

# The New Criterion

March 2024

A monthly review *edited by Roger Kimball*

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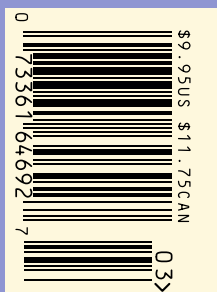
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# The New Criterion *March 2024*

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# Notes & Comments: March 2024

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## *Hockey-stick horrors*

The Washington, D.C., jury spoke! Twelve years and who knows how many millions of dollars later, we finally have a verdict in the defamation case brought by the climate alarmist Michael “Hockey Stick” Mann against Mark Steyn and Rand Simberg. What had Simberg and Steyn done? They had pointed out that Mann had manipulated the data behind his now-discredited Chicken Little graph showing rising temperatures in the shape of a hockey stick. Simberg also invoked Jerry Sandusky, the then-disgraced, now-forgotten football coach who was convicted of child molestation. All that made poor Michael feel badly. He lost friends, he said. He lost grants. So he sued. We didn’t see anywhere his acknowledgement of losing credibility, but that was his biggest loss. Yet it had nothing to do with what Steyn or Simberg wrote. His reputational demise was simply the result of the revelation of misused data behind his infamous graphic.

The big day was February 8. And what do you suppose the verdict was? If you have to ask, you weren’t paying attention. Didn’t you catch the detail that the case was heard in Washington, D.C., that the plaintiff was a certified, Al Gore–approved lunatic about “climate change”? Didn’t you note that the prominent defendant was Mark Steyn, one of the most intelligent, outspoken, and funny conservative pundits on the planet (and for more than a decade the theater critic of *The New Criterion*)? *Of course* the jury found for Mann, just as any jury

convened in Washington, D.C. (or New York for that matter), would find for any plaintiff in any case about any issue where the defendant is a high-profile conservative. That’s the way our so-called system of justice works these days.

It is a point that Justice Samuel Alito made in his dissent when Steyn and Simberg petitioned the Supreme Court to take the case back in 2019. Alito made a rousing defense of free speech, especially when the speech in question bears upon contentious policy issues, and went on to observe that “When allegedly defamatory speech concerns a political or social issue that arouses intense feelings, selecting an impartial jury presents special difficulties.” You can say that again. “An impartial jury”—the very phrase has become risible. Moreover, Alito continued, “when . . . allegedly defamatory speech is disseminated nationally, a plaintiff may be able to bring suit in whichever jurisdiction seems likely to have the highest percentage of jurors who are sympathetic to the plaintiff’s point of view.” Bingo.

But, as we say, Alito was in the minority. SCOTUS didn’t take the case, and so there were five more years of litigation and legal fees. Mann didn’t seem to care. As far as we know, no one has revealed who has been paying his legal fees. It is refreshing to note, therefore, that the decision, bad as it is from the point of view of principle, is unlikely to discommode Messrs. Steyn and

Simberg much. In what might, just possibly, have been the expression of a sense of humor, the jury awarded Mann \$1 in compensatory damages from Steyn and Simberg each. It also awarded him \$1,000 in punitive damages from Simberg and a cool \$1 million from Steyn.

That \$1 million might get your attention. But as Steyn pointed out, the Supreme Court has said that “in practice, few awards exceeding a single-digit ratio between punitive and compensatory damages . . . will satisfy due process.” A single-digit ratio, e.g., four to one, say, or even nine to one. So we’re looking at \$4, or maybe \$9. The nice thing about this jury, also possibly arguing for its sense of humor (or, just possibly, its stupidity), is that they went for a thousand to one in Simberg’s case and a million to one in Steyn’s. We wonder if that is a record. In any case, our experts report that Mann will not even be able to afford a single new hockey stick with any proceeds that might, someday, trickle into his account.

And who knows when that will be. February’s verdict was merely the prelude to a fresh set of appeals. Lawyers have school fees and mortgages to pay, too. The rallying cry is “billable hours.” Apart from the preposterous and expensive legal process itself, there are two issues here. Justice Alito touched on one when he mentioned the First Amendment. As one of Steyn’s colleagues noted in the aftermath of the verdict, “The precedent set today . . . means that disagreement and/or criticism of a matter of public policy—the founding principle of this country—is now in doubt. And should you choose to give voice to any dissent, you can be brought before a jury, held responsible, and fined.” Do we still have a First Amendment that protects free speech? The jury has yet to render a verdict on that question.

The second big issue was touched upon by John Williams, an attorney for Michael Mann, in his closing argument. The jury, he said, ought to award punitive damages so that in the future, no one will dare to attack “climate scientists.” It was an absurd argument, and irrelevant to boot, something the judge recognized when he sustained objections from the defendants. Williams also shoved in something about “election

deniers,” just to gratify his Washington jury with the ghost of Donald Trump.

For some years now, climate hysterics and their political and academic enablers have been describing those who disagree with them about the science of climate change as “climate deniers.” This was the fetid well from which John Williams sought to draw in his closing remarks. The echo of “holocaust deniers” is deliberate and pernicious. A “holocaust denier” is someone who denies a publicly verifiable historical enormity. But a so-called climate denier is merely someone who disputes an ideological construct masquerading as a scientific truth. We hope that Messrs. Steyn and Simberg will at long last prevail in court. So far, the process they have endured has been like something out of Kafka.

### *Modern moronics*

Franz Kafka is a handy author to bear in mind these days. His surreal sense of the macabre is pertinent and illuminating about so many quotidian realities we face. Consider what happened last month at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Perhaps you have had occasion to visit that establishment. If so, you know that it is a wide-ranging repository of nineteenth- and twentieth-century European and American art. Cézanne, Van Gogh, Monet, Manet, Picasso, Braque, Beckmann, plus Winslow Homer, Jasper Johns, Edward Hopper, and Jackson Pollock: the collection is as various as the atmosphere is pretentious.

But what, to move on to a question that no one is asking, does the Museum of Modern Art have to do with “colonialism”? If you said “Nothing. It has nothing to do with colonialism,” go to the head of the class. But since “colonialism” is supposed to be one of the signal evils of the age (it isn’t really, you know), and since the Museum of Modern Art is, among other things, a temple to what Thorstein Veblen called conspicuous consumption, it was probably only a matter of time before a band of sweaty and hysterical “protestors” descended on MOMA to make a public

nuisance of themselves and skirl about the evils of “colonialism” and—the meme du jour—Israeli perfidy toward the poor Palestinians.

And so it came to pass. The silly season usually doesn’t come until August, but this year February was swaddled in silliness. Hundreds of bored and underemployed Palestinian sympathizers—many wearing COVID masks, we could not help noticing—installed themselves in the museum, shutting it down to the public. Why? Because “Art is but one of many weapons in the colonial arsenal.” Really? “These museums are colonial repositories.” Care to explain? “The museum is a colonial vehicle.” Gosh.

According to some reports, as many as eight hundred “activists” flooded into the museum chanting “Free Palestine” and similar ditties. We thought wistfully of the nine protestors who glued themselves to the floor of a Volkswagen facility in Germany to protest carbon-dioxide emissions. When the working day ended, VW officials locked the doors and switched off the lights and heating. The protestors spent the night glued to the floor. We admire the pluck and the initiative of the VW officials. We could do with a bit more of that candid spirit in our cultural institutions.

### *Modern madness*

Since Kafka is on the menu, we note that it has been thirty years since we bid farewell to the annual meetings of the Modern Language Association. Time was, we would look in upon those inbred jamborees annually to savor the latest in reader-proof, politicized grandstanding. At some point, however, we felt that, like Macbeth, we had “supped full with horrors” and resolved to leave those annual exhibitions of narcissistic nullity to others. Life really is too short.

Nevertheless, someone called attention to this year’s festivity, which convened in the once-great city of Philadelphia. It was full of the usual perverse “sex in the head” (in D. H.

Lawrence’s phrase) nonsense: “Queer and Trans Multispecies Justice,” “Bodies, Bodies, Bodies: Theorizing Complex Embodiment,” “Queer Relationalities,” “The Place of Identity in Queer Studies,” “Group Sex,” etc. etc. There was also this little beacon of virtue-signaling tucked away in the online program under the rubric “MLA Land Acknowledgment.”

We acknowledge that the territory on which we gather for the 2024 convention, the city now known as Philadelphia, is part of Lēnapehòkink, the ancestral homelands of the Lenape people since time immemorial. We honor the Lenape tribal nations—the Delaware Nation, the Delaware Tribe of Indians, and the Stockbridge Munsee Community—whose governments now reside in different states as a result of colonial-settler violence and dispossession but who maintain ongoing relationships with their homelands. We take this opportunity to thank the original caretakers of this land.

It is not clear that airsickness bags were distributed along with this nauseating declaration.

We are not proposing to return to MLA anytime soon. But amid the usual carnival of perversity there was one bijou we thought might interest our readers. No, it has nothing to do with, you know, *literature*. The denizens of the MLA and indeed of the humanities departments of most of our universities wouldn’t countenance anything so retrograde. But how’s this, a session on “Vegetal Afterlives”?

“Advancing recent work in critical plant studies”—“critical plant studies”? alas, yes—“asking how plants offer vibrant models of resistance to environmental destruction through their persistent attempts to create a Plantocene, . . . panelists focus on the theme of vegetal resistance, considering how plants can offer models of resistance for human crises like systemic racism, unnatural disasters, and climate change.”

The real question that has to be asked, though, is how much had to go wrong that the largest and most prestigious professional humanities organization in the country would be home to such garbage. A dissertation on that subject might be very worth reading.

# Israel's eternal dilemma

*by Victor Davis Hanson*

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The gruesome massacre of over 1,200 Israelis on Saturday, October 7, 2023, was deliberately timed to coincide with the fiftieth anniversary of the Yom Kippur War, a conventional conflict that began when the Israel Defense Forces were similarly surprised on Saturday, October 6, 1973.

The nature of the current conflict—begun by a massive murder spree led by the terrorist gunmen of Hamas—is, of course, quite different from that of the Yom Kippur War. That earlier war broke out with surprise attacks from the armored and air forces of Egypt and Syria, with some additional but marginal support from surrounding Arab nation-states. Moreover, the assaults of 1973 were for the most part aimed at combatants, not civilians, and primarily fought for strategic ground.

In that way, the Yom Kippur War was dissimilar from the October 7 assault on Israeli kibbutz residents and concertgoers. The recent bloodbath of hundreds of civilians was designed by five members of the top terrorist leadership of Hamas in Gaza—the brothers Yahya Sinwar and Mohammed Sinwar (both reportedly still alive, hiding in bunkers beneath Gaza), the notorious military commander Mohammed Deif, the Hamas military council grandee Rawhi Mushtaha, and the now-deceased Ayman Nofal, of the so-called Gaza Brigade, who was killed by the Israelis last October. Their likely aims were to commit unprecedented mass murder on Israeli soil, instill terror among the citizen population, take hostages to mitigate Israeli retaliation, derail

ongoing efforts to normalize relations between Israel and moderate Arab regimes, demoralize the West, stir up renewed pro-Hamas protests in the United States and Europe, and by their sheer macabre slaughtering win global awe and even support for their gruesome audacity.

Hamas started the October 7 war with an invading force of a mere 3,000 gunmen, followed by a rag-tag mob of 500 or more civilians, all eager to murder, loot, destroy, and rape unarmed Israeli women, children, and elderly. In comparison, those invading murderers amounted to only a fraction of the million Syrian and Egyptian troops—equipped with over 3,500 tanks and 900 aircraft—that invaded Israel in the first few days of the nineteen-day war of 1973. It is a truism, however, that over the last fifty years it has proven far easier for Arab belligerents to kill en masse unarmed Israeli civilians than to confront the IDF.

Indeed, more Jews were killed and wounded in twenty-four hours by the small Hamas force of terrorists than on any single day since the Holocaust—a death toll of some 1,200 individuals, among them nearly 850 known civilians, alongside 4,834 wounded and 243 taken hostage. By contrast, in the three-week Yom Kippur War—still considered Israel's costliest and most difficult conflict—the huge conventional forces of Syria and Egypt, together with thousands of auxiliary Arab troops, inflicted somewhere around 2,600 total fatalities, with perhaps 8,000 wounded, and likely took over 290 captives. That is, in just a single day, the 3,000 Hamas terrorists killed

and wounded nearly half the number of total casualties inflicted by the huge forces of Egypt and Syria over almost three weeks of nonstop conventional fighting.

The October 7 terrorist assault has nonetheless prompted a months-long war as well, beginning with a conventional military reprisal from the IDF, which about three weeks later entered Gaza and began systematically destroying Hamas's vast subterranean city of tunnels. Whatever the disparities between the 1973 invasion of conventional forces and the 2023 murder spree of a few thousand rampaging gunmen, the similarities between the two wars remain both uncanny and instructive.

The early stages of the two conflicts were similar in timing. Fifty years ago, Israel was caught off guard as millions were celebrating the Sabbath during the Yom Kippur holidays. That holiday attack, its Arab enemies reasoned, would ensure surprise and also delay the call-up of reserves—even if the Israelis might have had some notion of the impending invasion in the hours before the assault. Hamas had just that earlier success in mind on October 7.

The Israelis were similarly observing the Sabbath, this time during the Jewish holiday of Shemini Atzeret which follows the week-long celebration of Sukkot, making it difficult to call in reinforcements to the Gaza border, much less mobilize Israeli reserves. It is a trademark of Islamic terrorists to strike during Christian and Jewish religious holidays, perhaps aware that any conventional and reciprocal response timed to Ramadan would be considered blasphemous or somehow unfair and against the so-called rules of war.

The implication of both attacks was that without the advantage of surprise, the Arab enemies of Israel would have faced the full mobilization of the IDF and thus had no chance of inflicting much damage at all on Israel. It is perhaps also a signature of Islamic war against Western powers to seek iconic or anniversary dates, sometimes obscure in the West, that resonate within the larger Muslim community. The 9/11 attack may not have been chosen so much to echo the 911 Ameri-

can emergency phone number as to signal payback for the calamitous defeat of Islamic forces on that very date in 1683, in the final failure of the siege of Vienna. In turn, the fall of the Twin Towers apparently inspired, eleven years later to the day, the attacks on the American consulate in Benghazi on September 11, 2012.

Intelligence failures have also characterized both wars. These lapses have been committed by all three services—military (Aman), internal security (Shabak/Shin Bet), and foreign (Mossad)—as well as by the respective governments of Golda Meir and the current Israeli prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu. Despite the half-century interval, there are again commonalities that explain these surprising breakdowns.

Postbellum inquiries found that in 1973, Israelis were still captive to the confidence that followed their incredible victory in the Six-Day War of 1967. In the six years since that stunning success, the Israeli government had felt that its recently acquired territories in Gaza, the Golan Heights, Sinai, and the West Bank had finally given the Jewish state strategic depth—certainly enough room to preclude any further surprise invasions of the pre-1967 borders of Israel.

In addition, the defeat, post-war humiliation, and death in September 1970 of the Egyptian president, the charismatic pan-Arab leader Gamal Abdel Nasser, was thought to have deflated some of the frontline fury against Israel. That sense of demoralization among Israel's enemies only grew the next year on unexpected news from Syria, where a successful coup by the relatively unknown Alawite Hafiz al-Assad had removed and imprisoned the supposedly far more formidable and militant dictator, the Ba'athist general Salah Jadid.

Even more importantly, Israeli intelligence had concluded that the Soviet Union was tiring of arming Arab states in their predictably failed efforts to destroy the Jewish state. The Soviets' weariness seemed confirmed by Assad's own anger at Russian reluctance and his permanent imprisonment of the more loyal Russian client Jadid. In Egypt in July 1972, President Anwar Sadat had reportedly and

unexpectedly expelled all Soviet military advisors, in a seemingly bizarre decision to part company with his country's traditional arms supplier. In addition, there were occasional back-channel peace feelers emanating from Cairo to Israel, purportedly with proposals along the lines of regaining Sinai in exchange for the recognition of the Jewish state.

As a result, by late 1972 Israel had concluded that its recently defeated enemies were still in disarray. They appeared orphaned from their traditional military patron in Moscow, no longer viable proxies in the Cold War, and increasingly diminished as threats to Israel's new strategic space—perhaps at last even forced to consider a comprehensive peace. Attention turned instead to the mounting, but supposedly less serious, non-state-sponsored terrorist incursions from the West Bank, organized by the recently formed Palestine Liberation Organization and increasingly under the command of the Fatah leader Yasser Arafat.

While Israel had ostensibly never been stronger, more secure, or more confident than in the fall of 1973, it was also confronted with insidious new dangers and underappreciated responsibilities. The post-1967 additions of the Gaza Strip, the Golan Heights, East Jerusalem, the Sinai, and the West Bank had added a vast expanse of some twenty-five thousand square miles of territory under Israeli control—*three times the area within Israel's 1949 borders*. These territories certainly offered security buffers, but they also spread already-taxed IDF forces even thinner on ever-more-distant frontiers, with new responsibilities for governing large Arab populations. The border outposts alone created long external supply lines and increased manpower demands on the tiny, 3.2-million-person Jewish state—another fact not fully appreciated in the exuberant years following the Six-Day War.

In eerily similar fashion, fifty years later, Israel also misunderstood the relatively recent hiatus in Hamas terrorism, wrongly judging the terrorist threat from Gaza as increasingly somnolent. Moreover, the government considered the violently terroristic Hamas a more authentic representative of the Pales-

tinians, with more grassroots support, than the traditionally more powerful Palestinian Authority. Therefore, Israel in counterintuitive fashion directed more of its own support to the militant Gazan leadership. Few in the intelligence services or the government fully grasped the dangers of normalizing in any fashion the murderous Hamas, whose various charters still call for the extermination of the Jewish state.

