, build. Also crucially, he was not *too* elegant, *too* beautiful. He was robust, as the music demands. A la-di-da quality is fatal to this piece, and to Tchaikovsky in general.

I have a minor complaint. In my view, much more should be made of the low strings in the final pages—the strings that counter the

melody higher up. This is a genius touch of Tchaikovsky (another one). In any case, we heard a first-rate performance, with the orchestra playing as if for dear life. As if it mattered.

Shakespeare's play has given birth to various works of music: Prokofiev's ballet (a masterpiece of masterpieces); Bernstein's *West Side Story* (I am tempted to say the same); Gounod's opera (creditable). Would Shakespeare be surprised? I am thinking not.

The second piece on the Philharmonic's program was a Haydn cello concerto: the first one, in C major. Haydn wrote it in the 1760s, then it had a long rest, until it was discovered in 1961. The Philharmonic's soloist was a young Frenchman, Edgar Moreau, who will turn thirty this year.

In the first movement, he played with a dark, rich tone. I prefer a brighter tone in this music. But dark and rich, as a rule, is desirable. M. Moreau was free with portamentos (not too much so). And his passagework was passable. I have a feeling he can articulate this music better. The second movement, Adagio, was a real arioso. And the Finale had its scampering joy, from all concerned: cellist and orchestra.

During the concerto, I could not help thinking about Carter Brey, the principal cello in the orchestra. There he was, leading the section as usual. He has been a member of the Philharmonic since 1996. But he has also enjoyed a distinguished solo career. Indeed, he was the soloist in this concerto a few seasons ago, when the Philharmonic programmed it.

What's it like, in his shoes? What's it like for a Carter Brey to sit in the orchestra as someone else plays the solo part? Well, I can report this: once the concerto was over, Mr. Brey applauded young Moreau enthusiastically.

The whole audience applauded enthusiastically as well. More than that, they gave Moreau a standing ovation. This is practically *de rigueur* for a concerto soloist. A thought occurred to me: *The Tchaikovsky overture-fantasy was much better played. And no one stood for that.* (This is not to begrudge Moreau his ovation. It is simply a note on concert life.)

Our soloist did the expected thing, and a good and right thing: he played Bach's C-major sarabande for an encore. A Bach sarabande is a

natural encore after a cello concerto (or a violin concerto). And the concerto had been in C major. So . . . a no-brainer, if you will. And Edgar Moreau played his Bach with balance and poise.

The two pieces after intermission were two show-stoppers: beginning with the suite from Bartók's *Miraculous Mandarin*. *The Miraculous Mandarin* is a ballet, or, more precisely, a *pantomime* ballet. Its music is brilliant and zany. From Maestro Orozco-Estrada and the Philharmonic, the suite was colorful and defined. The musicians caught the proper "contrasts," I thought. *There* is a Bartók word (the title of his piece for clarinet, violin, and piano, commissioned by Benny Goodman: *Contrasts*). Over the years, the New York Philharmonic has been known as a bright, sassy, virtuosic orchestra—maybe a bit hard. They were admirably themselves in the Bartók. What we heard from the stage was polished savagery.

That final show-stopper was Enescu's *Romanian Rhapsody* No. 1. I say "No. 1" as a formality. Enescu wrote a second *Romanian Rhapsody*, but when people say "Romanian Rhapsody," they mean No. 1—same as they mean Bruch's Violin Concerto No. 1 when they say "the Bruch Concerto" (he wrote two other violin concertos).

In the famous *Rhapsody*, calibration is key. No one, in my experience, calibrated this piece like Sergiu Celibidache, the late Romanian conductor. The build-up—the arc of the piece—was seductive and ultimately thrilling. Orozco-Estrada did a good job of calibration as well, though the piece sounded under-rehearsed. Toward the end—with about a minute to go—there is a kind of false ending. A sudden, longish rest. Some in the audience applauded during this rest. When the music resumed, Orozco-Estrada turned around smiling, as if to say, "Fooled ya, huh?" A winning personality and musician, Andrés Orozco-Estrada.

The Met Orchestra Chamber Ensemble played a concert in Weill Recital Hall. On its program were (a whopping) five pieces. The first three were by living composers—and the first of those pieces was *LigNEous 1*, for marimba and string quartet. "Ligneous," as you know, means "of or

resembling wood.” What about those capital letters? That is another matter, which need not detain us. The piece certainly involves, or requires, a lot of wood: the two violins, the viola, the cello, and—woodiest of all—the marimba.

It was a pleasure to see a marimbist at work up close—two mallets in each hand. On this evening, he was Gregory Zuber, the principal percussionist in the orchestra (the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra).

The composer of this piece is a percussionist, too: Andy Akiho, who is from South Carolina. He has a special interest in Caribbean music. *LigNEous I* is a little jazzy, and a little minimalistic. It is squiggly, squirmy, and scratchy. Discreet alterations of rhythm help hold the attention.

James Lee III is a composer from Michigan. He earned three degrees at the University of Michigan, studying with, among others, William Bolcom. In 2018, he wrote a clarinet quintet, which has been recorded by Anthony McGill and the Pacifica Quartet. (McGill was once the principal clarinet of the Met orchestra. Since 2014, he has been the principal of the New York Philharmonic.) In Weill Recital Hall, we heard two movements of the quintet, including one with the heading “Awashoha.” The composer has explained that this is a Choctaw word meaning “to play somewhere.”

“Awashoha”—the movement—is very pleasant and very American. It is lively, smooth, and catchy. “Catchy” can seem a negative word (like “pleasant”). But catchy is often welcome.

Serving as the clarinetist was Anton Rist, the Met’s current principal. He made a warm, beautiful, and—may I say—woody sound. Such a clarinet might be at home in one of Andy Akiho’s ligneous pieces.

Justinian Tamusuzza is not an American but a Ugandan—though he earned his doctorate at Northwestern University. In 1988, he wrote a string quartet, titled *Mu KKubo Ery’Omusaalaba*, which is to say, “On the Way of the Cross.” We heard one movement from it. The music is—believe it or not—Coplandesque. Folk-like, Appalachian, twangy. However you hear it, this is music that goes down easy.

The four string players were joined by a dancer, performing around and amidst them.

I thought of a program that Jessye Norman, the late and great singer, once put on with Bill T. Jones, the dancer–choreographer: *How! Do! You! Do!* The dancer in Weill Recital Hall was Quamaine “Virtuoso” Daniy’Els. His bio describes him as “a Brooklyn-based master of FlexN, with styles that include gliding, get glow, bone breaking, and connecting.”

Mr. Daniy’Els did, I presume, all of that, as the string quartet played Tamusuzza’s music. You could not take your eyes off him. I decided, at one point, that I would listen to the music and not be distracted by the dancing—impossible. Was the music enhanced by the dancing? I would say no. Then again, there is nothing wrong with a dance performance *qua* dance performance—some dancing thrown into a concert, variety being the spice of life and all.

After intermission, we heard a “classic”: the *Chanson perpétuelle* of Ernest Chausson. This song is often heard with orchestra. There is a version for piano quintet (which of course we heard in this chamber concert). Personally, I like the smaller scale: its texture. Our soloist was a bona fide opera star, and star of song, Isabel Leonard, the American mezzo. She conveyed the cool–hot nature—you might prefer to say the French nature—of the song.

To end this program was a piano quintet—a piano quintet without voice. It was the Piano Quintet in F-sharp minor, Op. 67, by Amy Beach (composed in 1907). That is an interesting, and uncommon, key, F-sharp minor. Haydn wrote a symphony in it—No. 45, the “Farewell.” (Not to worry: Haydn had about sixty more symphonies to go.) Yannick Nézet-Séguin, the music director of the Met, was to have been the pianist on this occasion. But he withdrew, in order to attend the Los Angeles premiere of *Maestro*, the biopic about Leonard Bernstein, in which he had a hand. He was replaced by one of his assistant conductors, Bryan Wagorn, a Canadian (like Nézet-Séguin himself, as it happens).

In recent years, presenting organizations have made an effort to program works by female composers. We have heard a fair amount of Beach, which is fine by me. But if you are interested in dusting off neglected music—

if you are interested in resurrecting worthy music—there is a lot of dusting, and a lot of resurrecting, you could do. Take piano quintets alone, by American composers, alone. Amy Beach’s fellow Bostonian, George Whitefield Chadwick, wrote one. So did another Bostonian (born in Maine), Walter Piston. So did Roy Harris, and Vincent Persichetti, and Ernst Bacon. And Leo Ornstein . . .

Have you ever heard any of those piano quintets? Will you?

Daniil Trifonov did what he often does: play a recital in Carnegie Hall. There was overflow seating—stage seating—as expected. A Trifonov recital is an Event. His stage manner is largely unchanging. He comes out, unsmiling, bows quickly, and starts. He concentrates intensely. He is in his own private Idaho. He seems oblivious to everything around him. Then he gets up, unsmiling, bows quickly, and exits. In this (as in other things), he is like another Soviet-born pianist, Grigory Sokolov.