As part of this dangerous normalization, kibbutzes along the Gaza border increasingly invited in day laborers from Gaza, who eventually numbered nearly twenty thousand (some 13 percent of all Palestinian workers inside Israel). Wages were roughly comparable to those accorded Israeli day laborers, and four times higher than in Gaza itself.

Many Israelis wrongly assumed the ensuing prosperity and familiarity would lessen tensions on the border, rather than provide Hamas with vital intelligence on the security, armament, and numbers of Israeli kibbutzes and towns facing the Gaza Strip. More importantly, there was scant evidence from similar past efforts that Palestinians witnessing firsthand Israeli accomplishment and affluence would embrace a desire for emulation, rather than feel envy for, and even hatred of, their success.

Still, long before the October 7 massacre, there was skepticism about the real intentions of the Hamas rapprochement—as outlined, for example, in a pessimistic May 2021 column in *The Jerusalem Post*:

Historians may agree that it is still too early to evaluate the results of the recent events in Israel and Gaza, but our limited historical perspective might suggest that several Israeli wide-held conceptions have been shattered. The first relates to Israel's intelligence assessment that Hamas is not interested in escalating its struggle against Israel and is focused on its domestic concerns.

Unfortunately, despite such large-scale skepticism that Hamas could ever be reformed, the rosy intelligence assessments prevailed. On the eve of the October 7 massacre, the Jewish state had never seemed more prosperous, secure, and yet apparently fac-



tious. For example, the largest protests in Israeli history erupted for months during 2023 over the Netanyahu government's proposed reforms of the Israeli Supreme Court. Amid demonstrations that shocked and delighted Arab neighbors, reports circulated that some IDF reservists had refused normal service calls in further protest.

Israel recently became a net exporter of natural gas from its vast and newly developed offshore fields. Its per capita GDP has soared, and by 2023 was equivalent to levels in France and the United Kingdom. Five vast desalination plants provide Israel with over three-quarters of its potable water. Before the war, there was talk of further joint ventures and United Nations-funded efforts to increase the desalinated water supplies being sent to the West Bank and Gaza. And there were still hopes—despite vetoes by the Biden administration, to the delight of Turkey—of rebooting the Eastern Mediterranean pipeline project, in which Israel, Greece, and Cyprus would jointly develop and transport Mediterranean natural gas into southern Europe.

In sum, among some influential Israelis there prevailed a sort of end-of-history illusion that their amazing prosperity might at last solve the perennial Palestinian question via an osmosis of affluence. In the diplomatic sphere, there seems in retrospect to have been a similar naive optimism. The Biden administration's misguided effort to resurrect the Obama-era Iran deal had failed, to the relief of Israelis. Moreover, Biden's rejection of the Trump-brokered Abraham Accords was gradually being rebooted into open (if opportunistic) support for and a restarting of talks to promote normalization between Israel and the Gulf kingdoms—with long-awaited hints of new overtures from the Saudis.

If Israel made disastrously unrealistic appraisals of the capabilities and intentions of Hamas, and entertained equally misguided notions that its own startling success and wealth were diminishing the attractions of terrorism for Palestinians, the United States itself, in quite different ways, was also losing its means of deterrence in the Middle East. And that reality was widely appreciated—and fueled—by

Iran and its satellites, such as Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Houthis of Yemen.

The Biden administration obsequiously but in vain sought to rekindle the Iran deal. It inexplicably lifted oil sanctions on Tehran, resulting in an influx of somewhere between \$60 and \$90 billion in petroleum revenues there since the departure of Trump. The new administration was on record in seeking to route \$1.2 billion *each* for the releases of the six American hostages held in Iran. Biden restored financial aid to both the West Bank and Gaza. He dropped the terrorist designation for the Houthis in Yemen. His diplomatic team was openly critical of the Netanyahu government and made no effort to disguise its own preference for a liberal alternative that would better accommodate Palestinian agendas.

This sense of eagerness to appease the non-Israeli Middle East was coupled with a loss of U.S. strategic deterrence in general. The massive American collapse in and flight from Afghanistan of August 2021—with a multibillion-dollar trove of weapons abandoned to the Taliban—sent encouraging signals to an array of American enemies. And these enemies' later perception that a near historically unpopular Biden either could not or would not do much about the February 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine was reinforced by the late January 2023 weeklong flight of a Chinese espionage balloon across the continental United States with impunity.

In the wake of the October 7 attack, the failures of U.S. deterrence have become even more plain. There has been constant rocketing of U.S. military installations in Syria and Iraq by Iranian-allied terrorists. The Houthis have repaid the Biden delisting of them as terrorists by stepping up drone and rocket attacks in the Red Sea. In sum, all these aggressions and catastrophes have contributed to the sense that the United States is in no position to deter its own enemies, much less those of its allies.

The same had been true in October 1973—on the eve of, during, and immediately after the Yom Kippur War—as similar doubts arose about both the reliability and the capability of the United States as Israel's patron. Chronic left-wing domestic terrorism con-

tinued throughout 1972–73 and peaked in September of the latter year with the Weather Underground's bombing of the ITT headquarters in New York and Rome. Massive demonstrations broke out over the Supreme Court decision in *Roe v. Wade*, adding to the persistent anti-war protests.

Indeed, in early 1973 Vietnam still dominated the nightly news, as the administration gave a series of concessions to the North Vietnamese to ensure the return of American prisoners of war and to bring an end to American participation in the decades-long misadventure. The media exposed the supposedly illegal American bombing of Cambodia that by August was forced to cease, ensuring the communist takeover of that country, which soon ended in genocide.

All summer long, with congressional hearings aired daily on national television, the conundrum of Watergate weakened the Nixon administration's credibility abroad and ability to govern at home. By the late spring of 1973, Nixon had fired his two top White House aides, John Ehrlichman and H. R. Haldeman, following the forced resignation of White House Counsel John Dean. The latter had flipped to a prosecution witness, even as Attorney General Richard Kleindienst was also forced to step down.

Amid the executive-branch turmoil, by early autumn the House was heading toward a likely impeachment of President Nixon, as executive–legislative debates broke out over revelations of the White House's secret system for recording presidential phone calls—including confidential conversations with foreign leaders. On the last day of the war, October 25, Nixon fired the special Watergate prosecutor Archibald Cox in the so-called Saturday Night Massacre that for weeks turned attention from abroad to Beltway melodramas, further undermining American stability and resolve overseas.

During the entire course of the three-week conflict, a distracted Nixon was still further crippled by related spinoff scandals. On October 10, just four days after the surprise attack on Israel, Nixon's vice president Spiro Agnew had abruptly resigned after pleading

*nolo contendere* to a single, negotiated tax-fraud charge. Meanwhile, earlier rumors of a looming oil embargo were soon confirmed. The ban shocked into recession the economies of the United States, the United Kingdom, Japan, and a few states in Europe that also had supported Israel. The threats of boycotts by the Gulf exporters, coupled with the OPEC cartel's curtailment of production, became a Sword of Damocles hung over American diplomatic efforts in the Middle East for decades.

There are still other commonalities between the two wars. One has to do with Israel's overconfidence in its own technological superiority and the tendency to underestimate the wherewithal, persistence, and tactical capabilities of its enemies. In 1973, the departure of Russian advisors from Egypt seemed to confirm to the Israelis that Arab nations had lost access to the most sophisticated Soviet weapons, which were themselves purportedly not as lethal as Israel's American-supplied munitions.

In fact, aside from providing critical satellite intelligence, the Soviets continued to supply the Sadat government with their most advanced weapons systems—even as the Egyptians used a sophisticated disinformation campaign to concoct a mythical Arab–Soviet falling-out, with the false narrative that by expelling Soviet advisors Egypt preferred to be orphaned but autonomous. In short, prior to their invasions, the Arabs postured as poorly armed but principled independent actors, rather than continually obedient Russian clients and stealthy recipients of uninterrupted Soviet largesse.

The result was that when the October 6 war broke out, the Egyptians achieved stunning initial successes not just through surprise, but also due to the use of massive stockpiles of lethal and often underappreciated Soviet weaponry. Wire-guided 9M14 Malyutka (or “AT-3 Sagger”) anti-tank rockets, SA-2 and SA-3 surface-to-air missile batteries, and deadly shoulder-fired SA-6 and SA-7 surface-to-air missiles took a terrible toll on Israeli armor and aircraft in the first hours of the conflict.

Soviet-supplied, agile, and highly maneuverable MiG-21S jets, in the hands of skilled

pilots, could achieve parity with the heavier and larger American F-4 Phantoms, the frontline workhorse of the Israeli Air Force, especially since Israeli planes were vulnerable anytime they entered airspace protected by Egyptian anti-aircraft batteries. Similarly, Soviet T-55 and T-62 heavy tanks were in terms of firepower and armor roughly equivalent to American-supplied M-48 and M-60 Pattons.

So, having assumed that their Egyptian and Syrian enemies would be poorly equipped after their supposed alienation from the Soviets, the Israelis were shocked to discover that in truth the Arabs were quite well supplied with state-of-the-art Cold War munitions. Vastly better-trained Israeli pilots and tank crews, and superior command-and-control adaptability within the first week of the war, soon enabled the IDF to adjust to both the surprise attack and the effective use of Soviet weaponry. But Israelis acknowledged afterward that the Arab armies in the first days of the conflict had proved formidable in ways far beyond their wildest expectations.

Similarly, before October 7 Israeli intelligence agencies and the IDF knew fairly well that Hamas had a labyrinth of tunnels in Gaza and had been supplied by Iran with sophisticated surface-to-surface missiles far more lethal than their own stockpiles of often homemade rockets. Hamas also was known to have been adept in avoiding Israeli surveillance and detection. But apparently no one in the Israeli intelligence communities had fully anticipated the wiliness of Hamas in communicating over walkie-talkies, employing World War I-like ground messengers to deliver handwritten messages, jamming Israeli border-security technology, and for months keeping their highest echelon off the internet and away from cell-phone communications. As a result of their yearslong planning, Hamas operatives were able to traverse the Middle East from Qatar to Beirut to Tehran largely unnoticed or at least unappreciated.

Iranian- and Chinese-designed Ayyash-250, R-160, Fajr-5, and Badr-3 missiles were also available to Hamas. Their range and payloads vastly exceeded those of the indigenously produced Qassam rockets. It wasn't until Israel entered

Gaza during its response to the October 7 massacre that the IDF finally appreciated the vast, three-hundred-mile subterranean Hamas city, the sheer size of the tunnels, and the ubiquity of its exits and entrances under mosques, schools, and hospitals—a multibillion-dollar diversion of international aid that had created a veritable military city far underground, complete with electrical power, heating and cooling, and water and sewage systems, and in places wide enough for vehicular traffic.

Only after October 27, when operations exploring the tunnels in Gaza began, did Israel truly begin to understand the magnitude of the labor, capital, and time invested in such a cavernous military complex, the product of imported tunnel-boring equipment, reinforced precast concrete conduits, and sophisticated engineering. And just as the Israelis had failed to anticipate the Egyptian military's ingenuity in its surprise bridging of the Suez Canal and its employment of water cannons to blast apart a sixty-foot sand wall blocking entry into Sinai, so too did they not imagine that Hamas would ever sail over the Gaza wall with gunmen flying in paragliders.

The Israeli border wall with Gaza was postmodern—at least in the sense that its sophisticated, sensor-equipped, billion-dollar surveillance technology purportedly made the old idea of a series of massive, reinforced concrete and steel walls anachronistic. But in truth, after more than a year of planning, Hamas proved adept in jamming the border wall's electronics, and on October 7 it used explosives and land-moving equipment to punch huge holes in the barrier itself. In retrospect, something like the old brick-and-mortar Theodosian Walls of Constantinople, which date to the fifth century A.D., would have been far more likely to prevent the Hamas invasion.

In addition, the very pulse of the war in Gaza is akin to the progression of events in the Yom Kippur War: initial Israeli unpreparedness, Middle Eastern euphoria over the early Arab Muslim victories and the losses by its enemies, rapid Israeli recalibration and response, and, within days, counteroffensive measures that took an enormous toll on the invaders,

infuriated the Middle East, prompted global calls for “proportionality” and a cease-fire, and saw mounting pressure on the United States to restrain its resurgent client.

A related, obvious subtext to the courses of the 1973 and 2023 wars was that the Israel Defense Forces, even when surprised, were fully capable of both defeating their immediate aggressors and deterring the legions of surrounding enemies considering opportunistic entries into the war. The only real difference in the outcomes of the two conflicts has been that Egypt justified *ex post facto* the great cost of the 1973 surprise attack by the subsequent return of the thousands of square miles of occupied territory that was lost in the 1967 war. So far, Hamas cannot claim that any territorial gain or strategic advantage has resulted from its October 7 surprise attack.

As for the professed reasons for Hamas's October 7 attack, all were bankrupt: there was zero chance its mass murdering would lead to the dismantlement of the Jewish state; its surprise assault will not permanently prevent more moderate Arab states from eventually coming to some sort of accord with Israel. Israel itself did not, as alleged, desecrate or seek to harm the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem; and the horrific Hamas killing, coupled with the defeat and humiliation of the Hamas terrorists, so far has not prompted a new pan-Arab intifada, or even a wider Middle East conflict with Hezbollah and Iran.

Both the 1973 and the 2023 wars, like most Israeli–Arab conflicts, have also served as proxies of a sort. Given the heavy reliance of Israel on American resupply of its arms and the ability of the United States to prevent the Soviet Union and, a half-century later, Iran and other outside powers from intervening on behalf of its Arab enemies, both the Nixon and Biden administrations respectively felt that they had earned the right to restrain Israel's military responses in a manner vaguely dubbed “proportionate.”

That is, after Israel had received grievous shocks from costly surprise attacks, the United States naturally sought to manage subsequent Israeli retaliations in ways that did not injure

its own perceived global interests—especially in the context of not permanently alienating the rich, oil-exporting (and occasionally terrorist-exporting) Arab and Islamic Middle Eastern petrostates.

Controversy still swirls around the purported wartime efforts of President Richard Nixon and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger to slow-walk the resupply of vital planes and armor for a few days, until Israel digested the message that the Yom Kippur War, unlike the 1967 Six-Day War, would not end with the complete defeat and utter humiliation of Israel's neighbors. For the Nixon administration, it was largely immaterial that Israel's enemies had prompted the war with surprise attacks, that the United States in 1973 had prevented a last-minute preemptive Israeli strike that would have saved Jewish lives, and that without the complete defeat and degradation of its enemies' means of waging war, Israeli deterrence would always be ephemeral (indeed, such restraint only enabled the serial wars to come). To be fair, however, the Nixon–Kissinger effort did lead to the Camp David Accords, the recognition of Israel by Egypt, and the subsequent fifty years of peace between the two states, even as the wider Middle East remained in violent turmoil.

Broader concerns about ensuring reliable and affordable petroleum exports to the West from the Middle East, flipping former Soviet Arab dependencies into American clients, finding a permanent peace that would stop radical Palestinian and Islamic global terrorism, and keeping Russia out of the Middle East for good were of far greater importance for American diplomats. And such agendas often did not synchronize with Israeli interests.

The same scenario played out in 2023. Initially, the Biden administration expressed outrage over the Hamas massacres through both public declarations of sympathy and tacit acceptance of a strong Israeli response. Soon, however, the administration began to worry about “inordinate” or “disproportionate” Israeli reprisals, in reaction to international criticism over the severity of the Israeli bombing in Gaza. At home, large pro-Hamas rallies in swing states like Michigan and Pennsylvania

rattled the Biden administration—who feared that, in states projected to have such tight election races in 2024, even a small defection of traditionally Democratic Arab American voters could lose Biden the election.

By the end of the second month of the Israeli counterattacks on Hamas, overt American strong-arming had sought to force a cease-fire. When Hamas lied about purported strikes on Al-Ahli Arab Hospital (it was hit by an errant Palestinian Islamic Jihad rocket aimed at Israeli civilian centers) or released exaggerated fatality figures (unverified and without distinguishing Hamas terrorist fatalities from those of the shielding civilian population), furor mounted abroad in the Middle East, at the United Nations, and among the European Union nations, prompting even greater U.S. pressure on Israel to agree to a permanent cease-fire.

That paradigm of U.S. pressure on Israel to deescalate was established back in 1973, when Israel became almost fully dependent on U.S. arms during the Yom Kippur War. After the initial Israeli defeats and rapid equipment losses, the Nixon administration began a massive resupply operation. Initially, the Soviet Union did not extend more military aid to the Arabs, privately expressing little confidence in an ultimate Arab victory. But within hours of what seemed to be a successful surprise attack that had evidently flummoxed both Israel and the United States, Moscow began airlifting resupplies to the Egyptian and Syrian militaries. Oddly, the Soviets enjoyed free use of NATO members' European airspace that was often denied to the United States—a fellow NATO member, no less—in its efforts to match Russian efforts plane for plane and tank for tank.

Soon, when its Arab proxies faced near-annihilation at the end of the first two weeks of the conflict, Moscow began overtly threatening the United States into further restraining Israel. That interference finally prompted Nixon, near the end of the war, to raise the military alert for all U.S. forces around the world to DEFCON 3—the highest stage of American peacetime readiness and just two steps from nuclear war. Nixon felt that he had deterred the Soviet Union, forced a cease-fire somewhat favorable to Israel, and yet

opened a path for the defeated Arab frontline states to claim “victory” through their initial progress—thus paving, at least in the case of Jordan and Egypt, the way for a lasting peace settlement.