Sokolov was born in 1950, a generation or two before Trifonov. Trifonov was born in the Soviet Union’s last year, 1991. He will turn thirty-three in March.

The older pianist has been known to begin a recital with Rameau. So did the younger pianist, in his most recent Carnegie Hall recital. He played a suite in A minor. He was soft and inward—too much so, I thought. “Sing out, Louise,” goes a famous line from Broadway. Trifonov then played Mozart: the Sonata in F major, K. 332. In this, he was lyrical, crisp, limpid, fleet. His playing was free and imaginative, but always within Mozartean bounds.

Third on the program was Mendelssohn’s *Variations sérieuses*. In parts of this work, I like a fatter, richer tone than Trifonov gave. He tended to be on the thin side. But, oh, what he brought. He was very smart, very musical. Nimble, cat-like. Seamless, fast, accurate. His virtuosity bordered on the demonic. I wrote in my notes the initials OMG.

On the second half of the program, there was one work, and not just any work—a Beethoven sonata, and not just any Beethoven sonata: No. 29 in B flat, the “Hammerklavier.” Trifonov, as usual, was in his own world, and Beethoven’s. At times he seemed practically improvisatory. I could report on the playing page by page, but let me say merely this: most pianists survive this piece, rather than play it. They wrestle with it, struggle with it, rather than play it. They scale Everest. Daniil Trifonov played the work with something like ease, pouring all of his efforts—if efforts they were—into pure musical expression.

I would like to relate a memory. The year 2011 was a “Liszt year,” the bicentennial of that composer’s birth. In Carnegie Hall, Evgeny Kissin played an all-Liszt recital. Many of us had been listening to Kissin since 1984, when he was twelve. I left the hall that night, in 2011, thinking, “Now he is a great pianist. That’s what he has become: a great pianist.”

Daniil Trifonov has always been an impressive pianist, obviously—lavishly talented. But it was on this recent night, as I was leaving the hall, that I thought: “He is not just a good pianist, or a dazzling pianist, but a great one.” Perhaps I am late to this judgment. Perhaps I am early, premature. In any case, there it is.

The media

What revolution?

by James Bowman

Over the Christmas holidays, a time when one quite often meets people whom one hasn't seen for a while, I mentioned to two friends that I was working on a book for young people about what life was like before the revolution—a subject on which today's schools and universities will have taught them little, and that little mostly erroneous. One of these friends said in reply, "What revolution?" The other assumed I was talking about the First American Revolution, the one in the eighteenth century, and was therefore writing about the Colonial period.

Readers of *The New Criterion* will know what revolution I was talking about (see "Revolutionism redux" in *The New Criterion* of September, October, and November 2019), though its manifestations in the impeachment fervor of 2019 were then only the latest signs of a process that began in the 1960s and achieved critical mass with the election of President Obama and his project for "fundamentally transforming the United States of America." But when the history of the Second American Revolution is written—if any history that is not mere propaganda is ever allowed to be written—the importance of the radicalized media in keeping this slow-motion revolution-by-stealth out of the public view for so long should be given due credit.

Not that the smell of old-fashioned black powder from the first revolution has not been in the air from time to time during these years. When she finally pulled the trigger on the first Trump impeachment, Nancy Pelosi was pleased to compare herself and her

Democratic caucus to the leaders of the First American Revolution, casting Mr. Trump in the role of George III. Now President Biden has sought to assume the mantle of George Washington by choosing Valley Forge—the scene of one of the most famous episodes of the 1776 revolution—as the location, and the third anniversary of the January 6 "insurrection" to launch his presidential campaign.

About this, the great Julie Kelly, scourge of J6 jurisprudence, has written:

After years of comparing Jan 6 to 9/11, Pearl Harbor, and the Oklahoma City bombing, Biden will again desecrate hallowed ground and the graves of the victims—roughly 2,000 soldiers died over a six-month period at the Valley Forge encampment—to [characterize] the largely peaceful protest at the Capitol as a pivotal event in American history. Fighting Trump and his supporters, the stunt apparently is supposed to demonstrate, is just like living in subhuman conditions, fighting starvation, hypothermia, and deadly diseases to prevail over the British crown. (Ironically, Biden moved up the speech from Saturday to Friday amid bad weather forecasts.)

At Valley Forge, the president renewed his oft-repeated characterization of his predecessor as an existential threat to American democracy, which might have seemed a bit excessive even if predicated of old King George himself. But they say that the best defense is a good offense, and while "MAGA extremists"

are busy being outraged by the comparison, Mr. Biden and his media and deep-state allies are doing more than enough to demonstrate to those with eyes to see that, if there is any threat to American democracy, it comes from them—most recently by seeking to have the former president banned from appearing on the ballot in this year’s presidential primaries, and perhaps the general election as well.

Even over the last year, during which Mr. Trump—fresh from his trial *in absentia* by the stacked revolutionary tribunal of the J6 committee and now less like George III than the Lin Biao of the current cultural revolution—has been subjected to multiple politically motivated prosecutions on a whole series of confected criminal and civil charges, the great mass of politically aware Americans have seemed to regard it all as political business as usual. Establishment Republicans carry on discussing whether, in their fantasy world, Nikki Haley or Ron DeSantis has the better chance of taking down Mr. Trump. Meanwhile, ordinary Republican voters not of or aspiring to the ruling class seem, at this writing, to have taken the Trump prosecutions as their cue to rally round the inevitable nominee.

These voters must have noticed at least a faint resemblance in the revolution’s methods—unprecedented in America—to the kind of “justice” meted out to the losers of Russia’s or China’s revolutions, or the victims of Third World *coups d’état*. As I write at the beginning of the year, it has just been revealed that the much-hated ex-communist dictator Vladimir Putin has exiled *his* chief political opponent to what remains of the Soviet-era Gulag, while Jimmy Lai, the pro-democracy leader in Hong Kong, has gone on trial for sedition before a Chinese Communist Party–dominated tribunal. But no one in the mainstream media that I know of has yet broken ranks with the Left and noted a similar totalitarian tendency in the Trump prosecutions—not to mention the rulings of (so far) two states that, as a supposed insurrectionist, the former president is ineligible to appear on their presidential ballots.

This blindness must be owing to more than just “bias.” So accustomed have we become

over the last half century to the media’s scandal culture, with its division of the political world into bad people and good people—a division lately assimilated to the Marxist one of oppressor and oppressed—that the prosecution and even the hoped-for imprisonment of national political leaders, if they are counted among the bad people, seems to most of the public not to be all that much of a break with the American past.

This thought, or something like it, came to me when I read a headline in *The Wall Street Journal* in December purporting to elucidate “The Tragedy of Rudy Giuliani.” According to the *Journal*’s editorial board, Mr. Giuliani is “the latest to be brought low for having peddled Trump’s false election claims.” In fact, Mr. Giuliani has been “brought low” not by “Trump’s false election claims,” even if we suppose they were provably false, but by a judiciary and a Department of Justice utterly corrupted by political partisanship.

I felt on reading the *Journal* headline rather as I did back in 2018 when Chief Justice John Roberts rebuked President Trump for complaining about adverse treatment from an Obama-appointed judge, saying,

We do not have Obama judges or Trump judges, Bush judges or Clinton judges. What we have is an extraordinary group of dedicated judges doing their level best to do equal right to those appearing before them.

I can understand why the chief justice felt he had to say something *like* that, as he had done two years earlier, before the Trump era, when he said, “We don’t work as Democrats or Republicans.” But I can’t help wondering how he could have dared to say something in public that was by then so obviously untrue.

Since then it has become even more obviously untrue. It has also become obvious that there are Democratic jurisdictions with overwhelmingly Democratic jury pools, one of which has just handed down a ruinous and absurd \$148 million judgment against Mr. Giuliani for “defamatory” remarks he made about a couple of Georgia election officials—a judgment that the highly respected

and reputedly conservative editorial board of the *Journal* now considers, apparently, to be entirely consistent with American justice.

“What revolution?” asks *The Wall Street Journal*, in effect.

Consider also David Lewis Schaefer, writing for the conservative London *Daily Telegraph* (whose former proprietor, Lord Black of Crossharbour, has also been a victim of partisan American justice). Professor Schaefer’s view is that “America’s Mayor has fallen completely from grace. But his misfortune is his own doing.” I don’t know Professor Schaefer, who teaches at the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, Massachusetts, but his list of publications suggests a decidedly conservative bent. I can only suppose that the professoriat, like the media, now finds it so natural to take on the role of moralizers-in-chief, the ultimate arbiters of right and wrong by virtue of their membership in good standing of the ruling class, that even those among them who might otherwise be sympathetic to a man like Mr. Giuliani—or Mr. Trump—who is beset on all sides by enemies determined to destroy him, cannot resist scolding him. In the words of the late Jimmy Buffet, it’s his own damn fault.