What ensued in the days after the cease-fire of October 25, 1973, was the virtual appropriation of the strategic course of the war by the Soviet Union and the United States. Both pressured their respective proxies to cease hostilities, largely on the mutual agreement that it was not a good thing for either Israel or Egypt that the trapped Egyptian Third Army be obliterated by the IDF.

As we witnessed in 2023, nothing in these half-century-long proxy wars truly changed the Israeli–American client–patron relationship. The mutual understanding seems still to rest on a series of quid pro quos:

- 1) The United States ensures that Israel has superior weapons and resupply, but only if it follows American strategic mandates.
- 2) The United States discourages preemptive attacks by the Jewish state, even when it is likely that major conventional or terrorist attacks are looming and preemption might quash them.
- 3) The United States seeks to prevent outside major powers from intervening against Israel on behalf of its failing Arab opponents.
- 4) The United States modulates the intensity of Israeli retaliatory offensive operations to prevent an unconditional victory, thereby not alienating the five-hundred-million-person Middle East from the United States.

For Israel, the domestic outcomes of these surprise-attack Middle East wars also follow a predictable script. The Israeli government in power is immediately faulted for being caught unaware, despite the general failure of all of Israel's intelligence services. A shocked and angry Israeli public unites and delays its criticism until the existing government has recovered and defeated the enemy. The Netanyahu administration, like the Meir administration fifty years

ago, brought in a wartime coalition government including members from the opposition—but with the expectation that after the existential threat had passed and Israel had prevailed, the government would call an election.

In sum, the more things have changed in the twenty-first century, the more they remain the same as the status quo of the twentieth. What, then, are we to make of this long, depressing cycle of warring that predates even the Yom Kippur War and will likely continue well beyond the current war in Gaza?

Israel in its current strategy seeks to reaffirm that whenever it is attacked, it will achieve an unconditional victory over the aggressor—at least to such a degree as to deter any other enemy from joining the anti-Israeli coalition, and ideally to ensure that no enemy will ever consider such a surprise attack again. Achieving such deterrence, however, would require the United States to forewarn state enemies of Israel that any preemptive attack on the Jewish state will earn a response from it whose magnitude and duration will be left entirely up to Jerusalem—while the United States would deter any great or regional power from opportunistically entering the conflict.

Yet Israel cannot count on such unconditional U.S. support, even after brutal surprise Arab attacks. The reasons for such caution are not just the radical ideological and demographic changes within the United States, brought about by open borders and massive immigration; the fundamental transformation of a once-liberal Democratic Party into a neo-socialist, anti-Semitic force; and the replacement of classical liberalism on American campuses by woke loathing, stoked by DEI functionaries, of Western civilization in general and Israel in particular.

More fundamentally, the actual national interests of the United States and Israel will not always coincide, especially in an era when the traditional economic and military superiority of America is increasingly in doubt abroad, and in compensation Washington seeks new allies and partnerships—and compromises—in lieu of its once unquestioned confidence and power.

As far as Israel goes, Jerusalem should invest in far greater domestic weapons capability. It must stockpile far more arms. And it has to accept the reality that it is a permanent garrison state, an outnumbered, Byzantium-like Western outpost in a hostile East surrounded by a sea of enemies. It cannot, like similar affluent Western democracies, afford flights of ecumenical, utopian, and pacifist fancy. It cannot even safely indulge itself in massive internal protests—not when surrounded by hostile forces pledged to its destruction and ceaselessly looking to exploit the slightest sign of domestic turmoil amid Western laxity.

As in the thousand-year history of Constantinople, Israel's increased prosperity, stability, and confidence have only instilled greater hatred among its Islamic neighbors, for achieving results that remain impossible in their own countries until they seek changes to their politics, economy, culture, and religious practices—agendas that for the near future remain unlikely, given that the proverbial medicine is still deemed more toxic than the disease itself. Israel should also attempt to cultivate allies well beyond the United States. After all, Constantinople after a millennium eventually fell in 1453, but only after it was abandoned by its major Western European allies that had still expressed admiration and empathy for its dogged resistance—but not to the extent of risking to send help in its final hour of need.

# A forgotten writer of Père Lachaise

by *Anthony Daniels*

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For family reasons, we bought a flat in Paris, near the entrance to the most famous cemetery in the world, Père Lachaise. I have always loved cemeteries and find them almost as irresistible as bookshops.

I took many walks in Père Lachaise, and one day the not very startling idea came to my mind, that if there were many famous writers—Balzac, Proust, Oscar Wilde—buried there, it was likely that there were also writers, many more of them in fact, buried there who had been completely forgotten, not necessarily because they were not good but because cultural memory is necessarily limited.

And so it proved. In an afternoon, without much difficulty, I assembled the names of at least twenty writers. I checked that they were unknown to the educated and literate French and British people of my acquaintance, and even when their names rang a faint bell, which was rarely, my acquaintances' knowledge of them never went further.

I chose eight such authors more or less at random. By the miracle of modern technology, I was able, through my telephone, to learn a little of their biographies (with the exception of one, so obscure that she had left no trace on the internet) and order their books from secondhand dealers even before I had even left the cemetery. Before the advent of such technology, a book such as the one I have just

written would have taken many years to write, and I, certainly, would not have written it.

My aim has been to entertain while illustrating the inexhaustible depth of our past.

Few lives are more extraordinary than that (I almost said *those*) of Enrique Gómez Carrillo (1873–1927). He must have been born under some special star that marked him out from others, for at the age of eighteen he left his native Guatemala to pursue, with almost immediate success, a career in Paris as a writer, intellectual, and bohemian. In his day he was famous, or at least celebrated and partly notorious, but practically nothing is now written about him without drawing attention to the oblivion into which he has fallen, even in his native Guatemala. It is true that in the 1960s there was a brief attempt, for nationalist reasons, to have his remains returned to Guatemala, and a monument was erected to him, but his body was not returned, and the nearest to return that was achieved was the spread of some earth from Père Lachaise at the site of the monument. Guatemalan intellectuals were divided on the question of whether his remains should return to Guatemala: the argument for return being that he was Guatemalan, and the argument against being that he lived all his adult life in France and that is where his heart was.

No ordinary person could have made his way so quickly at so early an age and from so provincial a backwater as Guatemala into the heart of bohemian Paris. He became immediately acquainted with Verlaine, the great poet, and later with Oscar Wilde. It is said

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that he even gave money to Verlaine from the Guatemalan scholarship that he was supposed to use to study in Madrid, a city that he soon abandoned for Paris. Interestingly, though, and perhaps surprisingly, he wrote all his many books in Spanish, not in French.

Mystery and mythology surround his biography. Even the exact number of his books is not known, at least according to a 1956 biographer:

As the astronomers tell us that there are stars whose light has not reached us, so there are works of Gómez Carrillo that remain in the zone of conjecture, that people assert have been published, and that they have read and possess, and yet that have not been listed in any of the bibliographies up to the present day.

Fifty-five years later, in 2011, we read in the introduction to a reprint of his three volumes of autobiography, *Treinta Años de mi Vida* (Thirty Years of My Life), and eighty-four years after his death:

How many books did Gómez Carrillo publish? Nobody knows for certain. He shuffled his pages, gave different titles to similar contents, and at any time could deliver to any generous publisher a supposedly unpublished work although it had been published only a few days before by another.

One of the strange, almost bizarre, things about his career is the persistent rumor that he was Mata Hari's last lover and that it was he who betrayed her to the French as a spy, thereby becoming partly responsible for her death by firing squad. He took advantage of the rumor to write a popular book about her, *Le mystère de la vie et de la mort de Mata Hari* (The Mystery of the Life and Death of Mata Hari). In this book, however, he denied that he had ever met, or even seen, Mata Hari. He recounts a conversation in Madrid with the disgraced and exiled French minister of the interior Louis Malvy, who had been cast out from France in 1918 for five years because of alleged negligence in the performance of his ministerial duties, and who was also suspected of treason, his pacifist newspaper, *Bonnet Rouge*, having received funds from the Germans.

Gómez Carrillo asked Malvy what Mata Hari's true role had been during the war, on the assumption that, as minister of the interior at the time, Malvy must have had inside knowledge. The following conversation ensued:

"But of the two of us who must know who were the friends of the famous dancer, it is you."

"Me . . . why?"

There was a moment's silence, during which the former minister's fine face became worried. In the end, visibly disturbed, he wanted to apologize for his indiscretion, and asked me to talk of less macabre subjects. But I had a great curiosity to know the reason for his enigmatic phrases; and so, serious in my turn, I asked him to explain what they meant.

"It's no secret from anyone," he replied, "and I don't mean only your love affair with Mata Hari."

"My love affair with Mata Hari?"

"Yes, everyone is whispering that you were her last lover . . ."

"Me? That's very flattering, after all, because she was so famous a woman," I exclaimed, laughing. "Only, there's nothing to it."

Malvy went on to say to Gómez Carrillo, "delicately," that the rumors claimed that he was not only the secret lover, but the denouncer of Mata Hari. The author denied these charges, using two arguments: first that he was so notoriously a Don Juan that he never hid his affairs, and second that, having written two books on the subject of exotic dance, he had never so much as mentioned Mata Hari. And Malvy went on to say that the rumor spread by Spanish Germanophiles that Gómez Carrillo had been decorated as a commander of the *Légion d'honneur* for his services as the denouncer were absurd, because the republic rewarded the exceptional services of policemen with money, not honors:

"The more grotesque a calumny," murmured [Malvy], "the more it finds people disposed to believe it."

Gómez Carrillo provides another argument as to why he could not possibly be Mata Hari's betrayer. "I remember," he writes, "the first time my name spread beyond the purlieus of



the literary world and reached the ears of the general public [in Madrid]. . . . I had been elected corresponding member of the Royal Spanish Academy at the age of twenty-one. The title so flattered my youthful vanity that I put it on my visiting card.” But when he learned that one of the members of the Royal Academy, called Cotarelo, had, in order to claim a reward, revealed to the police the whereabouts in Madrid of the notorious French swindler Madame Humbert, who had fled to Spain on exposure of her swindle, he told the permanent secretary of the academy that unless it expelled Cotarelo he would resign. This raised a public controversy, for and against denunciation of wrongdoers.

Gómez Carrillo wrote, partly as proof of his innocence with regard to his alleged denunciation of Mata Hari, that:

I who have always felt the most profound horror for all amateur *detectivism*, all dilettante Sherlock-Holmsianism, believe therefore that I behaved nobly.

This seems to capture quite well the self-congratulatory inclinations of many intellectuals when they pronounce simplistically on morally complex issues, making generous-sounding rhetoric stand for real thought.

No one finds informers—those who denounce minor wrongdoers (or even the innocent) to the authorities out of spite, sadism, revenge, or desire for petty reward—attractive. But that, surely, is not the end of the matter: at some point, failure to inform becomes complicity, sometimes with a great crime. In the prison in which I worked as a doctor, no prisoner was more despised, or in danger of attack, than a known informer, called a *grass*, but there was nevertheless an implicit limit to prisoners’ fear of or unwillingness to inform on each other. Once, for example, a prisoner secretly murdered his cellmate, who was found dead, apparently by hanging. I was on duty that night, and two prisoners gave me clues that resulted in the apprehension and conviction of the murderer. The informers were more subtle in their moral thinking than Gó

mez Carrillo: yes, informing was unpleasant and sometimes truly disgusting, but no, there could be no blanket prohibition of it.

Of course, it could be argued that Madame Humbert was a swindler, not a murderess. Indeed, her swindles were so outrageous that they exposed the foolishness, greed, and gullibility of the grandest of grand people in the French Third Republic: the kind of spectacle that we earthlings, prone to *Schadenfreude*, always enjoy and the opportunity for experiencing which, more recently, persons such as Bernie Madoff and Sam Bankman-Fried have provided us—except that Madame Humbert was a far more interesting character, having started out as the illegitimate daughter of two illegitimate parents in rural France. Moreover, having been once exposed, it would have been impossible for Madame Humbert to have resumed the swindles that allowed her and her whole family to live in the greatest of luxury for twenty years. She was ruined for good, and therefore no further punishment would have served any useful purpose.

Against these arguments that must have sustained Gómez Carrillo in his self-satisfaction might be argued two things. First that though Madame Humbert’s swindles amusingly exposed the folly and credulity of the elite, they also ruined thousands of small savers who lost everything in the eventual crash. There were quite a number of suicides as a result of her defalcations, and much suffering beside. Hers was not merely an amusing morality tale, a kind of practical satire on the rich and well-educated; she deprived thousands of people of the fruit of years of hard work and sacrifice.

Second, while it is true that she would never have been able to return to her dishonest activities, and that any harm she was able to do had already been done and would not have been undone by punishment, *not* to have punished her would also have had its consequences, by implying that everyone can rightfully escape punishment provided that the harm done by his acts cannot be undone by punishment and that he will be incapable of repeating those acts.

Punitiveness, of course, is another unpleasant characteristic, along with tendency to

inform. To punish is cruel, not to punish is generous. And yet this too is simplistic and, in the end, less generous than it at first seems. Let us suppose that the case here were not of swindling, but of murder. Let us suppose also that the victim was the one man whom the murderer ever wanted to kill, and he was therefore unlikely ever to kill again. Would we say, “Well, that’s all right then,” and leave it at that? Would this not give license to everyone to kill one person, provided only that it was the person whom he hated above all others?

Furthermore, the harm done by the crimes of someone like Madame Humbert is not over the moment she is exposed. If one has lost one’s life savings, one does not have another life in which to recuperate them, and, even if one did, it would impose onerous work on those who had previously saved precisely to be free of it.

And there is yet another consideration. As I know from clinical experience, those who have been victims of serious crimes in which the perpetrator has been dealt with leniently often suffer severely from this very leniency. The leniency implies that what they have suffered as victims is of no great importance to the state by comparison with the feelings of the criminals and, more particularly, of the intellectual class—which is in favor of such leniency for fear of appearing punitive in the eyes of each other.

As we shall see, Gómez Carrillo had a considerable capacity for hypocrisy, but let us return to the rumor that he was the betrayer of Mata Hari. Where did this rumor originate? Given that he was a famous lothario and Mata Hari was generous with her favors, it is not inherently impossible that he was her lover.

Trying to find how a rumor originates is often like trying to find the precise margin of a mist. Some authors give the rumors no credit: two lengthy recent biographies of Mata Hari do not mention them, nor does a novelized account of her life by the popular author Paulo Coelho (and their sensational nature might have been expected to attract the attention of a novelist). In contrast, Paul Webster, in his biography of Consuelo de Saint-Exupéry, the widow of Gómez Carrillo, implies that the award of the *Légion d’honneur* to the author

just after the end of the war is some kind of evidence in the rumors’ plausibility.

One explanation of the rumors is that they were the work of Guatemalan authors and others envious of his success. There is another reason why he might have been hated, however, as we shall see. “The rumor began with certain mediocre writers envious of his prestige,” said the poet Miguel Marsicóvetero y Durán. Mentioned in this connection is a jealous former wife of Gómez Carrillo’s, Raquel Meller, also a dancer, though a less successful one than Mata Hari. Admiral Canaris, the head of the German *Abwehr*, apparently claims in his memoirs that it was Gómez Carrillo who betrayed Mata Hari.

Another theory is that Gómez Carrillo, like Mata Hari herself, was a fantasist and liar who was always avid for publicity, and started the rumors himself, of which he then took advantage to write a book. César González-Ruano wrote, “Those of us who knew Carrillo knew that he was a man capable of inventing a story that he pretended hurt him and against which he protested, because his time in bohemian Paris and his desire *épater les bourgeois*, as well as his literary and personal position as an *enfant terrible*,” meant that he no longer knew, or wanted to know, where reality ended and fantasy began.

Now to the reason why Guatemalan writers might have hated as well as envied Gómez Carrillo. The curious fact is that this man who demanded the most absolute liberty for himself, and indeed lived largely as if it had been granted him, was a paid praise-singer of Manuel Estrada Cabrera, one of the most thoroughgoing despots of Guatemala’s history, a history that is not short of despots. In the year in which Estrada Cabrera came to power (semi-constitutionally, before he revealed his vocation as tyrant), 1898, Gómez Carrillo wrote a pamphlet so sycophantic that only fear or favor could explain it: and since he was beyond Estrada Cabrera’s reach, money is the explanation. The pamphlet begins wittily:

A few weeks ago, one of our most illustrious writers asserted that visitors to Guatemala would leave without knowing anything about Estrada

Cabrera because of the great amount that has been written about him.

This draws attention to the distinction between information and knowledge in a wider sense, a distinction all the more important in the age of social media. But the tone of the pamphlet soon changes into that of flattery that is redolent almost of high Stalinism:

During the days of solemn silence, when the cheap press left off its vociferating . . . the silhouette of the successful liberal candidate stood out clearly. The people could see him, then, in the grave serenity of his office, always serene, always energetic, always concerned for the well-being of the country.

And so on and so forth.

This pamphlet earned Gómez Carrillo the Guatemalan consulship in Paris and a generous salary.

It is not uncommon, of course, for a newly elected head of government to arouse the enthusiasm of his supporters, but the enthusiasm is usually followed more or less quickly by disillusionment. In the case of Estrada Cabrera, however, the enthusiasm never abated, despite the irrefutable evidence of his increasing tyranny. Gómez Carrillo's dithyrambs continued, and the Guatemalan novelist and essayist Carlos Wyld Ospina, in his book *El Autócrata* (The Autocrat), published in 1929, two years after Gómez Carrillo's death, says that it was the practice of the dictator to suborn writers, of whom Gómez Carrillo was one, so that they spread propaganda about the magnificent achievements of his regime. In 1913, Gómez Carrillo wrote to the dictator as follows:

My very respected friend: . . .

Thanks to you, only you, my young compatriots are going to read me. I have not waited to savor in this life this honor that in general is reserved for the dead. But because it is so unexpected, the pleasure you have given me fills me with pride. In the face of the admirable work of popular education that you have done for many years, I have many times thought of the

intimate satisfaction that one must experience to see that, thanks to one's efforts, new generations are being raised carrying in them the germ of culture that one day not very far off our country will be highly placed among the most civilized countries of the world.

Mutual backscratching could hardly go further.

In October 1915, Gómez Carrillo wrote to the president of the National Convention (the parliamentary façade of the regime) as follows, with regard to the forthcoming "election":

Permit me to say that although I am not legally entitled to vote in the next presidential elections, I will do so morally. My vote is that of all Guatemalans: a sincere vote for our great Estrada Cabrera, who has saved the country from a thousand dangers and has given it peace, progress, national dignity and love of culture. Personally, it is not the first time that I say Estrada Cabrera is the greatest politician on the Latin American continent. . . . In Europe, I pronounce his name with pride and say, "He is a statesman who would do honor to France or England."

By this time, Gómez Carrillo had long been in receipt of money from the dictator and could hardly have failed to be aware of the nature of his regime. Carlos Wyld Ospina described its despotic characteristics, to say nothing of its financial corruption:

Estrada Cabrera came to be the only important person in Guatemala.

[His] morbid passion for power and control led him to demand of the country adoration, of his name, his words, of the most trivial manifestations of his personality. He tolerated different qualities [from his own] provided they did not rise above mediocrity, or while they remained in a lower sphere, anonymous and hidden. . . . The quality he most persecuted was independence of character. . . .

The . . . collaborators with the autocracy formed an army of henchmen and traffickers. . . . The informers, spies and official and unofficial hangmen were legion. . . .

Estrada Cabrera required of his servants two indispensable qualities if they wanted to stay in

their posts: obedience without question and adoration without let-up.

Finally, all was lies:

The entire administration was a farce. Like a malign acid, the lie corroded and corrupted everything. It lived by the lie, in the lie, and for the lie.

Interestingly, there is another Guatemalan writer, Miguel Ángel Asturias, who is buried in Père Lachaise and who, like Gómez Carrillo, was the diplomatic representative of his country in France. He took an opposite view of Estrada Cabrera from that of Gómez Carrillo, his most famous novel, *El Señor Presidente* (1946), being a fictionalized description of his effects on life in Guatemala. Asturias won the Nobel Prize in the days when a higher proportion of its recipients had literary merit.

Gómez Carrillo's obsequiousness from afar towards Estrada Cabrera might have been one of the reasons he was disliked by some of his less successful compatriots, who therefore spread nasty rumors about him.

Gómez Carrillo died quite a rich man. He had a flat in Paris full of precious objects and a magnificent house and garden in the south. He also owned property in Argentina (he became an Argentine citizen and consul of that country in France, suggesting that his loyalties were fluid). Though dissipated for much of his life, he was a ferociously hard worker, writing fluently and with ease, often publishing several books a year. Yet it is difficult to believe that his wealth derived entirely from his writing. For example, my copy of one of his most commercially successful books, the one about Mata Hari, says on its cover that it is in the thirteen thousandth printed, a very respectable sale, but books in those days were cheaply produced and such a sale could hardly have yielded a fortune. Is it possible that the foundation of Gómez Carrillo's wealth was subvention from the dictator? Even though Guatemala was a poor country, the resources of its dictator were huge by comparison with those of the average, or above-average, writer.

Before leaving the subject of Mata Hari and Gómez Carrillo altogether, it is perhaps appropriate to mention the latter's love life, which was rich and complex. His biographer, Edelberto Torres, claims that "No Don Juan in any age had so many women in his arms during his life as Gómez Carrillo," and whatever the precise accuracy of this claim, it is certain that the writer was a great seducer (including, sometimes early in his life, of men). His first and short marriage, to the daughter of a rich Peruvian general, ended when, having driven with him to her hairdresser's in Paris, she found him when she returned from the salon drinking in a café with their chauffeur. His wife, anxious to preserve social distance from the servants, said that the chauffeur would have to go. "If he goes, I go," said Gómez Carrillo, and he went.

He was a man of great charm. The famous Nicaraguan modernist poet Rubén Darío said that if one day Enrique decided that he wanted to be a bishop, he was sure that he would succeed in becoming one. His fundamental outlook on life was Wildean, aesthetic rather than moral. He was without scruple in pursuit of what he wanted, and towards the end of his life he said that if he had his time over again, he would want to live as he had lived.

It is said that, in his time in Paris, Gómez Carrillo fought eighteen duels and was the best swordsman in the city. Some expressed surprise that he had neither killed nor been killed (for my part, I am surprised that duels persisted so commonly into the twentieth century). He almost fought a duel with the former lover of his third wife, the Mexican writer José Vasconcelos (whose work is nowadays much more read than is Gómez Carrillo's), who was advised to desist because of Gómez Carrillo's skill with the sword.

His third wife, Consuelo Suncin, to whom he was married, as her second husband, only for the last eleven months of his life, was a Salvadorean woman who in some ways resembled Mata Hari, though not physically. Like Mata Hari, she escaped her extremely constricting provincial life to the bright lights of Paris, where she enjoyed the bohemian life. Even in the eleven months of their marriage,

Gómez Carrillo (who said that he could offer her only his syphilitic decrepitude) found the time and energy to be unfaithful to her, as she to him. But perhaps the power or attraction of his personality is testified to by the fact that when she died in 1979, fifty-two years after him, she chose to be buried next to him, though she had remarried and was still the widow of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, the famous writer and aviator who was lost in an accident in the Mediterranean in 1944. She might have elected to be buried at sea near to where his plane went down but chose instead to be interred next to Gómez Carrillo. This is reminiscent of Caitlin Thomas's decision to be buried next to her first husband, Dylan Thomas, thirty-seven years after his death, even though she had found a new man and had a son by him. No one, I think, would deny the power of Dylan Thomas's personality.

“Nothing,” wrote Carlos Wyld Ospina, “helps to conquer literary fame like a reputation for being an ‘immoral writer.’ Gómez Carrillo had it and sucked the juice from it with consummate cleverness, in his art and in his life as a bohemian of the purest dye.” He goes on to say that Gómez Carrillo started as a novelist but was a bad one. He excelled, however, as a chronicler, essayist, and travel writer, mixing frivolity with seriousness and erudition. And, attached as he was to the life of a Parisian flâneur and boulevardier, he was also a great traveler at a time when travel was a good deal more arduous than it is today. His books can still be read with amusement, instruction, and pleasure. He was, in fact, a very good writer, however one assesses his character, since, after all, one judges a writer principally by his writing.

In 1905, for example, in the wake of the Russo-Japanese war, he went to Russia, which, then as now, was not an easy thing to do. The resultant book, *La Rusia Actual* (The Russia of Today), is an extremely powerful denunciation of the oppressive nature of Tsarism and can now be read as a corrective to the common notion that, because the communist regime was so vastly worse than the tsarist regime, the latter was really not too bad. Gómez Car-

rillo did not write prophetically of Russia, like Dostoevsky or Conrad, but he was certainly no optimist about its future.

The dedication of the book, to Doctor Geo D. Coen, is interesting in itself, at least for students of Gómez Carrillo:

You remember, dear friend, that afternoon when you advised me severely to renounce my habitual frivolous fantasies and devote myself to social studies? We were sitting on a terrace on a boulevard. It was spring. And while you were talking of serious things, I was ecstatic over the delightful Parisiennes who went rhythmically by. “Never”—murmured the froufrou of the street—“will any problem interest you more than us.”

But Gómez Carrillo underwent a change:

There came a day, however, when the deep, the sad, the unpleasant, the dirty, the poor, seduced me. It was my long day in Russia. There under the snow I forgot the frivolous and devoted myself to the serious. I read documents that before would have made me laugh, and I cried; I copied columns of figures, horrible figures; I translated judicial documents. And when I had finished, I said to myself, “This is the study that my good friend Coen always advised me to make.” I have it here, my friend. It is a heavy book. It is an archive of cruelties. It is the memorial of a time of blood and pain. Your upright and pious soul will feel on reading it what mine, frivolous but good, felt in writing it.

Russia has always been a corrective to light-heartedness.

Gómez Carrillo expresses the same anxiety on crossing into Russia that Custine did in 1839, and which we would probably feel today and people will no doubt feel in a hundred years' time. The first chapter, “The Tsar Who Trembles,” is devoted to the fear that the autocrat himself suffers, very similar to that experienced by the last autocrat but one, as described by Eugène-Melchior de Vogüé twenty years before:

In this vast empire of terror, the one who is most afraid is the monarch. In this respect, at least, his

supremacy is evident. The fear of others, those who see the image of Siberia before them at every step, results in a simple shiver, if compared with the perpetual shaking that torments the imperial being. What can I say! The very Sultan of Turkey, who in his dreams has the most atrocious visions of death, is a heroic figure by comparison with his neighbor. Abdul-Hamid loves, intrigues, desires, orders, hates, lives. Nicholas II . . . hardly breathes. He seeks a distraction, a pleasure, in his long days. In vain. The only thing he does is struggle against the shadows that threaten him. The long hours of meditation, the consultations with dukes and ministers, the prolonged reading, is the response to nothing but fear. Every effort at reform is a product of fear. Fear, fear without end, is what moves and motivates him. Only fear!

This is all very different from the sound of dresses passing on the boulevard.

Gómez Carrillo is good on Nicholas's character:

Like every weak and fanatical being, Nicholas is superstitious and attached to occult sciences and experiments. In the first years of his reign, his intimate adviser was a Frenchman called Philippe, whose power reached such a pitch that the Grand Dukes and ministers trembled in front of him . . .

Nizier Anthelme Philippe (1849–1905) was a French healer of supposedly extraordinary powers, several times tried for the illegal practice of medicine but eventually having doctorates of medicine conferred upon him. It is easier to be a healer when very few cures exist.

Fear in the tsarist empire was also an opportunity:

This perpetual, horrible fear, is an inexhaustible mine for the Grand Dukes and functionaries, in which are to be found honors and advantages. Far from combatting it, they seek to increase it by diabolical inventions. The police invent conspiracies; the generals imagine revolutionary projects; courtiers see nihilists everywhere. General Trepov, present Governor of Saint Petersburg, is a master of this. His history, as everyone knows, is full of inventions of assassination attempts against Caesar.

Trepov himself was the object of many assassination attempts, though he died of illness. This was a time when it was not always easy to distinguish the secret police from the revolutionaries and vice versa; it is surely rather odd that Gómez Carrillo did not see the parallels between tsarist Russia and Cabrerist Guatemala.

Gómez Carrillo is eloquent on the fate of the Jews. He ends the chapter:

In Russia, there is no forgiveness even for the tombs of the Jews. A telegram from Irkutsk says the Jewish cemeteries in which the bodies of the political exiles are buried, killed in the massacres at Irkutsk, present a sad aspect. Two weeks ago, all the monuments were destroyed and the remains of the bodies strewn about. . . . The cemetery appears to be invaded by barbarians. Invisible hands continue this sacrilege with rancor and hatred.

With a single anecdote, Gómez Carrillo captures the Gogolian aspect of Russian bureaucracy. An English journalist of his acquaintance goes to a government office in St. Petersburg to enquire about the revenue from tobacco. Ten people who are obviously doing nothing suddenly try to appear busy. He begins "Could you . . . ?"

"Not here," all ten reply immediately without even knowing what he is going to ask.

He persists, however, and continues, "Could you give me some information on the revenue from tobacco?"

"Not here," the ten reply.

On the door of the office were painted the words, "Statistical information about tobacco."

This is the very essence of bureaucracy.

Gómez Carrillo has an ability to capture essences. He doesn't much care for St. Petersburg, which he thinks is grandiose without beauty. He says that it is "an encampment of palaces," which a Russian friend of mine thought a very apt description. It is a city by decree, of decree, for decree, but I think it beautiful all the same.

In the year in which Gómez Carrillo traveled to Russia, he went also to the other combatant in the war, Japan, and published a book in

the same year about his impressions. I don't know whether he was the first Guatemalan ever to visit Japan, but there surely cannot have been many before him, and the fact that he even thought to do so is a tribute to his imaginative curiosity.

There is little doubt that he preferred Japan to Russia, finding there much to admire (he found nothing in Russia to admire). But his entry into Tokyo from Yokohama was disappointing, for despite the vastness of the city, he saw nothing beautiful there. The streets were muddy and filthy; the citizens disposed in them of whatever they did not want, just as they did in Port-au-Prince the last time I was there. Even in China (according to Gómez Carrillo), despite its poverty, the streets were at least jollier. Contrary to his romantic dreams of Japan, Tokyo was wretched. He describes his journey from Shimbashi station, "vulgar but lively," to his hotel (one of three European establishments in the city):

Journey without end, made in tall and narrow vehicles pulled by a man who trots like a horse. Oh, the sadness of these vehicles! I feel it more here than in China or in India, no doubt because of the muddiness of the streets and the enormous distances. We went for half an hour through sordid little streets, and we were still far [from our destination]. The journey generally takes an hour, sometimes two. The Japanese [rickshaw pullers] were content to smile, happy to all in appearance, resigned in reality, and continued to trot through the interminable, the incredible, streets of their city. From time to time, they stopped a second to dry the sweat of their brow and then continue their dreary way, more than dreary for those unused to it—anxiety-provoking.

Reading his account of the city, one can only wonder at its transformation in far less than a century: and for those of us (who are many) who are inclined to take the present for granted, as if all that exists now has always existed and always will exist, it is a valuable corrective to that shallow view.

One of the things that strikes him immediately is that the entire population seems to wear spectacles. "The soldiers, the tram-drivers,

the policemen, the workers, everyone wears them. They are objects of national necessity." Gómez Carrillo thinks that this is a matter of fashion, rather than an expression of a genetic predisposition to short-sightedness. (In North Korea, I was struck by precisely the opposite phenomenon, the complete absence of spectacles, as if the wearing of spectacles were an admission of national weakness. Under the reign of Macías Nguema in Equatorial Guinea, the wearing of spectacles was dangerous, for it implied that the person was educated, and the dictator was very sensitive on the subject of those who were more educated than he.)

Gómez Carrillo was an acute observer, but not of the future. He laments something that makes the streets of Tokyo even uglier:

Progress, which has not remembered to construct pavements in the streets, or put lights in the public thoroughfares, has, by contrast, added to the horrors that already existed, thanks to the telegraph and telephone networks. Oh! these infinite wires! You can imagine a spider's web like this. In the humblest alleyways there are thousands of wires and hundreds of poles to keep them up. The story of *a telephone in every home*, even in those of beggars, is not a legend. There, where there is neither a bed nor clothes, is a telephone. At the corner of every street you see kiosks which say *Public Telephone*. And it is thereby that Europeanism is reduced to some melon hats and numerous telephones.

Despite the Japanese victory in the Russo-Japanese war, in which they used the most modern weaponry of the time and sank almost the entire Russian Baltic fleet, Gómez Carrillo did not see this mass adoption of what was then new technology as a harbinger of the speed with which Japan caught up, and in many respects surpassed, European nations: he saw it only as a manifestation of the crudeness and ugliness that westernization brought with it. Indeed, when one looks at the views of Edo (as Tokyo was then called), and the landscapes, of Hokusai and Hiroshige, one cannot but sympathize with the viewpoint of Gómez Carrillo, who was an aesthete above all.

How far ugliness existed in those two artists' time, I do not know; what is certain is that Japan's civilization was of the highest aesthetic sophistication and refinement.

It is easy to romanticize previous ages as being more beautiful than our own, and no doubt (after a certain age) we are all prone to do so. But Gómez Carrillo has done his homework, and while he accepts that before the advent of modernization—with the industrialization that brought with it both great wealth and horrible poverty—Japan had a materially egalitarian society, he quotes accounts of the famines that affected the country that are as graphic as can well be imagined: human suffering is not of recent invention. He quotes the eighteenth-century poet Bakin's account of the famine of 1786:

A witness worthy of credence assured me that of five hundred families in a village, only thirty remain: all the members of the others were dead. Eighty *sens* [cents of a yen] were given for a dog and more than fifty for a rat. The dead were eaten . . .

A man who had already lost his wife and older son was ready to sacrifice his other son. He went to his neighbor and said:

As [my son] is going to die also, it would be better to kill him and eat him. As his father, I don't have the courage to kill him; if you do, we'll share him.

The neighbor accepted, "but hardly had he killed the child than the father beheaded him with an axe, not out of revenge, but to have the body all to himself."

Japan before industrialization, then, was not always an aesthete's paradise.

Gómez Carrillo gives an interesting account of Japanese nationalism and sense of superiority, at the same time as its chivalrous conduct towards the defeated Russians (as a man of contradictions himself, he could spot the existence of contrary tendencies in the world). For example, the Japanese preserved the Russian Orthodox cathedral in Tokyo from

attack and allowed it to continue to function throughout the war, all the more surprisingly because the cathedral itself was of a scale (and ugliness) designed to dominate the city, whose buildings were still of modest proportions. It also came as something of a surprise to me to learn that there were Japanese converts to Russian Orthodoxy.