Such appalling self-righteousness, presumably learned from the media, must prevent intelligent conservatives from seeing that the enemies of such men hate them not for anything they have done or not done—though they may have done blameworthy things—but for who they are and what they believe and who their friends and supporters are. What happens to them could happen to any of us, should we be so unfortunate as to fall into the power of enemies who hate us. But that is not how journalists (or, it seems, professors) think. Their motto is no smoke without fire—and their business is always, always to stoke the imagined fire. This is something they couldn’t do if they ever allowed themselves to believe that they were anything less than entirely shielded, through their own superior virtue, from any similar treatment themselves.

Some such thinking, at any rate, together with the merely wishful kind, must lie behind the belief of decent people, like my friends mentioned in the first paragraph, that America remains what America has always been and still is, according to President Biden: the land of the free and the home of the brave, a beacon of democracy and justice for all—if only democracy can be allowed to exclude as an option the most popular alternative to the aspiring one-party rule of the incumbent.

Over at *The American Mind*, Adam Ellwanger asks the most pertinent question about what he describes as the “numerous psychological manipulations” of the Biden administration and its media apologists:

If you’re reading this, you probably see through their tricks. But that hasn’t deterred our authorities from waving their magic wands. Why not? Typically, when the audience exposes a trick as mere sleight of hand, the performer stops trying to convince them of the lie. The administration’s persistence presents an interesting question: how do they see *themselves*? When they try to convince us that reality is something other than what it is, are they acting as magicians or illusionists? More simply: Does the administration expect us to *believe* that they have actually changed something about the world through a deliberate act of power? Or are their claims disingenuous—a means to induce a popular *misperception* so that the public sees reality inaccurately?

I think that this is a distinction without a difference. Actually, the promise of their revolutionary ideology to put them on “the right side of history”—and, therefore, make them immune to error—can only be fulfilled with the help of the most extraordinary imaginative contortions. Of these, they can never allow themselves to be more than about half-aware, and usually much less than half, as they use such contortions to evade realities that are apparent to anyone not ideology-bound. Yet even those who do not share the ideology can hardly bring themselves to believe the evidence of their senses that such “manipulations” are being practiced upon them.

Of course there are plenty of people of the Left and in the media who are fully aware of what they are doing and of what they are doing it *for*. But probably most of the media, like most of the masses, reject the idea that they are in the midst of a revolution because they just don't see it. Maybe those media personalities who spend their lives telling the rest of us what politicians really mean by what they say—and there is no doubt that this interpretive bent of the media's is priced in to what the politicians say when they say it—prefer to assume that the promised fundamental transformation of the Obama years must have meant something other than what it now obviously does mean.

Two years ago, the brilliant young author who writes under the name N. S. Lyons wrote a near-eight-thousand-word piece titled “No, the Revolution Isn't Over,” citing numerous premature obituaries of “wokeness” by mostly right-leaning authors and publications. These epitaphs have continued to appear since Lyons wrote, but his powerful arguments disputing this death, I'm sorry to say, have lost none of their force during the intervening years. Every day continues to take us further away from the world that those of us who are over sixty remember from our youth. That is unlikely to change, whatever happens in this year's presidential election.

“Even if the anti-woke were prepared to launch their own long march through the institutions,” wrote Mr. Lyons on his Substack, *The Upheaval*,

the cohort from which they would currently need to recruit their talent is the same one that's been busy tearing things down and chanting “the Revolution will not uphold the Constitution!” Of Generation Z Americans (those born after 1996) 51 percent report that America is “inextricably linked to white supremacy,” 52 percent support racial reparations, 60 percent believe systemic racism is “widespread” in general society, and 64 percent say “rioting and looting is justified to some degree” by the need to address systemic

racism “by whatever means necessary.” 51 percent believe the “gender binary” is “outdated,” and up to 40 percent self-identify as LGBTQ+ (although Gallup separately finds only about 16 percent do, compared to 2 percent of Baby Boomers). Fifty-nine percent support expanding non-binary gender options. Forty-one percent support censorship of “hate speech,” 66 percent support shouting down speakers they consider offensive, and 23 percent support using violence to silence such speakers. Sixty-one percent have positive views of socialism, and 70 percent think “government should do more to solve problems.” Sorry conservatives, but that's the sixty-seven-million-strong cohort who will fill the pipeline of employees, leaders, educators, and voters for the next two decades or so, even if Gen Alpha (those born after 2010) were all to become rampant little reactionaries tomorrow.

The greatest success of this American revolution, therefore, isn't even that its slowness and stealth have concealed its very existence from so many men and women of good will. It's that it has left the youngest generation of hopeful revolutionaries with no memory of a prerevolutionary past with which to compare the brave new world so long under construction by their teachers and mentors.

I think that I shall have a hard time selling my counterrevolutionary oeuvre, mentioned earlier, if the next generation believes, as the current one appears to, that America has not undergone a second revolution at all and remains what it has always been—either (officially) a beacon of freedom and democracy or (unofficially) a racial and sexual nightmare from which we all continue to strive to wake up. Either way, there is nothing in the past to cling to for support against the shifting tectonic plates of a political reality that we prefer not to notice. The most I and others like me can hope for is a change in the public attitude toward the past as (at best) an irrelevancy and a return to one belief, in particular, characteristic of that past: that it is possible to learn something from it.

Books

The universal Ulsterman

by Paul Dean

When Seamus Heaney was Professor of Poetry at Oxford, a friend of mine sent him some poems for comment. They were returned with a courteous note advising him to “keep your eye clear, your heart strong, your whole writing self braced and unbreathy.” My friend’s pleasure at this encouragement was somewhat diminished when, long afterwards, he heard Heaney say in an interview that that was his standard response when people sent him bad poems. Yet when one reads, in Christopher Reid’s edition of *The Letters of Seamus Heaney*, the sort of thing Heaney wrote to people whose poems he actually liked, one feels my friend had the best of it.¹ Ted Hughes is told that his collection *Wolfwatching* is “both plasm-tender and heart-sure”; Medbh McGuckian’s *Marconi’s Cottage* is “cloudy with mist all round it, but is pebbly-hard and watery-clear behind that gratifying aura”; in Gibbons Ruark’s *Rescue the Perishing* Heaney found “the outer and inner delicacies and distances so finely matched”; Derek Mahon’s *The Yellow Book* displayed “opulence of means and melody . . . buoyancy in the verse and balance in the feeling.” To which, Reid tells us, Mahon appended a note: “Pompous ass.”

Such Jamesian locutions form a marked contrast with the precision, accuracy, and felicity with which Heaney wrote about poems in his published criticism. The essays in

Preoccupations (1980), *The Government of the Tongue* (1988), and his Oxford lectures *The Redress of Poetry* (1995) repeatedly impress by their combination of analysis that never becomes pedantic with generalization that never becomes vacuous. R. F. Foster, in *On Seamus Heaney* (2020)—an ideal introduction to his work—praises the “expansiveness and enthusiasm” of his criticism, the “glancing but absolute exactness of his language.” That same balance of observation and reflection is found in his best poems as well.

A decade after Heaney’s death in 2013, his publishers at Faber (in the United Kingdom) and Farrar, Straus and Giroux (in the United States, working a year or so behind Faber) have launched a number of ambitious projects. The volumes under review here—*The Letters* and *The Translations of Seamus Heaney*—will be followed by Bernard O’Donoghue’s edition of the collected poems and a biography by Fintan O’Toole. Heaney’s interviews with Dennis O’Driscoll, *Stepping Stones* (2008), have already provided invaluable insights into his life and work. Despite occupying about as many pages as a Dickens or George Eliot novel, the letters still only constitute a selection; the earliest item dates from 1964, when Heaney was already twenty-five, and more intimate letters have been omitted at the request of the family. Consequently, personal revelations are few. What we have is largely professional and social correspondence, often dashed off, with apologies for neglect or late replies, while in

¹ *The Letters of Seamus Heaney*, edited by Christopher Reid; Faber & Faber, 848 pages, £40.

transit between readings and the increasingly stressful public duties demanded of a Nobel laureate who felt he had become “too much the mascot” and “a kind of product.” Heaney’s temperament emerges as it does in his published interviews and media appearances: warm, mischievous, generous, and sensitive. There are few asperities and a healthy dash of self-mockery. Some of the letters are in light verse, the most brilliant example being one to Robert Crawford (March 1996) to commemorate the bicentenary of Robert Burns, in which Heaney uses a Burns stanza form with dazzling skill, contriving to provide a critical appreciation which is also a comic tour de force.