But the Japanese, at least the upper class, were so impressed by their own military victories over China and Russia that they fell victim to the illusion of many successful nations, that they were special, unique, providential, destined to be the center of the world. Gómez Carrillo writes:

In his heroism, in his love of justice, in his cult of loyalty and generosity, the samurai is sustained by pride in being Japanese. You others, you who believe you love and admire your countries; you others, men of Europe and America, you hardly deserve to be called patriots! The citizen of Japan deifies his country—Listen: "The civilizations of all countries must unite in Japan; and Japan will transform all these civilizations by its own influence, and give to the world a new and veritable civilization. Such is Japan's special mission, that which will eternalize its influence."

The civilizations of India and China reached Japan and could expand no further; the civilizations of Europe went to America, which brought them to Japan, and could go no further. Therefore, Japan was destined to be the center of the world.

Success in war gave the Japanese a sense of invincibility (which before long proved dangerous even to themselves, let alone to their neighbors). The Russians, they said, fought from a sense of duty, the Japanese from a desire for glory and indifference to their own individual lives, and the latter were therefore bound to prevail. Their sense of anger and disillusionment at the provisions of the Treaty of Portsmouth, brokered by President Theodore Roosevelt, which were relatively favorable to Russia considering its military defeat, was directed at their own diplomats, who were blamed, but neither they, nor Gómez Carrillo, realized that the treaty was relatively favorable to Russia because Russian



strength in the Far East was increasing while Japan's position was overextended.

Gómez Carrillo reports, he does not condemn, but he is eloquent on the aesthetic marvels of Japan, which he thinks superior to all others:

Yes, human language is powerless to describe these marvels of art, grace, light, harmony and sumptuousness. Merely to say, for example, that the most grandiose of European architecture appears wretched compared with these does not suffice. What difference between the intensity of feeling that one experiences and the coldness of the sentence with which one tries to express it!

This may appear exaggerated, yet I am not unacquainted with the response to the art of other civilizations. When I walk through the gallery of Islamic art in the Victoria & Albert Museum in London, I think "This is of incomparable beauty, it is the acme of human creation"; then I walk through the gallery of Indian art and think, "This is of incomparable beauty, it is the acme of human creation"; then I walk through the gallery of Japanese art and

think, "This is of incomparable beauty, it is the acme of human creation." Finally, I pull myself up short and remind myself that art is not a team in a sporting league, and that to appreciate one tradition is not to denigrate another.

Gómez Carrillo, frivolous aesthete turned serious social commentator in the wake of the Russo-Japanese war, saw much to admire in Japan and nothing at all in Russia. Were he to return, would his judgment be very different now?

I have touched on only a small portion of Gómez Carrillo's work. I find him a protean figure, very difficult to summarize. He was intelligent, bold, brave, charming, talented, cultivated, multifarious, hardworking, and unscrupulous. Perhaps he sums himself up best, describing his childhood:

I drank life . . . in great mouthfuls, I drank the light, beauty, the joy of growth and enjoyment; I drank from the ardent glass of the tropics, I was intoxicated by the perfume of flowers, by the color of the sky, by the smiles of girls, by the caresses of my mother.

# The singularity of speech

*by Wilfred M. McClay*

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A great deal has been said and written of late about free speech: whether it is even possible, whether it has intrinsic limits, whether it is inherently biased for or against certain groups, or whether it might be more injurious than beneficial to the well-being of a community. Some of us wonder how it came to pass that a principle as fundamental to Americans as free speech, grounded as it is in the language of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution as well as Article 19 of the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights, among other places, has suddenly become so "problematic"? And on college campuses, of all places!

Perhaps it is the case that free speech is destined always to be controversial, always on the defensive, precisely because it is so rare and difficult an ideal to sustain. It is easy to approve of it in theory, but even easier to find it infuriating in practice. Free speech so often cuts against the grain. It is the rude guest at an otherwise harmonious gathering, the one who says *no* to niceties and conventional wisdom, asks embarrassing questions, defies etiquette, and otherwise sets the cat among the pigeons and his fellow dinner guests' teeth on edge.

Does that tendency of free speech to be disagreeable help us account for the surprising shift in the center of gravity that we have witnessed in free-speech debates? Is it a by-product of the "coddling of America," this inability to tolerate hearing a view contrary to one's own being spoken? Would the great free-speech maven of *The New York Times* in its

heyday, Anthony Lewis, still publish a book today with a title extolling "freedom for the thought that we hate"? Would Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. still insist that "the ultimate good desired is better reached by free trade in ideas," because "the best test of truth is the power of the thought to get itself accepted in the competition of the market"? Or might he find himself ridiculed and deplatformed for saying so?

There is an eatery on the campus of the University of California at Berkeley called the Free Speech Movement Café, hearkening back to the 1960s, that campus's glory days in the annals of dissent. How long will it be before that name itself—talk about commodifying your dissent!—has gone beyond being deeply ironic and becomes downright objectionable in the eyes of the rising generation?

I don't propose to answer all of these questions. But I do have some thoughts about the most important issue, the place of free speech in our colleges and universities. I believe that some portion of our current confusion may be clarified by recurring to first principles and recovering a clearer sense of what free speech is for. For the mere declaration that we possess a certain right, a negative liberty, does not tell us anything definite about why we ought to have it or what we ought to be *doing* with it.

My thoughts on the subject flow from my thinking more closely about the two words *free* and *speech*—and asking exactly what it is

that we mean by them. Let me start with the second one, *speech*.

It is here that I must regretfully express a measured but significant disagreement with the Chicago Principles, so named because they were propounded at and promulgated by the University of Chicago, under the courageous leadership of its then-president, the late Robert Zimmer. I honor Dr. Zimmer's memory and achievement, and I think he did a great deal of good in providing a text that over seventy institutions have been able to rally around, to reassert the university's fundamental commitment to free inquiry. And yet the Chicago Principles leave an important problem unaddressed, and they compound that problem precisely by their failure to address it.

You may recall that the document is called the "Report of the Committee on Free Expression" . . . not of "Free Speech" (or, for that matter, of "Free Inquiry" or "Freedom of Conscience").

This is not an unimportant difference, although the text of the report also employs "speech" instead of "expression" in multiple instances, as if there were absolutely no difference between them.

The Chicago Principles are not unique in emphasizing "expression" rather than "speech." The Woodward Report, published in December 1973 by a committee at Yale headed by the eminent historian C. Vann Woodward and still one of the best such guides to the virtues of academic freedom, also uses the same language. Its official title is the "Report of the Committee on Freedom of Expression at Yale."

In neither of these two influential documents is attention given to any difference of meaning between "speech" and "expression." The terms are treated as if they are completely interchangeable.

There are consequences to such semantic slippage, particularly if it is deliberate. The Chicago Principles open with a statement about how "from its very founding, the University of Chicago has dedicated itself to the preservation and celebration of the freedom of expression as an essential element of the Uni-

versity's culture." But then, as evidence of this foundational commitment, it goes on to say:

In 1902, in his address marking the University's decennial, President William Rainey Harper declared that "the principle of complete freedom of speech on all subjects has from the beginning been regarded as fundamental in the University of Chicago" and that "this principle can neither now nor at any future time be called in question."

Note that Harper did not refer to freedom of *expression*, but to freedom of *speech*. Did the authors of the Chicago Principles believe that Harper, who was a Baptist clergyman, would have recognized no difference between the two terms? Or did they make a silent editorial decision that the Principles would not recognize the difference between the two terms, even if Harper would almost certainly have done the opposite?

Either way, I believe they made a mistake. The ultimate justification for free speech is inseparable from the fact that that it is *speech* that we are allowing to be free.

By saying it this way, I mean that speech, discursive language—what the ancient Greeks called *logos*—has a special dignity. It is the human gift par excellence. It is the medium by which we engage in rational deliberation, the way that we work things out together, solve problems, state and apply moral principles or principles of action. It is the means by which we are able to be "political animals" in the way that Aristotle describes us—not just animals that live together, but animals that have the capacity to deliberate together on questions of the common good. Or as Aristotle himself puts it, in Book I of the *Politics*,

[W]hy man is a political animal in a greater measure than any bee or any gregarious animal is clear. For nature, as we declare, does nothing without purpose; and man alone of the animals possesses speech. The mere voice, it is true, can indicate pain and pleasure, and therefore is possessed by the other animals as well (for their nature has been developed so far as to have sensations of what is painful and pleasant and to

indicate those sensations to one another), but *speech* is designed to indicate the advantageous and the harmful, and therefore also the right and the wrong; for it is the special property of man in distinction from the other animals that he alone has perception of good and bad and right and wrong and the other moral qualities, and it is partnership in these things that makes a household and a city-state.

Animals share with us a capacity for expression of pain and pleasure, but not a capacity for speaking with analytical cogency about those things, describing them with the requisite precision, making judgments of value among them, and incorporating those judgments into the life of a human community. In fact, Aristotle is saying that it is our capacity for “partnership in these things” that makes a community possible.

Speech occupies a middle ground between thought and action, a sort of buffer zone in which we can consider, together, different courses of action prior to acting upon them. The whole idea of allowing speech to be free depends upon its being securely situated in and mostly confined to this middle transitional zone. (Speech that represents a “clear and present danger” is proscribed precisely because it violates this fundamental understanding.)

We engage in this sort of provisional thinking all the time, as when we deliberate together in considering competing scenarios, whether Plan A is better than Plan B, which plan will have what consequences, and which simulation or imaginative projection is likely to provide us with a more accurate reading of future events, and thus a more effective plan of action. In a truly deliberative environment, individuals collaborate with one another in thinking through their plans, both in constructing them and then in evaluating them, implementing them, and considering together their moral implications.

Expression, however, is something distinct from speech. It is a more or less romantic term, an emotion-laden term, referring to forms of communication that may or may not be verbal, and may or may not be part of a delibera-

tive process. Its romantic quality is reflected in the word’s etymology, deriving from the Latin *exprimere*, “to press out.”

Permit me to elaborate with a story that will illuminate the difference.

When I was an undergraduate, my college had the practice of inviting scholars to deliver formal lectures to the entire student body on Friday nights. Coming at the end of the academic week, the lectures were required occasions that were both academic and social in character. One dressed up. After the lecture, the audience members who were eager to question the lecturer would assemble in a separate hall, and the conversation would continue, often long into the night. A delightful custom, when it was working as it should.

It didn’t always do that. One Friday night I found myself in the after-audience, listening to a conversation that, little by little, got itself stuck on different understandings of certain ineffably abstract concepts. The conversation became tense and exasperating, like listening to variations on a snowbound car spinning its wheels in vain. Suddenly, a young woman behind me, a fellow student, stood up and let out a loud, long, intense, wailing scream and, having delivered her sonic judgment on the entire proceedings, turned on her heels and walked out of the room. Her nonverbal remonstrance had shocked everyone in the room, but she made a point. “Well,” commented the waggish senior sitting to my left. “Freedom of expression.”

As this example suggests, expressive liberty tends to be a one-way thing, a monologue, a cry of the heart, like the Sammy Davis Jr. song “I Gotta Be Me,” not a contribution to collective deliberation about truth. We sit back and listen to the monologue, like moviegoers in a darkened theater. We are spectators. The experience can be enthralling, moving, powerful, passionate. Shocking, even. If it is a great work of art we are confronted with, we might be uplifted, or feel our spirit crushed, by what we see, and perhaps our thinking about some social issue or historical person is changed. If it is inferior art, like our best friend’s little sister’s earnest but awful poetry, we try to be generous, and we accord it the

respect due to another person's inmost expression, rather than giving it the hook right away on aesthetic grounds.

But there is no room for us to answer it, or offer an alternative view. Expression *qua* expression is all about "my voice," "my truth," "my narrative"—and it must be heard! And in some sense, it must be deferred to. Think of that screaming girl: what could anyone have said to her in criticism of her voice, her truth, honestly expressed? Well, we could have criticized her for failing to use words, for failing to participate in a discussion in the customary manner. But if I cannot detach her words and ideas from her "truth," how can I criticize her words usefully, without seeming to reject her, as a person, altogether? Her position is argument-proof. Trouble is, no one will ever really know what her point actually was.

Freedom of expression, in this sense, is almost certainly not what James Madison had in mind in 1789, nor what William Rainey Harper had in mind at the University of Chicago in 1902. That doesn't settle the matter for us today, of course. But it serves as an indication that we are now embarked on a very different path than the one they set us upon. And a part of the quandary in which we find ourselves has arisen precisely because we have confused speech and expression.

One could write an interesting history of how this blurring came about in our general culture, how two things that were distinct a mere century ago have become so conjoined in our thinking as to be indistinguishable. I think we can say with some confidence that the twentieth-century controversies over obscenity laws, prompted by the publication of such books as *Lady Chatterley's Lover* and *Ulysses* and *Fanny Hill*, had much to do with the expansion of the category of speech to include the protection of expression. Rochelle Gurstein's 1996 book *The Repeal of Reticence* is a masterly historical treatment of that process, by which intellectuals threw off the older idea that the traditional canons of art and literature were instruments of intellectual and moral refinement and embraced the notion that the transgressive writings of the

Marquis de Sade or the shocking photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe were expressions of authentic perspectives and equally deserving of our attention. Perhaps even *more* deserving, since they had been suppressed for so long by our society's moralistic preceptors.

But the message being conveyed by some favored forms of "expression" can be hard to hear, even when it is very loud. And in terms of discernible meaning that can be articulated in definite terms, "expression" is sometimes downright mute.

The members of the American Nazi Party who sought to march in 1978 through Skokie, Illinois, a community in which one in six residents was a Holocaust survivor—were they intending to engage in speech? Exactly what would they have been saying? Yes, we know generally what they would be saying, but can what they wanted to say be expressed in terms that allow for a counterargument in speech to be made?

What about a gesture like flag-burning? Leave aside what the courts say. Is it speech or expression? If such things are a form of speech, shouldn't we be able to identify what they were saying? Can we?

Or to bring the matter up to date, do we really know what "taking a knee" means, in anything other than the broadest sense? Ask twenty different people what "taking a knee" means. You will probably get twenty different answers.

But often the point of using an expressive gesture or image rather than a verbal declaration is precisely the imprecision that expressive symbolism offers. Words can generally be answered and contested and clarified and amended, in dialogue and conversation and debate with others using words. But the gesture has a powerful finality about it, an unanswerable quality—or it can only be answered by another unanswerable gesture: you insult me, and I insult you back; you block me, and I block you. This is the kind of gestural misanthropy in which our era increasingly specializes. It is not a good model for democratic deliberation.

Much of the armory of present-day political protest is about various forms of nonnegotiable expression—taped-up mouths, armies of Atwood-inspired handmaids, staged scream-

ing, audiences that wheel around and turn their backs on invited speakers or drown them out with chants, vandals who throw tomato soup at Van Gogh paintings, madmen who glue themselves to valuable objects—gestures and imagery treated as if they were speech. The courts, including the U.S. Supreme Court, have been instrumental in furthering this trend. I could multiply examples or emphasize that this is a practice of all political parties and persuasions, but the point is that we have come to accept passively the notion that these expressive acts are equivalent to more conventional forms of speech.

But in fact these examples represent the *opposite* of speech. Rightly understood, speech, *logos*, always entails the possibility of an answer, of interlocution, of dialogue, of engagement, of argument—in short, of talking back. Instead of offering the opportunity for argument and persuasion, such examples seek to foreclose the possibility of counterargument and refutation.

When we equate free speech with free expression, we deny or diminish the unique property of speech: as the medium of deliberation, as that middle ground between thought and action, and as the instrument that enables us, together, to seek and test and validate the truth. In addition, we miss the fact that “free speech” entails obedience to a whole set of procedural norms, which are the necessary ground of that freedom. This adherence to some such norms may be desirable for our society as a whole, and that is a possibility that deserves a separate examination. But my point here is a more narrow one: that free speech and the norms it entails are especially necessary in an academic culture, a culture whose reason for being is unimaginable apart from such norms.

Those norms include many of the things that go by the term *civility*. They begin with respect for those to whom we speak, a respect that acknowledges their presence before us and their shared membership in our community, precisely because the purpose of our speech is honest persuasion and, ultimately, truth-seeking that benefits the whole community—since as an academic community, we are a community consecrated to the pursuit of truth.

The confusion also works in the other direction. Just as actions have become interchangeable with words, so words have become regarded as a form of action. This can take the narcissistic form of tweeting out a virtue-signaling message, or even launching a social-media campaign, as a substitute for actually doing something concrete. Ten years ago, when 276 Nigerian Christian girls were kidnapped by the Islamic militant group Boko Haram, there was a huge social-media campaign, joined by the First Lady of the United States, repeating the slogan #BringBackOurGirls. But little else was done, and today nearly half of the girls remain unaccounted for.

But fecklessness is not the only ill consequence of confusing words with actions. During the famous 2017 incident at Middlebury College, when violent students (and radical outsiders) rejected the idea that the distinguished AEI sociologist Charles Murray could even be allowed to speak on campus, they resorted to chanting that “Words are violence,” echoing the 1993 Nobel Prize address of the novelist Toni Morrison. To be scrupulously fair, what Morrison actually said was “Oppressive language does more than represent violence. It is violence.” The protestors’ simplification seems a crude but honest extrapolation from her words.

In other words, speech can be a form of violence, and violence—at Middlebury, in the streets of Berkeley, in Baltimore and Portland and Seattle and Charlottesville and a dozen other places—can be a form of speech.

What we have lost in this formulation, which can be expanded to include any unwelcome words in the category of violence, is a recognition that the realm of speech—properly understood and properly cared for—serves a civilized society, and an academic community in particular, as an essential buffer zone between thought and action, a holding pen or neutral place where we can hold our disparate views out before ourselves in public and consider them together. It is the realm of civility, which is something entirely distinct from niceness.

Yes, there are exceptions to this, in the form of so-called fighting words or the proverbial shouts of “fire” in a crowded theater. Speech

can go too far. There also are a few categories of speech that are rightly called “speech acts,” such as wedding vows. But these exceptions do not invalidate the rule. To make speech into action and action into speech is to negate the value of speech entirely. Such a conflation will ultimately leave the outcome of any conflict in the hands of those with the fewest inhibitions about employing violence, manipulation, and bullying threats to greatest effect.

There has been much talk of “safe spaces” in the contemporary academy, but words are our principal safe space, especially in the academy, since they are where the most dangerous ideas can be explored safely, as in nuclear containment units, without immediate consequence. Hence the Woodward Report’s famous characterization of the academy as the place defending “the right to think the unthinkable, discuss the unmentionable, and challenge the unchallengeable.” We cannot have that, the academy cannot perform this dangerous function, if we do not recognize and affirm the special status of words. And if you haven’t noticed, we really have not been performing that function very well in recent years.

That is not to deny the fact that words can cause pain and damage. Toni Morrison was not wrong about that, and we should not strive to test our commitment to free speech by stocking our campus speaking docket with the most obnoxious characters on earth, who will flay and bludgeon the sensibilities of their listeners rather than further the process of rational public debate.

But there cannot be a free society without citizens who are sufficiently resilient to hear and understand and give respectful attention to views, put forward in speech rather than expressive gestures or slogans, that are seriously at odds with their own. This is the constraint imposed by canons of fundamental civility that we all accept in order to be otherwise “free.”

One of the other slogans mouthed by the mob that drove Charles Murray off the Middlebury campus, and seriously injured his host Allison Stanger, was (I am quoting) “Fuck rhetorical resilience.” This was a response to a sensible contention by the college’s president,

Laurie L. Patton, that developing “rhetorical resilience” is an essential element in a college education. She was right. But the students employing that slogan were having none of it, and they used their expressive freedom, rather than genuine speech, to make their point, much as an infant makes his point by overturning his bowl of oatmeal rather than offering a detailed explanation. Their juvenile resort to the F-bomb, which is by now as shocking as dishwater, was a way of saying “Don’t bother us with your arguments, there is nothing to discuss. We already know the truth.” Ubiquitous use of the F-bomb is the trademark of individuals who, lacking the capacity to explain their views to others, know only how to “press them out.”

Yes, from a procedural standpoint, freedom of speech is a negative liberty, in the sense that, as in the First Amendment, it bars governing institutions from presuming to be censors acting in the name of some putative higher set of values. It does not seek to impose that higher set of values.

But in the academic setting, the limitations of understanding free speech as merely an expressive liberty, a Hyde Park Speakers’ Corner for the voluble, become especially clear. Freedom of speech must be seen as a truth-seeking tool, whose existence points toward a larger social purpose by enabling the search for truth. Indeed, every cogent defense of free speech, from John Milton to John Stuart Mill to Zechariah Chafee on down to the present, finally ends up defending it in such terms: as a means of discovering and testing the truth.

Free speech is an individual right that points toward a social end, and we best serve the social end by defending the individual right with vigor and conscientiousness. Even something so fundamental as allowing opposing positions each to have their moment to speak becomes an empty procedural norm unless there is an underlying commitment to the pursuit of truth and to the possibility, however slim, that the lone obnoxious dissenter in the room might be the one person who has it right.

I should add that nothing I am saying here about the importance of protecting free speech should be taken as advocating for restrictions

on free expression. I am simply arguing that the two things ought to be distinguished, as we have increasingly failed to do; that the cases to be made for them are different; and that when it comes to the academy, it is speech rather than expression that stands most urgently in need of our defense.

Furthermore, it is not enough to affirm free speech on the grounds of feeble and genteel relativism: that we live together in a world in which the truth cannot be known, so everyone ought to have the expressive liberty of sounding off. On the contrary, free speech is one of our most precious tools for *seeking* truth. We need free speech because there are truths out there to be found—and because no one of us alone is ever going to find them all or come independently into complete possession of them. We need the refining fire of contrary opinions to purify and elevate our own necessarily incomplete assertions.

Which means that, as a truth-seeking community, we cannot allow ourselves to become reliant on the superior wisdom of censors and experts to do our job for us. That is yet another argument for free speech, and one of the most venerable. The best way of improving our own arguments is by hearing and responding to the arguments of those who disagree. John Milton's great essay *Areopagitica* of 1644, one of the most important defenses of free speech ever written, makes just this assertion, composing a brief against censorship. Read his words:

I cannot praise a fugitive and cloistered virtue, unexercised and unbreathed, that never sallies out and sees her adversary but slinks out of the

race, where that immortal garland is to be run for, not without dust and heat. Assuredly we bring not innocence into the world, we bring impurity much rather; that which purifies us is trial, and trial is by what is contrary.

As David Bromwich has pointed out, Milton is making a subtle theological statement here: that we do not come into the world innocent, each of us a Lockean *tabula rasa*, but instead our judgment is inherently tainted, our timber crooked. We cannot be relied upon to discover truth on our own, in magisterial solitude. It is only by subjecting ourselves and our opinions to the challenge of contrary opinions that we can have any confidence in what we have discovered, and can have any hope of governing ourselves justly and well.

To choose a regime of free speech, then, is to choose a regime of constant trial, in just the way Milton expressed it some four centuries ago. That is what the university should exemplify. It can be exhausting. It is not what everyone wants out of life, and in some ways it is highly unnatural.

But many fine things are unnatural: tolerance, sacrificial love, the stately beauty of a formal garden. Such is the unnatural ideal to which the university in particular ought to be consecrated. And the sustenance of that ideal is ultimately dependent on a firm commitment to the refining force of speech, that most human of capabilities. The university best serves its society by understanding the proper limits of that commitment, and by adhering to it faithfully, even fiercely, as a place for knowledge, requiring a special kind of community.



# A life in ballet

by Peter Martins

Each year, at the end of the Royal Theatre season in Copenhagen, auditions are held for the ballet school. Children, for the most part between the ages of eight and eleven, come to the school for the entrance examination. The audition room is an old ballet studio with worn wooden floors whose walls are lined with portraits of August Bournonville, and in one corner is a bust of this nineteenth-century ballet master and choreographer who created the Danish ballet style.

In small groups the children are seated in a row and asked to remove their shoes. The ballet master and some teachers walk slowly down the line, the ballet master sometimes holding a baton. The children raise their feet, and the shape and extent of each arch is scrutinized, the curve of the instep examined. The foot is a clue to potential ability—the children are being examined for a crucial indication of a dancer's physical equipment. When I was a child, in the early 1950s, what was wanted at the Royal Danish Ballet School was a small foot with a big arch and a big instep.

Next, the children are asked to stand, and their overall proportions are considered. No low legs (short limbs), no extra-long legs. The teachers are looking for a pleasing appearance, and for the perfectly proportioned. But talent can override all shortcomings (in my case it had to override big feet). The next test is a dance, and the dance is a simple waltz. The students are arranged in a circle, and, since

most of them have had classes in social dancing, the test is an easy one, but it demonstrates grace and musicality and how the body moves. Intelligence isn't being tested, but it will be demanded later on.

Equipment, proportion, musicality, and intelligence: these make a dancer. (Well those, *and* talent and dedication.)

In a country whose total population is five million, about fifty students are accepted, and the school's total enrollment is 250. Of these, only a few finish out the course, for each year the students are tested, and the unpromising are weeded out. A very select number of those who are graduated are asked to join the corps of the Royal Danish Ballet. In 1954, when I was eight, I was accepted into the school.

My mother's side of the family had been involved in music and dance for generations. My mother was a pianist who traces this predilection to her own mother, who, unknown to her parents, spent many childhood days with the local Copenhagen circus, learning simple acrobatic feats and entertaining between acts. Her thwarted theatrical ambitions blossomed in her children. My mother's brother, Leif Ørnberg, was a leading dancer with the Royal Danish Ballet, and his wife was a prima ballerina. An uncle was a percussionist in the Theatre Orchestra, and a cousin who was in the ballet company was married to a violinist. Another cousin had her own dance academy. Ours was a family steeped in the arts, and my mother saw no reason why her son shouldn't continue the tradition.

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This essay is adapted from *Balanchine and Me*, by Peter Martins, published by Academica Press.

My father, an engineer whose designs and ambitions for a native-made Danish automobile came to nothing because of the industrial halt caused by World War II, had no interest in dance or in any of the arts for that matter. He and my mother were divorced when I was two, and he never exerted any influence on my choice of career.

As it happened, my heritage and family connections were of no help to me when I first attended the Royal Danish Ballet School. In retrospect, they seem to have created problems. My sisters Marianne and Annette auditioned the same day I did and were not accepted for reasons that remain unclear. Some of my relatives felt that there were teachers and dancers who intensely disliked my family for political reasons stemming from the war, and that we children were being victimized for quarrels that had nothing to do with us. It's likely that my acceptance was based on the school's being short of boys, a problem shared by dance schools all over the world.

At the end of each year, for seven straight years, my mother received a letter from the school authorities:

Peter is possibly talented, maybe he has some aptitude, perhaps some gift, but we have not made a conclusive decision, and we must warn you that we are still watching his progress. So, we leave you with the caution that this next year might be his last at the school.

The school is a full-scholarship school, and all my expenses, including dance shoes and class clothes, were covered. Ballet classes were held in the morning; in the afternoon we had our academic subjects; and at the end of the school day were rehearsals for performances, for the theater seasons were a mix of ballet, opera, and drama, all of which used children to fill out the stage picture.

After the divorce, my mother moved with my sisters and me to a small apartment. Being the sole male, I had a room to myself, while my sisters shared one. The forty-five-minute trip to school involved two streetcars, and when the weather was good I would cycle. For lunch, my mother packed open-faced sandwiches of

salami, liver pâté, thin slabs of chocolate, or banana on dark pumpernickel. After school I would go home for an early supper, return to the theater to perform, and then go back home by myself after the performance. Copenhagen was a safe city, and I wasn't afraid of traveling alone.

That was no guarantee of success, however, and my early years at the school were not pleasant for me. I didn't feel liked by the staff and instructors, and I sensed a personal antipathy because of my family. But even at that age, I had enormous pride and would have thought it an unendurable disgrace and, even more, a family dishonor if I had been expelled. No matter how much I loathed the school, I felt I had no choice but to remain, and to excel. My instructors grudgingly conceded I had some talent but were skeptical I could develop it fully. These doubts forged a quality in me that turned out to be a strength in later years: a faith in my talent, an assurance that was developed not by constant praise from others but from an inner, self-sustained belief.

From the age of five I had had social-dance classes, and I always felt good at it. For five straight years my partner and I won the social silver medal in the Danish National Social Dancing Competition, losing out to the same couple every year for the gold medal. The winning boy was the son of Denmark's leading social-dance teacher, and on the sixth year I finally beat him. With that accomplished I retired from social-dancing competitions. Dancing was something I did better than any of my classmates. It was easy (then), and I just did it. I realized afterward that I didn't have to search out an ambition. I'd be a dancer, and that was fine.

By my early teens I had become rowdy, quarrelsome, sometimes snotty, and completely undisciplined. Stanley Williams, who was a principal dancer with the company, became my teacher when I was twelve. He had been born in England, but his mother was Danish, and his family moved to Denmark when he was a child. When a dancer says, "So and so is my teacher," he means this is the one who determined my style, who gave me the clue to the art and my way of performing. This is the

teacher who set my goals, who set my standards of movement. It was Stanley who first made me feel the challenge, the potential achievement, and the *importance* of being a dancer.

What Stanley taught was not the traditional, inherited Bournonville style of ballet but a way of dancing classical ballet that took account of the present, that was modern in feeling. It was a living method that held the possibility of exploration and extension and variation of the classical technique. What appealed to me about Stanley was his attitude—one of honesty, directness, and lack of fuss. I worked hard under his tutelage.

Thanks to him my talent emerged. I graduated and became an apprentice in the Royal Ballet. In 1967 I was promoted to principal dancer, and that spring I was assigned to George Balanchine's *Apollo*. Henning Kronstam coached me on the role, and the reviews said I was fair.

That summer, Stanley Williams had returned from New York, where he was now teaching at the School of American Ballet, and we were having dinner at his hotel when a call from Vera Volkova came for me. She had been searching for me everywhere, because a small group from the New York City Ballet was supposed to open the day after next in *Apollo* at the Edinburgh Festival, but Jacques d'Amboise had been injured. Balanchine had asked John Taras, one of the company's ballet masters, to comb Europe for a replacement. Taras had flown to Copenhagen hoping to audition me that very night. I replied that was impossible.

Instead, Taras, Volkova, and I met at the theater the next morning, and then Taras cabled Balanchine that help was on the way. We flew to Edinburgh later that day, amid a growing chorus of press coverage, and Mr. Balanchine watched me go through the ballet without making any major changes, except slight adjustments in the pas de deux. The opening was a big success, and my effort was judged heroic. Proud I had not let anybody down, I arrived at the theater for another rehearsal the next day.

"Before we begin," Mr. Balanchine said, "You know, you do it all wrong." He tore up my performance, but he was very pleasant about it and demonstrated what he meant, even partnering with Suzanne Farrell to show me what he wanted.

He told me I was dancing too classically, and I was not giving the role the suggestions of character and imagery he had built into it. I had been trying to make everything look beautiful and grand, but he demanded shapes that looked grotesque but were packed with energy. He was so wonderfully natural. This was an enormously great man. One eye on him, and I knew what dancing was all about. He radiated knowledge and authority. He was never condescending, and he never pretended to know more than he did, yet maybe there wasn't much he didn't know. These were the same qualities that had attracted me to Stanley Williams.

*I fell in love with George Balanchine!*

On the plane back to Copenhagen, I asked Stanley what I should do next. If Balanchine liked me, Stanley assured me, he would be in touch. What Stanley could guarantee me was that Balanchine had been impressed. "You see, I changed everything for him, and he remembered everything."

Back in Copenhagen, my world felt lifeless, but eventually my patience was rewarded: two months later a telegram came. Balanchine invited me to guest during the run of *Nutcracker* performances in December.

I arrived two days before my debut with the New York City Ballet at the New York State Theater in December of 1967. With my dancing the Sugar Plum Fairy's cavalier and partnering with Suzanne Farrell on the stage of the New York State Theater, the critics were welcoming. At the end of two weeks, Mr. Balanchine asked me to stay on to learn *Diamonds*, the concluding ballet of a tripartite evening called *Jewels*, and a ballet made especially for Suzanne.

This began a tense period with the Royal Ballet in Copenhagen. I returned to Denmark, but when the NYCB spring schedule was finalized, they wanted me to perform *Apollo* and *Diamonds* again, and to partner with Suzanne in Balanchine's setting of Brahms's *Liebeslieder Walzer*. Jacques d'Amboise had a string of injuries that kept him out—and me in. I was learning ballets overnight and performing them the next day. My performances went well, and Mr. Balanchine finally made me the offer I had dreamed of. Whenever I was free,

he wanted me to join the company. For the next year and a half, I juggled performing in Copenhagen and New York, to the Danes' increasing annoyance. I applied for a two-year leave of absence, or indefinite leave, to Fleming Flindt, who had himself received one year before. Nothing doing, he said: those days are over. In the end, I tendered my resignation and told Mr. Balanchine I was free to join his company as a permanent member. There was nothing easy in any of this. I was leaving my family (by now I had a son, Nilas) and leaving the institution that had nurtured me. My relationship with Nilas's mother could not be salvaged, but I have made a point of spending summers with Nilas ever since and experienced the joy of watching his dance career develop successfully in the United States.

For all the difficulties, however, I had never felt so relieved in my life. I had freed myself of a burden and made a strong commitment to start in a new direction. With my resignation from the Danish Ballet, all should have moved forward smoothly, but it wasn't to be like that.

The spring gala in 1969 at the New York State Theater was the occasion for the premiere of a new ballet by Jerome Robbins called *Dances at a Gathering*. It marked Robbins's return to the company after a long absence. It was an important night in ballet history, though one that was upstaged slightly by Suzanne Farrell. A few days before, she and her husband, Paul Mejia, had been fired by Balanchine. Suzanne had demanded that her husband be cast in *Symphony in C*, or else they would leave the company. This left me without the partner I was most at ease with balletically, and without a clear place in the company.

When I first became a member of the New York City Ballet (which is this year celebrating its seventy-fifth anniversary season), Balanchine was not teaching the company class every day. When he resumed teaching daily, he noticed I was attending less and less. I learned what I was told to learn, but nothing more. In my mind I was a classically trained, conventional artist, and the classes were unconventional.

The other reason I began avoiding Balanchine's class was that he found me an easy

target for ridicule. My attempts to achieve a cool perfection irritated him, and when he imitated my style, he made me look prissy and overrefined. This was devastating, and I felt humiliated. My response was to become even more reserved, so that Mr. B and others felt I was distant, even incommunicative and uninterested, which was completely untrue.

Things came to a head when Balanchine programmed *Theme and Variations*, on the last part of Tchaikovsky's Suite No. 3 in G. Balanchine created a new choreography for it, extending its summation of classical ballet into a dance essay about mood, a dream, with implications of loss and regret, desire and guilt.

After the first day of rehearsals, Balanchine called me into his office and told me directly what he had been implying in his remarks about my stiffness, lack of expression, and general clumsiness in rehearsal. He said I was unusable.

I was only twenty-three, and patience and tolerance were not my chief virtues. I complained to the company director, Lincoln Kirstein, who was sympathetic and promised I would soon be featured in a new production, Michel Fokine's *Les Sylphides*, presented under its original title, *Chopiniana*. Here again, Balanchine and I clashed, and I actually considered leaving the company and going to the American Ballet Theatre. Instead, after intense consideration, I recommitted to the New York City Ballet and asked Mr. B to clarify my position.