Letters from Berkeley, where Heaney was a visiting lecturer at the University of California in 1970–71, reflect his excitement at discovering a social scene very different (“new suits and haircuts have about as much chance here as a snowball in hell”) from that in Ireland. He immersed himself in contemporary American poetry, impressed by its experimental boldness of form and tone, but, as he reported to O’Driscoll, he “couldn’t slip the halter of the verse line and the stanza” in his own work (greater flexibility was to come later). He was struck by the intensity of the anti-Vietnam movement and by the lack of self-doubt in the protesters: “I couldn’t imagine a poetry reading in Belfast directed simply and solely against the Troubles. The poets and the audience [in Ireland] were too clued-in to the complexity . . .” That is a characteristic reaction. Heaney’s resistance to demands for him to make political statements is well-known to his readers (and was bitterly resented by those, friends and colleagues among them, who accused him of equivocation). So it is intriguing to find him writing in 1973 to Brendan Hamill, a former pupil of his during his years as a schoolteacher, that in his early work he was not “very politically conscious *as a poet*” (original italics); that, even as violence increased in Northern Ireland, he “tried to be non-partisan and to comprehend all that was happening within the terms of history or myth”; and that, though his response may

have been oblique, “the voice can’t be *summoned*” (original italics).

In fact, as Foster’s monograph makes clear, there has always been a political dimension to Heaney’s work. Given the time and place of his birth and growing up, it could hardly be otherwise. But “politics” has to be taken in its original sense, as the question of what makes a community. At times, it’s true, Heaney felt the need to be more explicit. His letter of March 31, 1983, to Blake Morrison, who had included Heaney in *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry* which he had edited with Andrew Motion, enclosed a poem (later published) protesting politely but firmly against being categorized as “British”: “My passport’s green./ No glass of ours was ever raised/ To toast *The Queen*” (original italics). His political interventions were usually more indirect, such as the poem “Anything Can Happen” (2001), a version of an ode by Horace that is also a response to 9/11, or *The Burial at Thebes* (2004), his adaptation of Sophocles’ *Antigone*, which reflects the climate of President George W. Bush’s “War on Terror.”

Letters to Charles Monteith, the poetry editor of Faber, in 1972 show that Heaney planned a book on “the idea of an Irish poetic tradition,” which, in the event, came to nothing. But that tradition was always dear to him: *Sweeney Astray* (2001) is his abridged translation of the twelfth-century Middle Irish *Buile Suibhne*, and he devoted essays to Brian Merriman, W. B. Yeats, Patrick Kavanagh, John Hewitt, and Oscar Wilde. His letters to Tom Paulin, Derek Mahon, Michael Longley, Bernard O’Donoghue, and Medbh McGuckian remind us that he belonged to a remarkable constellation of Irish poets coming to prominence during the 1950s and 1960s. Heaney spoke eloquently about his Irishness in a lecture, “Through-Other Places, Through-Other Times; the Irish Poet and Britain,” printed in *Finders Keepers: Selected Prose 1971–2001* (2002). Here he suggested that the word “Britannic” which “allows equal status on the island of Britain to Celt and Saxon, to Scoti and Cymri, to Maldon and Tintagel, to *Beowulf* and the *Gododdin*,” might be a more acceptable alternative to

“British”; and he added that the concept of the “through-other,” an Ulster word meaning “physically untidy or mentally confused,” was applicable to the “Britannic.” The sectarian violence in Northern Ireland figured in his poetry in various guises, the best known being the “bog poems” in *North* (1975), which find an analogy to the Irish situation in the murder victims of Iron Age Jutland whose bodies had been preserved in peat. Translation, which was a significant part of Heaney’s output, is also a “through-other” activity, a trafficking between languages and cultures.

Heaney is both translator and translatee. Reid’s volume includes letters to his French, Italian, and Russian translators, and he has also appeared in Catalan, Finnish, modern Greek, and Spanish. His own translations, collected in Marco Sonzogni’s edition, remind us that, while never losing touch with his Irish roots, he commanded a European range of reference.² His major book-length achievements include *Beowulf* (1999), Henryson’s *The Testament of Cressid & Seven Fables* (2009), Book VI of the *Aeneid* (2016), and *Sweeney Astray*, as well as versions of Sophocles’ *Philoctetes* (*The Cure at Troy*, 1991) and *Antigone* (*The Burial at Thebes*). But these are by no means the whole story. Altogether in the new collection, Heaney draws on thirty-nine poets from fourteen different countries (the lack of an index of poets is regrettable). Ireland, understandably, predominates, with Italy (Dante) and France next in line. Eastern Europe also features, recalling the essays in *The Government of the Tongue* on Czesław Miłosz, Miroslav Holub, Zbigniew Herbert, and Osip and Nadezhda Mandelstam—poets who wrote, as Heaney put it, in “the indicative mode” posing a challenge to the cozier “conditional” mode of Western European and American poetry. In addition to these we have, among others, Brodsky, Cavafy, Pushkin, and Rilke.

Of course, Heaney wasn’t fluent in all the languages from which he translates—which raises a question about the accuracy of re-

² *The Translations of Seamus Heaney*, edited by Marco Sonzogni; Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 704 pages, \$50.

ferring to “translations.” He obviously read Irish, Latin, and French, as well as Old and Middle English, gaining access through the latter to the Middle Scots of Henryson, which has affinities with the speech of Ulster. In other cases he had to rely on cribs and existing translations, with help from native speakers where available. I can testify to the excellence of his translations from French. His *Beowulf* and Henryson are outstandingly good, although I enjoy the Henryson more, as Heaney himself seems to have done. (“I didn’t know or love *Beowulf* enough to remake it,” he admitted to O’Driscoll.) His brilliant introduction to the separately published *Beowulf* translation manages to be more exciting than the poem, whose austerities are unrelieved, but he catches both the pathos of Henryson’s *The Testament of Cressid* and the colloquial swagger of the *Fables*. Among his other translations from Old English, one should single out “Caedmon’s Hymn,” the earliest surviving poem in the language. Caedmon’s situation, as a farm worker in a community dominated by a religious institution, would have evoked family memories for Heaney, who would also have responded to the emphasis on the inspiration behind the act of making: the ignorant cowherd becomes a lyric poet following an angelic visitation in a dream.

In “The Impact of Translation” (included in *The Government of the Tongue*), Heaney recalls Stephen Dedalus’s quip, in Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist*, that “the shortest way to Tara was via Holyhead” (implying that only from abroad could Ireland really be understood), and adds that perhaps “the shortest way to Whitby”—for whose abbey Caedmon worked—“is via Warsaw and Prague.” Miłosz and Holub were crucially important to him poetically, although he did not translate either. His letters to Miłosz have, as Reid says, an “almost filial” affection; writing in 2002 to Fr. John Breslin, a Jesuit English teacher, Heaney comments, “I suppose I read him [Miłosz] as a kind of spiritual director, really.” His Eastern European translations are from lesser-known poets: Ana Blandiana and Marin Sorescu are Romanian, Ozev Kalda from Wallachia (now the Czech Republic). Heaney’s choices suggest a wish to

show solidarity with artists who had suffered under political censorship and persecution.

The letters provide evidence of Heaney's feelings about his own work, complementing the interviews in *Stepping Stones*. His early pseudonym, "Incertus," for poems published in a student magazine, points to a diffidence that never quite left him; even after winning the Nobel Prize, he was always extravagantly grateful for any praise from fellow poets and other friends. He writes to Karl Miller that *Field Work* (1979) is not "as tight and obsessive" as *North*, but "I like to think there's more of my personality relaxing in it." He admits to Helen Vendler that "there was something doughy and dutiful" about the sequence "Station Island" in the book of the same name (1984). (Vendler, who became a friend, published a monograph on him in 1998.) In 2012, responding to enquiries from David-Antoine Williams about his linguistic and etymological interests, Heaney identified *Wintering Out* (1972) as "the collection where language and its historical/political charge come into focus," adding that since *Field Work* "the language . . . was wanting to be more like clear glass than stained glass." He was commendably determined not to stand still artistically, even if the element of experimentation didn't always come off. In 1989, Craig Raine admitted to reservations about the relaxed manner of the sequence of forty-eight poems called "Squarings," in a draft version of *Seeing Things* (1991), but added that he had eventually been won over. In his reply, Heaney expressed relief at this, acknowledging "vague intimations of a book more generously loosened out, with more draperies of meditative, discursive things—and a more spacious patchwork of the bits." Both Vendler and Foster read "Squarings" in a positive light, as a visionary meditation on the process of creativity itself. Such an undertaking risks losing touch with the concrete, drifting too far into abstraction, a fault Heaney doesn't always avoid.

Heaney's later years were clouded by anxieties. In 2006, he had a minor stroke; in 2007 his wife, Marie, was treated (successfully) for

breast cancer; in 2009 he turned seventy and had to endure "the passage of the media juggernaut" in celebrations that made him feel "plundered"; in 2010 and 2011 he suffered severe depression, which he overcame with the help of medication, but in the latter year he again had a small stroke. Inevitably, his thoughts turned to mortality. Two months after the first stroke, he wrote to Jane Miller that, although he had abandoned Catholicism, its "structured reading [of] the mortal condition" had never quite left him and emerged in the many poems he wrote about ghosts and the underworld ("I've always had a weakness for the elegiac"). This is evident not only in his original work—preeminently "Station Island" but also the late "Route 110" from his last collection, *The Human Chain* (2010)—but in his translations of Book VI of the *Aeneid*, the first three cantos of Dante's *Inferno*, and the poem "Testimony: What Passed at Colonus," from Sophocles. To Michael Alexander he reflected that, at seventy-two, he must be about the age Beowulf was when he fought the dragon. The final pages of Reid's collection have a wistful, tender note, and in view of the anecdote with which I began this review I am glad to be able to record that in December 2012 Heaney took the trouble to write to a seventeen-year-old schoolboy fan, Dean Browne, thanking him for his letter of appreciation. Browne is now a published poet in his own right.