He said,

You see, dear, you don't seem to be interested. I never see you anywhere, except at O'Neal's restaurant. When people show interest, I use them. If they don't, I leave them alone. And you don't show interest.

I was shocked. We had been getting the wrong messages, and our misunderstandings had been deepening every day. Rather than coolness and lack of interest, I felt frustration and anger, yes, but also tremendous energy and passion. When I told him this, he responded that in that case I had to change my attitude, show him I was willing to work hard, to concentrate, and to behave maturely. It was now up to me

to prove my seriousness and determination. If I succeeded, he'd let me do anything I wanted.

This was the turning point in my career with the NYCB. The atmosphere altered immediately. No longer did Mr. B disdain to say hello. Instead he smiled and welcomed me. And, needless to say, I reciprocated, smiling and bowing at every opportunity. Soon it felt as if we had become friends.

Jerry Robbins, who was the founding choreographer of the NYCB along with Balanchine, was a genius at some things but very difficult to work with. He idolized Balanchine but was paranoid about me. He thought I would try to drive him out. The reverse was true, and I tried very hard to keep him happy. When I got to know Leonard Bernstein, the composer said, "Jerry fucked up some of my best music." He was referring to *The Age of Anxiety*, among others.

I had wanted to come to America because of *West Side Story*. When I was a teenager, my biggest ambition was to become a conductor. I would go into my little room at home, put Tchaikovsky on the stereo, and conduct to it. Conducting was always a passion of mine. When I got to the NYCB, I would do it in rehearsals, sometimes to the annoyance of our own musicians. "That's our job," they would protest, but I couldn't help myself. I have always had very strong opinions about tempi and would let them know when I thought the music was too fast or too slow.

In any event, I was fascinated by Leonard Bernstein and often went to the New York Philharmonic to watch him conduct. In due course we became friends and would talk in his dressing room. It was there that he made disparaging remarks about how Robbins had devalued his music. He continued to invite me, and when he died in 1990, I was surprised and very touched that his office sent me a beautiful little antique silver ashtray as a memento of our friendship. Ultimately I was able to choreograph a ballet to one of my favorite of his compositions, *Chichester Psalms*, as a tribute to him in 2004.

I used to have fights with Robbins when we were codirectors. He always wanted to promote the beautiful girls, even if they couldn't dance.

I would say,

Come on, Jerry, dancers are intelligent, they know when they can't dance; you're doing them a disservice to advance them when they don't deserve it.

There was an extremely talented, highly intelligent, and technically perfect dancer named Gen Horiuchi that I fought to promote over Jerry's opposition, because Jerry thought he was too short, or so he said. I finally got my way, and today Gen is the longtime director of the St. Louis Ballet.

One day in the late 1980s, Lincoln Kirstein burst into my office and shouted, "You're doing *Sleeping Beauty*!"

"What?" I replied.

"And you're doing it with Jerry [Robbins]," he said.

"Lincoln, this is pure fantasy," was my reaction.

"Well, you're codirectors, and you have to do it," was his response.

I was concerned about collaborating with Robbins, although I remembered that in the *Nutcracker* Mr. B had done the ballet, Jerry the battle scenes, and both got credit.

"We can't put on *Sleeping Beauty* in the New York State Theater," Balanchine had once told me.

"Why not?" I asked.

"Because," Mr. B explained, "It doesn't have a turntable."

In any case, Jerry never mentioned a possible collaboration to me, so it became clear that Lincoln had not told him about his plans.

Of course, I did not know what Balanchine's vision would have been, as he did not elaborate before his death in 1983, but I still continued with a yearlong research project to examine all the other productions that had been put on worldwide. I studied the tapes of all the other productions, immersed myself in the glorious score, and recognized that Tchaikovsky often repeated phrases throughout his score. Most productions that I studied had two or even three intermissions, but I wanted to create a streamlined version that, if possible, could function with only one intermission. This was an incredible challenge for me. I believe I found the answer, although not where one

would expect the intermission to be placed. Other productions commonly inserted the intermission after Aurora wakes up, following a hundred years of sleep, but I chose to take a different route, placing the intermission after the Hunt scene, just before the Prince travels to wake up Aurora.

For me, the greatest importance was to give primacy to the grand Tchaikovsky melodies in the music. In my opinion, Tchaikovsky's *Sleeping Beauty* is by far his most beautiful score, even more splendid than *Swan Lake* and *The Nutcracker*.

After outlining the character arcs and using the quirky but useful skills in miming that I had learned at the Royal Danish Ballet, I finally felt capable of producing a work that could, I hoped, make Balanchine proud. I remember acting out each character in the studio, to the dancers' great amusement, but it still helped them a great deal in their performances. I wanted to retain most of the great Petipa choreography, and asked permission from the Balanchine Trust to incorporate Balanchine's remarkable garland dance, which he had created years earlier. The Trust happily obliged, and this was one more ode to Balanchine in my version of *Sleeping Beauty*.

I went to see the famous designer David Mitchell to discuss set designs and Patricia Zipprodt to discuss costumes. Mitchell built a model and spent two hours going through it with me, telling me how it would work. Zipprodt had created sketches for all the costumes even before we met, and they were brilliant.

But I noted a huge problem.

"It looks very expensive. Three and a half hours. A hundred dancers. \$3 million [in 1990 dollars]. We need to raise half before I dare to announce it."

We got the money, cut many of the repeats but not any of the gorgeous music, and it became the most successful ballet other than *The Nutcracker* in the company's history.

I chose to choreograph the ballet for Darci Kistler. Darci came to New York from California when she was fourteen and lived in the Swiss Town House, a dormitory, while she studied dance. One year later Mr. B hired her.

She was so advanced technically that Mr. B said, "She's divine, only fifteen, and she will be the greatest ever." I couldn't tell him that I would, years later, be dating her.

Casting Darci in *Sleeping Beauty* was a dream come true. She was the most classically talented among the dancers, yet still poetic and youthful in her movements. For the pas de deux in the last act, I chose to use Petipa's choreography, because there was no need to change it. His pas de deux was pure and elegant, and Darci danced it perfectly. The choreography fit her like a glove. In the last act—also known as the Jewels section—I decided to rechoreograph Petipa's version and add a new solo for a male. I also added a new pas de deux for Little Red Riding Hood and the Wolf.

During my research, I discovered that Tchaikovsky had originally intended for the Fairy variations in Act I to run consecutively, without stops in between. All other productions, however, had pauses between variations, to allow for applause. I decided to choreograph my production of *Sleeping Beauty* according to Tchaikovsky's guide. I did, though, change some of the meters in the solos as an ode to Balanchine, who used this technique frequently, making the choreography far more interesting.

My favorite part, if I may say so, is when the King and Queen transfer their power to Aurora and the Prince. I was criticized by the press for that section, as many claimed it was unrealistic for a monarchy, but Lincoln Kirstein loved the idea and supported the decision fully.

A number of years later I choreographed *Swan Lake*. I invited the great Danish painter Per Kirkeby to do the set design and costumes. For anyone who knows Per's work, it's no surprise that the production design was abstract, but some critics took issue with this. Nevertheless, the public loved the production, and it became our third highest-grossing ballet, following *The Nutcracker* and *Sleeping Beauty*.

I fundamentally rechoreographed the entirety of Act I, choosing to honor Petipa's style. I kept, for the most part, Balanchine's version of Act II, which he had choreographed years earlier. Act III was entirely my own, and I added the National Dances sections—Hungarian,

Neapolitan, Spanish, and Russian. Act IV was also entirely new choreography and over the years has become my favorite act. I believe Mr. B would have liked it. The ending is truly powerful to me. When the Prince recognizes his grave mistake in choosing the Black Swan over the White Swan, he is left on stage alone, and in despair. This emphasizes his tragic error and makes it all the more heartbreaking to watch.

Despite Lincoln Kirstein having recruited Balanchine to come to New York, and the fact that they had to appear together at curtain calls, Mr. B and Kirstein had no personal relationship. They were very different people. They were both brilliant, but Balanchine alone was wise. Kirstein frequently lost his temper, used gutter language, and made impulsive decisions, whereas Balanchine did not.

One day Lincoln barged into the elevator at Juilliard as I was going up to teach the noon class. He was sweaty, pasty-faced, and trembling. “My goodness, Lincoln, whatever is wrong?”

“You won’t believe what that sonofabitch just said to me.”

“What?”

“He said, ‘Lincoln, the solution to your problem is simple. Just buy a gun and shoot yourself!’”

Mr. B was extremely diligent, always working, twelve hours a day, every day. (Jerry Robbins worked two to three hours a day and was bored by many administrative details, so he didn’t attend to them.) The board of the New York City Ballet was in awe of Balanchine. He only went to the board twice, once to ask for earthquake-relief funds in Italy and the other to buy bulletproof vests for the NYPD.

But the board trusted him. It was impossible to succeed him, but I wanted to protect him. He never spoke badly about others.

Perry Silvey was the NYCB production stage manager. He watched Mr. B and Jerry for thirty years and said “they had no relationship,” which was obviously true despite their long history.

Lincoln Kirstein was also impossible to get on with. He came to my office one night and gave me a letter addressed to the editorial board of *The New York Times* that was very demeaning of Robbins, whom he hated and wanted fired. At the bottom were our two names in print, and Lincoln had already affixed his signature next to his. “Lincoln, this is nuts,” I said. “It will cause a huge scandal and be all over the media. I won’t do it.” But Lincoln was adamant about getting rid of him and went on and on about why he was such a detriment to the New York City Ballet. I finally said to Kirstein, “I’m so grateful to you and Mr. B.”

“Why?”

“Because Mr. B taught me everything to do, and you taught me everything NOT to do.”

“Fuck you” was his poetic response.

Another time Lincoln called me in and told me that the time had come to oust Mr. B himself! “He’s old and getting sicker. We have to move on. I have a plan.” Obviously, it was a plan I wanted no part of, and, in the end, of course, it came to nothing.

I retired from dancing in 1983, becoming Co-Ballet Master-In-Chief alongside Jerome Robbins, and the sole Ballet Master-In-Chief in 1990. But I ran the company largely on my own as Jerry had no interest in administration or fundraising. I also served as the artistic director and chairman of faculty of the School of American Ballet, the training division of the New York City Ballet.

“*Après moi, le board,*” Balanchine said to me near the end of his life. I guess he wasn’t completely sure about me or the future.

The Board was always starstruck by him, and the dancers adored him. He was like a god, but always a constructive and supportive god. And he could be funny. Once he was watching from the audience with a microphone when Violette Verdy made a mistake. “Oh God,” she exclaimed.

Over the PA system came the reply, “Just call me George.”

That is how I remember George Balanchine.

# New poems

*by Amit Majmudar, James Matthew  
Wilson & Michael Casper*

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## Doctrine of the emptiness of forms

The belly feels the law of falling bodies.  
Likewise the law of the excluded middle.  
I've never been much more than half a Buddhist,  
But I attest the airiness of metal,  
The emptiness of all things shaped and solid.  
Round-bellied Buddhas made of brass, or less,  
The meditating ones that seem ensouled,  
The teak ones with a hand raised, blessing loss—  
I lift one off the shelf, and he's a kite,  
A helium balloon, a smoke ring floating  
Away to prove the ruse of form is fleeting.  
He wears his weight as softly as a cat.  
His eyes are stops along a silenced flute.  
Such ballast serves to ease me into flight.

*—Amit Majmudar*



## Tucson hospital, waiting room

The visitors outside the ICU,  
    After first greetings, don't have much to say.  
And yet, an idle gazing on the view  
    Of cars parked in the warming desert day,  
Waiting themselves in silence, will not do.

And so, they speak of where their children live,  
    Now that they're grown with children of their own,  
Of one's tenacity or initiative,  
    A grandchild's trophy, grades, or broken bone.  
No detail is too trivial to give.

Their voices hide those distant beeps and hums  
    That hint of purposes they only guess.  
And as they laugh, that place, it seems, becomes  
    One where old women praise a young girl's dress  
And she, in turn, shows off her speed at sums.

But when, from time to time, a nurse appears  
    And summons someone through the heavy door,  
They leave off reminiscing of past years,  
    And find the window's blazing scene once more,  
In silence wondering whose disaster nears.

—*James Matthew Wilson*

## Sunnyside

I found my butcher knife in storage,  
wrapped in *The Irish Times*.  
Memories of Sunnyside,  
when Snapchat was all the rage.  
Now, on my skull, a bare pate  
emerges like a tectonic plate.

Some things remain hidden, like souls.  
Kids will jump off a bridge  
for the likes, and for the LOLs.  
“Never give a inch” read the banner at college.  
I was too often in the stacks.  
Me, I would just lay on the tracks.

—*Michael Casper*

# An afternoon in the Steinway basement

by *David Dubal*

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If ever there was a name that conjured up magic, it is Steinway, “The instrument of the immortals.” The firm Steinway & Sons has dominated the American piano industry since the 1860s. The instrument is used the world over in more concerts needing a piano than any other make. Indeed, most pianists prefer it to all others. To be a Steinway Artist is to have prestige, and few biographies do not use its allure—“Arthur Rubinstein is a Steinway Artist,” or whoever. People of every musical stripe feel, “Oh, a Steinway, yes, that is quality.” The advertising budget for the firm may well be small, as each Steinway Artist in himself is a magnificent endorsement, and the company pays no artist for his words. In my case, in imitation of Walter Pater, I wrote, “The Steinway is the piano that all others aspire to.”

Recently I was given a slim volume published in 1929 of Steinway tributes. That was a catastrophic year; the Great Depression was upending world piano-building. Only twenty years before, there were 370 American piano builders producing 370,000 instruments. Fewer than thirty-five survived the depression. By World War II, the Steinway firm was relegated to making airplane propellers. In the book, the endorsements are repetitious and flowery, but there is one from Ignacy Jan Paderewski that gives a special note of authenticity:

Whenever perfection is attained progress is stopped, for there is no room for climbing when the summit has been reached. And yet, in your case, this law of nature seems to have been defied.

Such a thing can only be accomplished by a sincere love of profession, and it is to this love of profession that I wish to pay my tribute of high esteem and admiration.

The lineage of the Steinway company has proved this love for profession, and books have been written of this splendid family. Heinrich (Henry) Steinway was born in 1797 (the year of Schubert), and the last eloquent spokesman of the firm was another Henry Steinway (1915–2008). It was to John Steinway (1917–1989) that I owe my afternoon in the hallowed basement of Steinway Hall, then at 109 West Fifty-seventh Street in New York.

As the music director of WNCN, then New York’s classical-music radio station, I had the pleasure of interviewing the legendary and elusive Vladimir Horowitz, who had not been interviewed on New York radio for something like forty years. That story is told in my book *Evenings with Horowitz* (1991). From those interviews I created a series, *Conversations with Horowitz*, which Steinway & Sons decided to sponsor. John Steinway, a senior vice president of the firm, had a smooth, mellow, and cultivated speaking voice. He had come to WNCN to tape the commercials for the programs, each dealing with a different composer in the Horowitz repertoire. It did not take long for me to realize that John Steinway was a well-mannered gentleman. One may even say he had an old-fashioned charm. The encounter was one of those splendid confluences that results in artistic meaning.

At that time, WNCN had recently secured plush new studios at Forty-sixth Street, on Sixth Avenue. The station was technically top-notch, and we had planned for a large performing space for live concerts and recording. It was to have everything from perfect acoustics to special air-conditioning, with not a speck of dust to be tolerated. Looking at the naked studio with several of my colleagues, I did not say a word about the indispensable piano that would make it all possible; indeed, none of us did. The studio was months from completion, and perhaps we did not want to speak of the large expense of a piano.

WNCN was a commercial station with a very modest profit margin. Today it is unthinkable to have a classical-music format not funded by public and private donations. The unspoken problem of a piano was immediately solved when John Steinway bellowed: "Yes, indeed, these studios will be splendid, but you have said nothing about a Steinway piano, the great tool of the trade for any broadcast studio." And with a sweeping gesture he said, "I am giving a Steinway Grand to WNCN on permanent loan." We all hemmed and hawed our thank-yous for such largesse. Steinway said,

Yes, David is a Steinway Artist, so the Steinway must be the piano in residence. So when you are ready, David, come over to the Steinway basement and choose. I do think, however, a nine-footer would be less effective in this kind of acoustics than a seven-footer.

Naturally, we all agreed in unison.

Within a month I made an appointment, and I remember undertaking my eleven-block trek to Steinway Hall on a perfect spring day. The place looked like a temple to Steinway's pre-eminence, its majestic rooms filled with paintings, letters, and photographs of past giants of the instrument. For me it was an enchanted atmosphere, as is the famous factory in Astoria, where daily tours were once held.

At that time, I knew most of the Steinway salesmen, who took their jobs with seriousness and pride. After conversing at some length with them, I was then ushered down to the

most celebrated basement, perhaps, in the world. Here was a veritable stable of thoroughbred pianofortes, to use the instrument's official name. These and other pianos coming in are chosen by various artists, and the instruments are then sent to where they will perform. It's a daunting task of coordination. All Steinway Artists may sign up for practice sessions. I was told Rudolph Serkin had been there the night before, choosing a piano for an upcoming Carnegie Hall recital. I reverently touched the keyboard.