On August 30, 2013, Heaney sent a text message to Marie from the hospital on his way to an operation for a ruptured artery. It read *Noli timere*, "Don't be afraid." He died before the surgery could be performed. Two weeks earlier he had written his last poem, "In Time," dedicated to his granddaughter Siofra. Foster tells us that, at the All-Ireland Gaelic football semifinal held shortly after Heaney's death, "eighty thousand people stood and applauded for two minutes in homage." One cannot imagine a comparable event occurring at Wembley Stadium after the death of an English poet. Whatever Heaney believed, or did not believe, about life after death, through his work he has assuredly had, and will continue to have, an unassailable afterlife.

My fair gentleman

Ulinka Rublack

Dürer's Lost Masterpiece: Art and Society at the Dawn of a Global World. Oxford University Press, 480 pages, \$36

reviewed by David Platzer

Ulinka Rublack's substantial new book, *Dürer's Lost Masterpiece*, uses a lost 1509 altarpiece by Albrecht Dürer to paint a rich picture that includes art, collecting, commerce, religion, and the occult in Northern Europe during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when art, it seems, was going "global." It recounts Dürer's exasperation about being underpaid and rushed by his patron, a rich Frankfurt merchant named Jakob Heller, who had commissioned an altarpiece that was to include portraits of himself and his wife praying at the picture's lower corners. "I am losing time and money . . . What do you think my living costs are?" the master cried to the merchant. Even a successful artist's life can resemble a dog's.

Rublack, a professor at Cambridge University, tells us that Heller had little sense of the time it took a painter of Dürer's caliber and sense of dedication to create a painting. To turn out a quick job to satisfy an impatient, penny-pinching patron was not Dürer's style. Dürer, who aspired to be the "German Apelles," might have agreed with Dr. Johnson's putting "the Patron" together with toil, envy, and want. The *Heller Altarpiece*, as the work is now known, mattered as much to Dürer as it did to Heller. For Dürer, it was a showcase for his art. He painted himself into the central panel holding a sign in Latin, that he, Albertus Dürer, German, had painted the painting. He wanted the altarpiece to be in Frankfurt, a crossroads in Germany where people would see and admire it. In addition, he was using the painting to address posterity. At the time, many people believed the world was about to end. Dürer, however, intended this altarpiece to impress viewers five hundred years thence.

Dürer, though not in the position of an artist painting while bailiffs knock at his door, lacked any fixed income for many years. By 1509, he was

well known in his native Nuremberg, where he had been born in 1471, the son of a goldsmith of Hungarian origin. The young Dürer was a pioneer engraver, as was the slightly older Martin Schongauer, himself a goldsmith's son. Engravings could be produced in series and be sold at more modest prices than paintings. Dürer was an early example of a hard-working artist who could imply himself to be a gentleman, as Jan van Eyck had done before him. A Renaissance dandy, Dürer had an acute interest in grooming. "To know Dürer meant knowing a man who kept arranging his hair," Rublack writes, as if the Renaissance painter with his "carefully curated" hair was a 1970s rock star using his style to make a social statement. The book's unfortunate frequent mention of "drugs" in Dürer's period, presumably medicinal rather than recreational, furthers the comparison. The artist was doubtful of his status in Nuremberg, where he complained he was made to feel a "parasite." He admitted to his closest friend, Willibald Pirckheimer, his pleasure at finding himself regarded in Venice as a gentleman by the Venetians, whom he thought superior people, "intelligent, well-educated, good lute players and pipers, knowledgeable about painting, true paragons . . ."

The book is of particular interest when Rublack discusses Dürer and his two boon companions, Pirckheimer—a Nuremberg patrician and humanist who resigned his civil duties to work on translations from Greek and Latin—and Canon Lorenz Beheim, who had spent twenty-two years in the Vatican with Cardinal Rodrigo Borgia. Borgia became Pope Alexander VI, and Rublack describes his court as "sexually licentious." Beheim, a skilled astrologer, was also expert in chemistry and poisons, perhaps useful to the Borgia pope. He made Dürer's astrological chart and also gave advice to his friend about hair dye; one hopes Renaissance dyes were more effective than the pathetic ones we see on people now. Pirckheimer owned buildings all over Nuremberg, while Dürer had only one house where he was a tenant, sharing with his widowed mother as well as his childless brother and sister-in-law, on the corner of a noisy, busy street. He and Pirckheimer worked for Emperor Maximilian I, Dürer contributing

designs for tomb sculptures of Habsburgs and horoscope prints. In return the emperor arranged in 1515 for Nuremberg's Council to pay Dürer a hundred florins every year. This pension ended at Maximilian's death in 1519.

Dürer's friends laughed at his attempts to write spiritual poetry, but his letters and his diary of his journey to the Netherlands in 1520 allow us to know something of his life in addition to his art. His trip to the Low Countries was made partly in the hopes of finding new patrons in Maximilian's daughter, Margaret of Austria, and her young nephew, Emperor Charles V. Dürer gave Margaret a number of his works, including two paintings of her father, but Margaret disliked Dürer's portraits of her father and refused his other offerings. Antwerp was then the center of Northern Europe, and the artist was fascinated by Margaret's cabinets of curiosities. He traded prints for exquisitely made razors, gloves, and shoelaces and located a man of ninety-three years to model for his 1521 painting *St. Jerome in His Study*.

Around this same time he discovered Martin Luther. The book informs us that in February 1520, Dürer wrote that reading Luther "rescued him from deep anguish." Dürer's interest in Lutheranism is well known, though the reformer's dismissal of the Virgin Mary might have left Dürer's *Heller Altarpiece* vulnerable to destruction, as she was a crucial figure in the painting. Thankfully the altarpiece was spared from purges. There is a chapter in the book called "Becoming Lutheran," but there is no indication that Dürer went the whole way. He continued to take confession and he could not accept the condemnation of merchants, notwithstanding his differences with Heller, nor the iconoclastic element in the more extreme forms of Lutheranism. Pirckheimer opposed the reform movement's radical edge, and Dürer agreed with him.

The book's second half is about developments following Dürer's death. Rublack tells us that it was an "Age of Curiosity," its origins already evident to Dürer when he was in Antwerp. She sees two merchants, both art lovers, Hans Fugger (1531–98, from a Renaissance family of merchants as important as the Medicis), and the

moderately Lutheran textile merchant turned art agent from Augsburg, Philipp Hainhofer (1578–1647), as crucial to Dürer's posthumous renown, not least because of their connections with the court of Bavaria. Dürer's reputation as Germany's Apelles was in limbo after his death, with his prints going for a few florins, but it soon rose again. By the beginning of the seventeenth century, Emperor Rudolph II and the Duke Maximilian II were in competition "hunting Dürer." Rudolph II's death in 1612 removed him from the race, and Maximilian was able to buy from the Frankfurt Dominicans the *Heller Altarpiece*, notwithstanding Dürer's desire the previous century for the work to be in Frankfurt. Worse, the altarpiece perished in a fire in Munich in 1729. In a letter to Heller, Dürer provided precise instructions on caring for the altarpiece, but his words were ignored by the Dominicans, nor did they forward the letter to Maximilian. Before Maximilian bought the painting, he had the Nuremberg painter Jobst Harrich (1579–1617) make a copy of the altarpiece, and his replica gives us the only remaining idea of Dürer's lost masterpiece.

This book is a rich cornucopia of the period, when art was joining exotic shells, potions, and unguents as an international commodity. More to the point, it has much to tell about how Dürer and his contemporaries lived.

Sightseeing in the past

Peter Brown

Journeys of the Mind:

A Life in History.

Princeton University Press, 736 pages, \$45

reviewed by Amit Majumdar

Peter Brown began his career with a book about Augustine of Hippo, the author of what is thought to be the West's first autobiography. It's fitting that Brown caps his career with an autobiography of his own. Brown's is not a spiritual confession but an intellectual and professional one, as his title, *Journeys of the Mind*, suggests. Yet Brown isn't using the term "journeys" in an exclusively metaphorical sense.

Geography plays a key role throughout, as travel—from Ireland to the Sudan to Oxford, from Italy to Persia—shapes and broadens his mind as much as any colleague or book.

Born in Dublin in 1935, Brown caught a glimpse, as a boy, of the British Empire in its heyday. The empire, after the addition of formerly Ottoman “mandates,” had reached its largest extent. As the son of a senior railway engineer in the Sudan, Brown “fed [his] Mickey Mouse handkerchief to the resident hippopotamus in the Khartoum Zoo.” (The book is full of such fondly recalled details.) When the British Empire contracted, Brown was just old enough to perceive and understand that process, both in the newspaper accounts of revolutionary uprisings in Africa and India and in the return of his own family to Ireland, where the Browns had to make do on a modest half-pension.

The action of much of Brown’s book takes place in his own mind, specifically its encounters with other minds, both in person and through his readings. His vignettes of these eccentric and kindly figures of bygone academia are fond and full of interest, even for readers who have not encountered their names before. I was delighted to meet R. C. Zaehner, a lover of mysticism and a translator, like me, of the *Bhagavad Gita*:

He would soften beefsteaks by beating them with the college croquet mallet and . . . read the entire Sanskrit epic *Mahabharatha* in one such summer. . . . [Zaehner] liked to recount (preferably with drink in hand and with Berlioz playing loudly in the background) Gnostic, Zoroastrian, and Ismaili myths. . . . He once introduced me at lunch to a mystic of his acquaintance whom he studied: a sweet, old-fashioned English country gentleman, with large, dark eyes. He had recently injured his hand, for an ecstasy had come upon him while he was driving a lawn mower across his back meadow.

The proliferation of droll detail and captivating anecdote epitomizes Brown’s personality as a writer. Early in his career, this historian of the late classical world considered becoming an astronomer, then a professor of Greek, and then (inspired by Oxford’s pseudomedieval,

nineteenth-century spires) a medievalist. I suspect he could have made it as a novelist, too.

From a storytelling perspective, though, this book, at roughly seven hundred pages, is simply too long for its own good. Brown set for himself the task of tracking the development of his own mind, and so has included a lot of writers, scholars, and mentors he knew personally. It seems he could not bear to leave anyone out; at times, the book resembles a long speech of thanks that keeps listing name after name. Many are cameo appearances. Though Brown takes care to summarize his colleagues’ main ideas or the points he learned from them, the accounting does grow tedious, even for someone who admires this historian and adores his chosen subjects. Surely it would have been enough to say that *Augustine of Hippo* (1967) was well-received; half a dozen excerpts from newspaper reviews are half a dozen too many.

Each chapter is subdivided into shorter, titled subsections, which I suspect were written as separate notes and bundled chronologically to form the manuscript. The effect is choppy, and a few chapters lack meaningful narrative unity. At the same time, I see the value in Brown’s choice of form; it is a faithful reflection of how human memory works. His mind recalls its own development as a series of startling, transformative encounters. That is exactly right; a smoother, more “processed” version of this book would have falsified Brown’s development into something less serendipitous than it really was.

Journeys of the Mind is still a valuable record, though not everywhere designed with the reader in mind. Brown’s career reflects a deepening and broadening of the historian’s art over the past century. His description of Oxford in the 1950s reveals the limitations of its study of antiquity: the same subjects (very little beyond the reign of Trajan) and the same technique. That technique had not changed much since Edward Gibbon decided to write his history. Gibbon conceived his great book in Rome—and promptly went home to the library and read everything he could. Historiography, for centuries, relied almost exclusively on the written record.

By Brown's time, the discipline was forced to account for the rise of archaeology, anthropology, the intricate economic analyses of Marxism, and the decline of Eurocentrism in Western thought. An anthropologist who studied witchcraft among the contemporary Azande of South Sudan guided Brown's investigation of late Rome's widespread belief in sorcery. Even before his dissertation was finished, Brown had gotten "mud on the boots," assisting at digs outside Rome by cleaning church frescoes. "By standing on straw bales," he wrote to his parents at the time,

I was able to wash it [the fresco] down, to reveal beneath the dirt the un-faded colors of a 12th–13th century fresco in the Byzantine provincial style . . . with an inscription by the priest who had made it . . . !

This vignette could equally represent Brown's later career, restoring late antiquity to its vibrant, living colors. By the 1960s and early 1970s, late-antique Byzantium and Persia, for the first time, were "no longer treated as a marginal topic," which, in the context of Oxford at the time, "was a revolution in itself." *Journeys of the Mind* is in large part the story of the legwork Brown did, both in the library and on the road, to help bring about that reimagining.

The spirit of "field work" goaded Brown, in his study of the doomed Sassanian empire, to Iran, Kabul, and other places in the Islamized world. This "Eastern tilt," the journey that Brown identifies as the "most decisive" in his own career, may not have been as revolutionary as he claims; Gibbon, centuries earlier, had devoted entire volumes to the foundation of Islam and the rise of the Turks. Still, Brown and his contemporaries brought a renewed focus on developments in these regions, with Brown himself zeroing in on the Syriac world of the Fertile Crescent. Several passages in *Journeys of the Mind* recall, in their style and even their content, the Iranian travelogues of V. S. Naipaul, and these passages are some of the book's best. In Tehran, after lecturing sympathetically about pre-Islamic Zoroastrian society, Brown endured protests from young male

students in the audience. These zealots, just a few years later, would carry out the Ayatollah Khomeini's 1979 Revolution; here, they took Brown's portrait of Sassanian religious pluralism as implicit support of the Shah.

Throughout the book, Brown shows a great degree of insight into the relationship of his own historical moment to his historiographical writing. If you read the best historians of the generations before him, like Jacob Burckhardt in *The Age of Constantine*, you find the "senescence," "exhaustion," or "decadence" of pagan antiquity taken for granted. These terms get used interchangeably, but they all mean that the late Roman Empire ("late" itself has a connotation) had reached the end of some natural life cycle. This multiracial, multifaith "late Rome," doomed by the corruption of its ancient ideals, offers a foreboding precedent to doomsayers about the contemporary West. Caught up in these easy parallels, many forget that the Roman Empire, like God or Shakespeare, often serves as a blank screen on which the imagination projects its vision of the present. Though few remember this line of scholarship today, historians in the 1930s convinced themselves that the Roman Empire fell because it became an intolerable "surveillance state" under Diocletian and Constantine, with government overreach in every walk of life. Americans leery of the New Deal, Germans witnessing the rise of Nazism, and Russian intellectuals getting "reeducated" in Stalin's labor camps all projected their anxieties onto their field of study. The countless edicts of the Theodosian Code (which, as Brown notes, were nearly impossible to enforce in the provinces) became proof of "Big Government" rather than proof of its frantic ineffectuality. Those historians saw in the past what they saw around themselves.

Brown's generation witnessed what happened to world-dominating Europe between 1914 and 1945 and, in particular, to the British Empire. This sense of an empire dying an *unnatural* death informed Brown's approach to the period he chose to study. In the formulation of one of Brown's early influences: "Classical civilization did not die, it was murdered." Nothing about the course

of its history was predetermined by some Spenglerian mechanism or biological clock. Brown went on to paint a portrait of this period as vibrant, integrating its periphery and negotiating periodic crises in creative ways. Brown did justice, too, to the third-century philosophical and cultural surge of paganism (Plotinus, Porphyry, and others) on the eve of Constantine's conversion. Not even paganism's extinction was an inevitability.

Brown's intellectual travelogue is valuable in two ways. First, it offers a detailed roadmap (complete with Brown's many wrong turns and scenic excursions) to the study of late antiquity. A reader can use this book to compile a rich reading list of scholars and books that have been forgotten today. Brown discusses several idiosyncratic historians of the era, even ones he disagrees with—another factor that accounts for the book's length.

Students of history and professional historians, though, should treasure this book for its portrait of an ideal historian's mind. Brown's method is far indeed from the judgmental, moralizing, polemical approaches of ideologically motivated historians; he even counters such exalted "Enlightenment" figures of the past as Gibbon and Voltaire, whose witty objectivity marked the limits of their historical

empathy. Brown's approach allowed him to perceive the living power of faith in ancient societies, which is what gave his biography of Augustine—though Brown was neither a theologian nor a classical scholar at the time he wrote it—the roundedness that keeps it authoritative.

Brown's vision of late antiquity comes across as generous, synoptic in its inclusion of Zoroastrianism and the Islamic world, and free of either anti-Christian or anti-pagan rancor. His great advantage, from the beginning, was his vision of his own discipline:

a perpetual awareness of living beside an immense, strange country whose customs must be treated by the traveler from the present with respect, as often very different from our own; and whose aspirations, fears, and certitudes, though they may seem alien to us and to have turned pale with the passing of time, must be treated as having once run in the veins of men and women in the past with all the energy of living flesh and blood.

Though every historian has his or her own biases, one could do worse than choose, for one's guide to an era, a historian who defines his endeavor in this way. Though it takes the long way there and back, *Journeys of the Mind* charts and epitomizes an exemplary career.

*We mourn the passing of
William D. Gairdner (1940–2024)
A valued contributor to The New Criterion*

The vagaries of English spelling

by John Steele Gordon

“Rough,” “through,” “though,” “bough,” and “cough” are all spelled alike but don’t rhyme. I remember in school having to memorize a sentence that contained something like thirty-four exceptions to the “I before E, except after C” rule. All I remember of it today is, “On the *weir* in the *weird heights* behind the *sovereign’s* castle . . .” Mark Twain allegedly joked that “fish” should be spelled G-H-O-T-I, the GH as in “enough,” the O as in “women,” and the TI as in “nation.”

There is even a poem (written by a Dutchman yet) called “The Chaos.” It runs to 247 lines and begins,

Dearest *creature* in *Creation*,
Studying English pronunciation,

I will teach you in my verse
Sounds like *corpse*, *corps*, *horse* and *worse*.

I will keep you, *Susy*, *busy*,
Make your *head* with *heat* grow dizzy;

Tear in eye your dress you’ll *tear*.
So shall I! Oh, hear my *prayer*,

Pray, console your loving poet,
Make my coat look *new*, dear, *sew* it?

Just compare *heart*, *beard* and *heard*,
Dies and *diet*, *lord* and *word* . . .

Why is English spelling so chaotic? One reason, of course, is that English has never

had an official governing body such as the Académie Française (established in 1635) and the Real Academia Española (established in 1713). So English orthography has never been systematically reformed, as French and Spanish were, to make the spoken and written versions more alike and consistent.

The first real English dictionary was only published in 1604 and was not widely circulated. (Today, only a single copy is known to exist, in Oxford’s Bodleian Library.) So people at that time spelled English words pretty much any way they pleased, often based on which dialect they spoke. That’s why we are able to identify the five compositors of Shakespeare’s First Folio by their characteristic ways of spelling. Dictionaries didn’t become common until the second half of the seventeenth century (Samuel Johnson’s majestic *Dictionary of the English Language* was only published in 1755). It was then that English really began to settle down into a right way and a wrong way to spell, to the dismay of grade-school children and not a few adults.

As Middle English evolved into Modern English between 1400 and 1600, the pronunciation of many words changed radically because of what is known as the “great vowel shift.” What is now pronounced “bite” had been said “beet,” while “oot” became “out,” “boat” became “boot,” “mairt” became “meat,” and “matte” became “mate.” But while the sounds shifted, the spellings did not necessarily, being unfixed as they were.

Some consonants became silent in this period, but they did not drop out of the written language, which is why we have such spellings as “knight” and “knock.” Indeed, V is the only letter in the alphabet that is not silent in one English word or another. (To wit: *aesthetic*, *crumb*, *indict*, *Wednesday*, *imagine*, *gnaw*, *ghost*, *business*, *marijuana*, *know*, *colonel*, *mnemonic*, *autumn*, *leopard*, *pneumonia*, *lacquer*, *February*, *island*, *asthma*, *build*, *wrong*, *faux*, and *rendezvous*.)

But there are many other reasons as well. One is that English has a lot of phonemes (the various sounds that make up a language). Depending on the particular dialect, there are about twenty-four consonant sounds and as many as twenty vowel sounds, for a total somewhere in the forties. French has only about thirty-eight phonemes and Spanish a mere twenty-five, fewer than the twenty-seven letters in its alphabet, with only five vowel sounds, one for each vowel in the alphabet. That is one reason why Spanish spelling is so regular and so easy to master. (Hawaiian, remarkably, has only eight consonant sounds and around ten vowel sounds, which is why it sounds so sing-songy and why its vowel-laden loan words, such as “luau,” “poi,” and “hula,” show up so often in crossword puzzles.)

Many languages use diacritics—such as accent marks, the French cedilla, the Spanish tilde, and the German umlaut—to indicate which way a particular letter is to be pronounced. But English speakers, for whatever reason, just don’t like diacritics, and so they only show up in words recently borrowed from another language. That’s why the French “café,” a place where coffee is served, has now usually lost its acute accent but retains its two-syllable pronunciation.

And English is a highly imperialistic language that has borrowed words from a vast number of other languages (many of which, of course, have returned the compliment: “OK” is understood around the world today, and the Japanese word for gay bar is, well, “gayba”). We took “igloo” from Eskimo, “yo-yo” from Tagalog, “jungle” from Hindi, “sofa” from Arabic, and “raccoon” from Algonquian. Altogether, only about 20 percent of the modern Eng-

lish vocabulary can be traced back to the Old English of *Beowulf* and the Venerable Bede.

But, as we have seen, English speakers are orthographically conservative. When we borrow a word, such as “llama,” the pronunciation soon becomes typically English but the spelling doesn’t change, in this case retaining the Spanish LL, until recently considered a separate letter of the Spanish alphabet, but not the LL sound. In some other words we drop the foreign phonemes but keep the foreign spelling. That’s why words borrowed, or constructed, from Greek spell the F sound with PH, such as “photography” and “philosophy.” Why is it “capital city” but “Capitol building”? Again, etymology. “Capital” comes from the Latin word for head, *capita*, while “Capitol” comes from Capitoline, the hill in Rome where the Temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus was located. In many languages, such as Spanish, borrowed words are spelled as if they were native ones. So the English “cocktail,” borrowed in the 1920s, was immediately respelled *coctel*, and photography is spelled *fotografia*.

Finally, scholars in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries introduced what are known as “inkhorn terms,” borrowed from Greek and Latin, to dress up what they regarded as a rather low-class language. So while English already had a number of terms meaning to have inadequate economic resources, such as “poor,” “needy,” and “penniless,” all of which go back to Middle English, scholars brought in “impecunious,” from Latin. (As typesetters were then paid by the line, they naturally tended to favor such long words.)

But scholars also tried to change the English spelling of words already borrowed from Latin. The word “debt,” for instance, had been borrowed from Old French, “dette,” and spelled “det.” But because that word had come ultimately from the Vulgate Latin word “debitum,” they stuck a silent B into the word, where it remains to this day. The same thing happened to “dout,” which became “doubt,” to link it to Latin “dubitare.”

Shakespeare has fun with this pedantry in *Love’s Labour’s Lost*. The schoolmaster in the play, Holofernes, insists that pronunciation

should follow the spelling, not the other way around. And so the B in “doubt” should be pronounced, despite the difficulty of doing so.

Scholars also tried to affect English syntax, with less success. The first Poet Laureate, John Dryden (1631–1700), issued a dictum forbidding the ending of a sentence with a preposition because that is one of the few word-order rules in Latin. English, which is not descended from Latin and which has very strict word-order rules, however, does end sentences with prepositions. Winston Churchill is supposed to have statted a copyeditor’s correction to avoid a final preposition, writing in the margin, “This is the sort of arrant pedantry up with which I will not put.”

Is there anything to be done about English spelling? Well, people have been complaining about it at least since the mid-sixteenth century. John Hart, an educator and grammarian (and later Chester Herald of Arms in Ordinary), left an unpublished manuscript, written in 1551, entitled *The Opening of the Unreasonable Writing of Our English Toung*. He later published a proposed thorough reform of English spelling entitled *An Orthographie*. It called for adding six new letters to the alphabet and the use of many diacritics. Like all such fundamental overhauls of English spelling, it was ignored.

James Howell, the writer and grammarian (his *Proverbs* contains the phrase “All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy”), advocated a much more modest reformation of English spelling in 1662, proposing such reforms as spelling “logique,” borrowed from the French, as “logic,” and “tounne” as “town.” Many of these were quickly adopted.

In the early nineteenth century, the American lexicographer Noah Webster pushed for spelling reforms such as “color” instead of “colour,” “theater” instead of “theatre,” and “music” instead of “musick.” Most of these

were adopted in this country but often not in Britain and the empire.

Spelling-reform associations were formed in both Britain and the United States in the 1870s, but their proposed reforms, like all systematic ones, died aborning. In the late-nineteenth century, the *Chicago Tribune* editor Joseph Medill started using new spellings for some words in the newspaper. And between 1934 and 1975, the paper used eighty respelled words, such as, “burocrat,” “frate,” “harth,” “herse,” and “iland.” But they didn’t catch on with the public and were phased out in favor of standard spelling.

George Bernard Shaw left a considerable portion of his large estate to Britain’s Simplified Spelling Society to promote what was called, after his death, the “Shavian Alphabet” of forty-eight characters. It would have replaced the Latin one used in English for more than a thousand years. Again, it went nowhere.

The major problem with all fundamental spelling reforms is what economists call an installed-base problem. People learned the arbitrary and often illogical spelling system (if, indeed, “system” is the right word) of English in school. And they have little or no interest in learning a whole new one, however logical it might be. And publishers have no interest in adopting a new system unless their readers demand it, which they don’t.

The French and Spanish academies were able to make their spelling reforms in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries stick because literacy was very low at that time. Literacy in the English-speaking world today, however, borders 100 percent, making the opposition to major spelling reform much greater.

So it is highly unlikely that anything will change. And, thanks to a new technology that Mark Twain and George Bernard Shaw never dreamed of, there is less and less need to.

The technology is called “spell-check.”

The Lukacs centenary

by John P. Rossi

This month marks the centenary of the birth of the Hungarian American historian John Adalbert Lukacs (he died in 2019). He liked to say that he entered the world as two of his *bêtes noires*, Woodrow Wilson and Vladimir Lenin, departed. His parents were Jewish converts to Catholicism. His mother was an Anglophile who passed her love for all things English to John, a trait he retained for the rest of his life.

John fled Hungary for the United States in 1946 because he saw the coming victory of communism in his native country. He arrived in America with two advantages: he had a Ph.D. in diplomatic history from the University of Budapest, and he spoke clear, almost idiomatic English. With the growing number of students flocking to college under the GI Bill, John was quickly teaching classes at Columbia. Soon his friend the Austrian scholar Erik von Kuehnelt-Leddihn was leaving a job at a small women's Catholic college in Philadelphia, Chestnut Hill College, and recommended John for a permanent post. He taught there for forty years and as an adjunct at La Salle College (later University), where I met him in 1955 as a college sophomore in a senior course on twentieth-century European history. That event changed my life. I took all his courses and with his recommendation went on to get a master's in history at Notre Dame and a Ph.D. from the University of Pennsylvania. Between 1952 and the early 1960s, many other Lasallians would get doctoral degrees in history, all through John's intercession and recommendation. John and

I became colleagues at La Salle and friends for the rest of his life.

While at La Salle, John revised and expanded his doctoral thesis on Hungarian–Russian relations after World War I into a major examination of the role that Central and Eastern Europe played in World War II. *The Great Powers and Eastern Europe* appeared in 1953 to mixed reviews, and John didn't return to diplomatic history for the rest of the decade. He wrote widely for various magazines and journals during those years, including a few pieces for *The Saturday Evening Post*, which he was not proud of and never wanted to talk about. His best writing during the 1950s was for *Commonweal*, the Catholic intellectual weekly. John respected the literary quality of *Commonweal*, although he was not a liberal Catholic in any sense. He was an admirer of Pope John XXIII, who he believed returned the papacy to respect, but John was no fan of Vatican II, which the same pope launched—perhaps one reason why he stopped writing for *Commonweal* for years.

John's reputation as a conservative arose because, unlike many intellectuals at the time, he was never taken in by the Soviet myth. He had, however, no time for Senator McCarthy's anti-communist campaigns. For John the real threat was not communist subversion but Russian nationalism. He liked to describe himself as a reactionary in the sense that he reacted against the nonsense of the modern world. But he was a natural traditionalist, an admirer of the best of the past in art, literature, and music: Mozart, Jane Austen, the great artists

of the Renaissance. Among moderns he was a fan of Evelyn Waugh—his comic novels, but not *Brideshead*, which he found a little too romantic for his taste.

In his classes John included on his reading lists works of fiction and relatively few academic histories. It was in his classes that I was exposed to Orwell's essays, Robert Graves's *Goodbye to All That*, Stefan Zweig's *The World of Yesterday*, and Waugh's *Black Mischief*. Those readings were formative for me and wound up on my syllabi for years also.

John's classes were always packed, with outsiders often sitting in. He lectured standing, with his hands gripping his lapels, reminding me of pictures of Lincoln speaking. He made few gestures, spoke clearly and dramatically, and didn't use notes but followed his syllabus closely. He drew freehand maps on the blackboard that were amazingly accurate, although his map of Europe always showed Ireland as a beer glass foaming over. His classes were not only fascinating, but there was always an atmosphere of fun. Once in class after lunch with some of his students, he asked, "what was the last thing I said?" Somebody shouted, "I'll have another scotch and soda." John laughed louder than any of us.

After his experience with the *Great Powers* book, John turned to the life and work of Alexis de Tocqueville. He organized a centenary program at La Salle in 1959 that was attended by some of the biggest names in Tocqueville scholarship. For his part he wrote an important essay on Tocqueville's last years that appeared in the journal *French History* and edited a study of his relations with the racialist philosopher Arthur de Gobineau, *The European Revolution & Correspondence with Gobineau*, which showed the interaction between the two and how it influenced Tocqueville's ideas on politics and history.

During my senior year at La Salle, John told me of his plan for a book he thought was needed, a history—really an analysis—of the Cold War. He had been corresponding with George Kennan for some time, and he believed that Kennan's view of Russia's future was correct: the system would break down of its own contradictions. John said he wanted to show

how the Cold War developed, stressing the nationalism he believed had motivated Stalin. He also believed that the war state the United States had engineered in response to the Soviet threat was dangerous for America's future, a thought similar to Eisenhower's warning about the power of the military-industrial complex. (Interestingly, John was no admirer of Eisenhower, for whom he had voted in 1952. He believed America had lost an opportunity after Stalin's death to moderate the Cold War and blamed Eisenhower for the failure.)

When he finished *A History of the Cold War* ("A," not "The," because he said it was interpretation), he asked me to proofread it. I was thrilled when John took my comments to heart. I thought the narrative part was superior to his analysis of how the Cold War unfolded. Our friendship dated from those days. I was always gratified when he discussed his latest project, serious or frivolous, with me. He enjoyed the give and take, and in fact loved to argue historical issues.

Throughout the 1960s John's main interest was a massive historiographical study that he called *Historical Consciousness* (1968). It went through various titles and was inspired by his understanding of Werner Heisenberg's theories of indeterminacy and the related observer effect; John had corresponded with the physicist. John believed that history was a form of thought, not just an academic study, and he was convinced that the historian, the observer, altered the topic he studied.

For John this was his most important contribution to the study of history. He was outraged when the book was neglected by the historical profession and failed to receive serious reviews. This treatment went far in alienating John from his field. He had little contact with the academic side of the history game thereafter and devoted himself to the American Catholic Historical Society, of which he served as president in 1977.

In the 1970s John returned to his first interest, diplomatic history, and especially the onset of World War II. His book *1945, Year Zero: The Shaping of the Modern Age* (1978) was a long, reflective essay on the impact of the war, espe-

cially on Germany, written in a vivid narrative style that increasingly became part of John's repertoire. It was *The Last European War: September 1939–December 1941* (1976), however, that marked the beginning of John's greatest contribution to our understanding of the Second World War. *The Duel, 10 May–31 July 1940: The Eighty-Day Struggle between Churchill and Hitler* (1991), along with *Five Days in London, May 1940* (2001), saw John develop his argument for the centrality of Churchill as the man who could have lost the war if he had given in to peace terms with Hitler in the summer of 1940. Churchill was the nearest thing to an idol that John had, and he returned to him again and again in his writings over the years. His thesis about how close England came to making a deal with Hitler in late May 1940 is now an accepted part of World War II studies.

He regarded his historical study of how Hitler was understood by historians, *The Hitler of History* (1997), as one of his more meaningful works. He believed that you could come to a clear understanding of a historical figure by analyzing how they were interpreted by various historians. The book blended bibliography with sharp historical analysis and for John confirmed his view that Hitler was the most significant revolutionary figure of the twentieth century.

John maintained a continued interest in World War II—he wrote short books about Churchill and his “Blood, toil, tears, and sweat” speech as well as a portrait of Stalin—but also found time to pen an appreciation of George Kennan. That friendship dated back to the early 1950s, and their correspondence and lunch meetings lasted almost to the end of Kennan's life.

John's approach to historical studies was capacious. Two books that were favorites of his demonstrated a breadth of interest rare among those writing serious history today and were paeans of praise to the two cities that shaped him: *Philadelphia: Patricians and Philistines,*

1900–1950 (1981), and *Budapest 1900: A Historical Portrait of a City and Its Culture* (1988).

John loved his adopted city and knew its quirky characters. It is typical that in his Philadelphia book the discussions of the rogues and philistines produce the best chapters. (Consider Senator Boies Penrose, nicknamed “Big Grizzly” and the last of the old-guard Republican barons, and William Bullitt, the Wilsonian liberal who turned against Wilson and in Lukacs's view became one of our best ambassadors to the Soviet Union.) It amused John to write in his chapter on Albert Barnes and his art foundation of how the chemist outwitted the arts establishment and produced one of the greatest collections of Impressionist art in world.

His Philadelphia book received good reviews and sold well, but his Budapest book was too esoteric for American tastes. It was respectfully reviewed and sold poorly, but that didn't matter to John. It was his *beau geste*, his labor of love. I understand it is thought of highly in his native Hungary.

John never gave up writing, even as his health became more precarious. He published his last book, really an extended essay, *We at the Center of the Universe*, three years before he died in 2019. His last essay, a piece for *Commonweal* on Churchill, Roosevelt, Stalin, and Hitler, appeared two years before he died.

Visits became difficult for me—John lived an hour away, near Valley Forge Park, and the roads seemed too fast and dangerous to drive. In my last visits he was in poor physical condition but mentally as sharp as ever. We couldn't go out to lunch but sat around his beautiful home overlooking a lake and talked history. He was rereading *Barchester Towers* during that visit, for the fifth or sixth time he said. Trollope was a favorite, and he was fond of repeating the line of the Bishop of Bath and Wells, also a Trollope fanatic, who had said: “There is nothing I like better than to lie in my bed with my favorite Trollope.”