As I toured the premises, I continued to give unseen pats of veneration to each instrument. Surely, I was in a celestial place, and I heard luminous vibrations; the air seemed to float with sounds "writ in ivory." In fact, my head buzzed with the music of Hofmann, Levitzki, Lhévinne, and Busoni; indeed the whole romantic firmament was mingling. I shook my head and remembered my recent discussion with Horowitz, who told me of the time he met Rachmaninoff only days after the former's first arrival in New York in 1928. The two artists went straight to the basement, where Rachmaninoff played the orchestral part of his Third Concerto while the young master tackled the solo part. Rachmaninoff gleefully told Horowitz, "You swallowed it whole," and a lifelong friendship took root.

The basement was very quiet and completely reserved for my meeting with WNCN's future Steinway. I was pleased to see Franz Mohr, one of the finest piano caregivers: a tuner and technician. This most gracious of men walked to me, smiling: "David, I am at your service." I was honored, as Franz was an institution himself. Perhaps nobody had more intimacy with the Steinway mechanism. Here Franz stood, a picture of love for his calling; he seldom failed to please any finicky pianist.

Franz, in his soft Austrian accent, said, "Are you ready to go?" Weakly I replied, "Well, I guess so." At that second, however, within the ghostly chambers of pianistic greatness, I was feeling quite dizzy and puny. I was given no time limit for my choice. I breathed deeply and began. The operation took three focused hours. That day the basement housed nearly thirty Grands. In my case, I had only three seven-

footers to choose from. Here was the moment. Franz felt I was nervous and with perfect calmness said, “It’s not easy, but you’ll do it.”

I had been practicing a great deal at the time and was soon to make a recording that included a wide range of music, from the Gluck-Sgambati Melodie to Liszt’s difficult *Rigoletto* paraphrase. I felt numb and wondered if I could release my playing to any effect. Slowly I walked to the piano labeled Concert Department 361 (or CD 361) and took the plunge, playing forty-five minutes non-stop. I could see Franz, bat-eared in a darkish patch of the place, puttering.

As I played, I felt inspired by the piano’s personality. At home I have a Steinway, but this piano was levels above my beat-up instrument. As I finished off the octaves of the *Rigoletto*, it dawned on me that there were two other pianos to try.

CD 361 clearly had a hard action, not at all easy to play, yet it offered a satisfying resistance. In general, pianists prefer an easier, more comfortable piano action, but a softer action can run away from you. It can be difficult to keep in harness; one may feel a certain lightness of head and hand, the instrument laughing at you: “See how nice I feel? Did you know you could play those runs and passagework so fast?” So it’s a tricky and frustrating endeavor to choose a piano, not to mention finding its singular ability to create the sounds and colors one is trying for.

And so I kept going. Now I was auditioning CD 361’s sisters (the numbers for some reason I have now forgotten). Each had its own soundscape. Yet each was identifiably a Steinway.

The next piano was certainly easier to play, but it sounded to me lackluster, with little personality. Yet suddenly in the F-minor *nouvelle étude* of Chopin it projected a burnished sound that I had always wanted to play but never had. My body thrilled; could I choose this piano for one piece only?

Now I was pounding away on the third piano; it was a different type indeed, and it had an innate lyricism of its own. I dug deeper into my repertoire to find fragments and passages. “Yes,” I shouted, “this piano was born for Scarlatti, for Haydn, for certain Romantic

salon pieces.” The top absolutely glittered, and the bass boomed. Playing it was a luxury itself, and yet I didn’t feel comfortable about it.

I screamed, “Franz, I’m completely confused! What to do?” This was serious stuff. Other hands besides mine will be on it. I remember being immensely hot, actually dripping with sweat, as I manically scurried from one piano to another. Franz came over to me, gently laughed, and said “Yes, David, this is very tough stuff.” I replied, “This last one is a dream to play on, and perhaps will appeal to a greater variety of players.” I collapsed on a bench. I told myself, *this is not a personal piano*. This was for a broadcasting situation as well. Looking at Franz, I uttered, “I’m really attracted to CD 361’s range and color. This piano is truly *appassionato*.”

As I went back to the others, it seemed that the tactful Franz had disappeared. I was actually suffering. Each was special; one was more orchestral, another had a certain sweetness; one had a cello sound, while on the lighted piano there was a nasal oboe pouting. All of them had Steinway’s celebrated ringing, bell-like bass. I was in a muddle, a fog: easier action, harder, lighter touch, less treble—all this and much more. “Franz,” I blurted out, “I don’t know what to do.” Franz walked to CD 361 and said, “I remember three hours ago it was this one that readily spoke to you, David.” He continued, “Yes, there is *passion* in this piano.” Yes, the lighter instrument will be easier, perhaps more fun to play, perhaps better for Debussy. But now Franz softly struck a bass A flat several times on CD 361, comparing it to the others. “This,” Franz said, “will hold up better to the rigors of a studio, and will record better.” And Franz looked me in the eye, saying, “You are right. CD 361 has the Steinway sound as I like it.” I said, “Franz, that’s it, there can be no other endorsement,” and in minutes I feverishly signed the papers for delivery to its new home.

As I left, I hugged Franz, and I stepped out to a bright sun, feeling like I was on air. For some reason I was singing, “Strange, dear, but true, dear . . . So in love with you am I.” I knew I had made the best choice. Thank heaven there were not four or five seven-footers to try. It would have done me in.

# Addicted to futility

by Kyle Smith

The anti-Nazi resistance gets the *Rent* treatment in *White Rose: The Musical* (at Theatre Row through March 31), in which four plucky friends and their teacher at the University of Munich—who called themselves “The White Rose”—decide to take down the Third Reich with leaflets. Sloppy about their methods, they are soon discovered and put to death. The musical paints the quintet as noble freedom fighters who fueled a vigorous resistance movement, but since internal opposition had almost nothing to do with the destruction of the Third Reich, their actions, however courageous, were in vain. The musical must therefore struggle with the question of how to dramatize an obviously futile gesture, albeit in the right direction.

The siblings Sophie and Hans Scholl gained the glow of martyrs, which has been celebrated many times before. (See, for instance, the 2005 German film *Sophie Scholl: The Final Days*, which was nominated for an Oscar). Their stories might have inspired a wrenching, somber musical steeped in revulsion for the barbarism of the Reich as well as appreciation for the idealistic follies of youth, but *White Rose* has no gravitas whatsoever. Indifferently staged by Will Nunziata, thinly acted, underbaked, and plagued by banality in most of Natalie Brice’s musical compositions, it never makes the audience feel the immense danger or the world-historical stakes. Worst of all, both the book and lyrics (by Brian Belding) confuse clichés with insights: The truth changes everything! Don’t give up! Look to the stars! Dim millennial-speak keeps reminding us

we’re in twenty-first-century America (the Führer “empowered us,” says a disillusioned former member of the Hitler Youth; Sophie asks her feuding colleagues, “Are we seriously doing this right now?”), and the multicultural casting is, in context, ludicrous, considering the famously monocultural nature of 1943 Germany. Of the five leading members of the White Rose brought to life onstage, one is black (as is an SS officer) and two are Asian. Why dilute a show in which 1940s Nazi master-race ideology is the pretext for every action on both sides by making it look like a guidebook for meeting 2020s artistic DEI quotas? The actors appear so out of place as 1940s Germans that they might as well be costumed as astronauts.

The story’s tragic arc makes it perhaps best suited to opera (Udo Zimmermann composed one, 1967’s *Weisse Rose*, which was reworked and enjoyed several follow-up productions), yet the intrinsic frivolity of the musical-theater form can be overcome. This piece barely makes an effort, containing itself to depicting Sophie and Hans Scholl (Jo Ellen Pellman and Mike Cefalo, respectively), their friends Willi Graf (Cole Thompson) and Christoph Probst (Kennedy Kanagawa), and their professor Kurt Huber (Paolo Montalban) as the kind of plucky upstarts familiar from a thousand Broadway musicals. They take the actions that will lead to all of their deaths with no more thought of consequences than the upper-middle-class bolshies who staged a more-whimsical-than-dangerous East Village rent strike in *Rent*.

The show's songs—nineteen of them are stuffed into a ninety-minute, one-act presentation—are largely nondescript ballads centered on violin, piano, and guitar, with overly aggressive drumming frequently drowning out the melodies. Some of them are pretty enough, such as the duet “Who Cares?” sung by the condemned siblings. But when the students declare “We Will Not Be Silent” in the closing numbers, it's hard not to respond mentally that the guillotine is notably effective in silencing people. Since the Scholls and their friends didn't accomplish anything, their story demands an entirely different and far bleaker approach, one that comprehends and absorbs the suicidal nature of their protest. What kind of personality can drive someone to throw away a life just begun? The day Hitler died, and Germany's rebirth began, Sophie Scholl would have been only twenty-three, had she not been so heedless that she threw a handful of anti-Hitler leaflets in the air in 1943 in view of a Nazi janitor who immediately reported her to the authorities.

Instead of conveying the sense of an utter seriousness of purpose more or less alien to us today, the play chooses naivety. It seems to recast the members of the White Rose as the forebears of the last several generations of lefty American students engaging in the kinds of consequence-free political gesturing that have characterized campus politics and angry protest marches for the past sixty years. But the Scholls and their allies were not at all like today's fake radicals, who have come to expect, with good reason, no worse than a pair of plastic handcuffs and a brief stop for a booking before they continue on with their lives. The Scholls' group was extraordinary and, by today's lights, incomprehensibly so. The characters in the show, and the actors who portray them, come across as lightweights who are barely aware of what they're doing. As they prance around the stage burbling about hope and tomorrow, they never seem like anything more important than generic musical-theater dweebs.

The best current example of how to stage a serious subject for the musical theater without the whole project disappearing in frivolity is an-

other horticulturally titled piece, *Days of Wine and Roses* (at Studio 54 through April 28). The familiar story about a convivial young publicity man and the teetotal secretary he corrupts with drink, then marries, then drags into sodden dissolution in the Eisenhower–Kennedy era was originally a play written for television by J. P. Miller in 1958, then adapted by Miller for the rightfully beloved 1962 film starring Jack Lemmon and Lee Remick. The title resides within a line from the 1896 poem “Vitae Summa Brevis” by the alcoholic poet Ernest Dowson (who also created the phrase “gone with the wind” in another poem, “Non Sum Qualis Eram Bonae Sub Regno Cynarae”). Both poems' titles are references to Horace's *Odes*. My, how the reference points of television writers have changed. Miller was guilty of a modicum of literalization when he supplied the male lead with a gig delivering roses for a greenhouse, but nevertheless the film is a standout for its era, raw and piercing about the hazards of excessive drinking at a time when Hollywood preferred the warm glow of sentiment to the harsh glare of verisimilitude.

With a book by Craig Lucas and music and lyrics by Adam Guettel, the Broadway production directed by Michael Greif begins in the swagger of youth, when aboard a party cruise Joe Clay is getting happily sauced when he encounters the boss's lovely, demure young secretary Kirsten Arnesen. The Broadway veterans Brian D'Arcy James and Kelli O'Hara play the leads, and though James is sturdy and dependable, O'Hara is a standout. She is perhaps the leading lady of Broadway musicals these days, having been nominated for seven Tony awards. In 2015 she won one, which was richly deserved, for playing Anna in *The King and I* at Lincoln Center. O'Hara is forty-seven but even just a few rows from the stage she seems effortlessly to capture the spirit of an adorably inexperienced girl in perhaps her mid-twenties. Joe, associating alcohol with good times, and feeling a bit stymied by her prim air, seeks to get her to join him in bibulous festivity, but she doesn't enjoy the taste. That changes with the first Brandy Alexander he orders for her on a dinner date. In a trice, she is lighthearted, buoyant, and sexy. Her song about needing

some danger in her bookish life, “There Go I” is properly foreboding. In the next scene, the pair have set up together, he has brought home some whiskey to celebrate a promotion, and the two drink it straight up.

Everyone in the audience will sense where this is heading—daytime drunkenness to chase the housewifery blahs, the specter of job loss, even near-catastrophe caused by a fire resulting from one character’s passing out with a lit cigarette. The story presents alcohol in all of its contexts—a tonic, a toxin, a shortcut to sociability, or a prison to which one sentences oneself. Kirsten, whose mother is dead, was raised by a stern Norwegian American farmer (Byron Jennings) and initially seems merely a passive victim, hence not very interesting. As the show goes on, however, the urge to break the addiction passes back and forth between the couple and she gains agency. She’d certainly have been better off never touching a drop, but nearly everyone has had a first drink, very often at the suggestion of someone else. Each sip is nevertheless an individual choice. Ultimately the show, which races through a single powerful act of an hour and forty-five minutes, demonstrates an admirably honest understanding of this. Some people simply can’t drink in moderation and hence shouldn’t indulge at all.

Kirsten’s taciturn father despises Joe and blames him for leading his daughter into self-destruction, and there’s plenty of reason to believe that. At one point, living under her old man’s roof, Joe suggests they celebrate a period of sobriety by . . . drinking. This doesn’t go well, leading to a dolorous reprise of an especially devastating scene many recall from the movie, in which a drunken Joe carelessly trashes the father’s greenhouse, destroying innocent flowers that might as well be potted Kirstens, while looking for a bottle he has stashed somewhere. Yet in the final third of the show, Kirsten becomes the tout and temptress while Joe, having recalibrated via *Alcoholics Anonymous*, tries to avoid falling back into the liquid trap. The show creditably avoids grandstanding about so-called toxic masculinity, or at least understands that femininity can be toxic as well.

The songs, played by a small orchestra as is necessitated by the tight confines of the theater, aren’t especially memorable. But they’re highly effective in their place, suggesting a sedate late-night cocktail lounge with their trembling reeds, soft trombone, and piano. The numbers have a sensuous but regretful and cautionary air that seems perfectly calibrated to match the relationship many problem drinkers have with alcohol.

“From Supreme Court to sausage factory” is a wry son-in-law’s tart summation of the fortunes of the O’Donnell family into which he married in *Aristocrats* (through March 3), the second of three plays by the Northern Irish Catholic Brian Friel that constitute the Irish Rep’s thirty-fifth season. (First was *Translations*; next up is *Philadelphia, Here I Come!*). The family in question, whose patriarch, a retired judge, lies offstage in dementia-riddled agony muttering nonsense heard through an intercom, are Catholic gentry whose stately home is Ballybeg Hall, the “big house” in the fictional village where Friel set many of his plays. The judge’s three daughters and his son Casimir are all failures in various ways. Despite his pretentious Christian name, borrowed from a Polish prince, the flighty, possibly gay Casimir (adroitly played by Tom Holcomb) now works in a food-processing plant in Germany with his alleged wife Helga, whom no one else in the family has ever met. “Helga’s the real bread-winner,” notes his alcoholic sister Alice (Sarah Street). “She’s a cashier in a bowling alley.” It only takes a single generation for a family’s standing to collapse. It’s the mid-1970s, and the O’Donnells are clinging to their past glories as a bleak future stares them cruelly in the face.

When we meet Casimir, he’s having a wonderful time describing the environs to a visitor, an academic from Chicago, Roger Dominic Casey’s Tom Hoffnung (the translation of his surname is the only hope present), who has no dramatic function except to serve as an audience surrogate to elicit information about the family history. (His research area is the grand estates of Ireland, most of which are owned by Protestant Anglo-Irish clans, which makes the



Catholic O'Donnell family a rare type). Casimir merrily shuffles around the place claiming, dubiously, that G. K. Chesterton fell off this stool, or W. B. Yeats napped on that cushion. He has three sisters, and there might as well be a cherry orchard on the grounds. Friel, who died in 2015, was an acolyte of Chekhov, and among his plays were adaptations of both *Three Sisters* (1981) and *Uncle Vanya* (1998). Friel even dramatized a couple of Chekhov's short stories, "The Bear" and "The Lady with the Dog," and his one-act play *Afterplay* imagines an entanglement between a character from *Vanya* and one from *Three Sisters*.

*Aristocrats*, tautly directed by the Irish Rep's creative director, Charlotte Moore, probably could not exist without Chekhov's spirit whispering in Friel's ear, but if its creative debt is obvious, it's also highly effective. As challenging as it is to create a work nuanced and subtle enough to be dubbed Chekhovian, Friel did so. The play has exactly the master's tone of gentle, lightly comic sympathy for its downwardly mobile family, adrift in its cloud of self-delusion, disappointment, and generational decay. As is often the case in Chekhov, there is one clear-eyed, hence dryly amusing, observer present to explain wittily what has gone wrong. Eamon, Alice's formerly working-class husband, superbly played by Tim Ruddy, managed to climb the social ladder by winning her hand, but now the couple lives humbly in London. He allows that he talks too much, but only because the others refuse to say anything much: "This was always a house of reticence, of things unspoken, wasn't it?"

He might have married one of the other two sisters: once he even proposed to Judith (Danielle Ryan), who has instead settled into spinsterhood and spends her days living in the house and looking after the judge, who

dribbles on his chin and soils his sheets. Claire (Meg Hennessy), who plays the piano almost obsessively, is about to be married to a grocer, hence the presence of the rest of the family in the house at this moment, but her melancholy air does not bode well. Offered a drink, she says, "The doctor doesn't allow me to take alcohol when I'm on sedatives."

The family may still possess a few tattered remnants of gentility, but they haven't a cent. Should the old man die, and deprive the family of his pension, there won't even be enough to pay for the upkeep of the estate. Unlike in *The Cherry Orchard*, in which poor business decisions hasten the family's ruination, the O'Donnells have no options except dissolution. The way Friel uses the academic researcher's innocent, friendly questioning to reveal the sad truth of the situation is the play's finest moment, as cunningly designed as anything in Chekhov. A haunted, silent figure who occasionally drifts into the scene, Uncle George (Colin Lane, who also plays the aged judge) typically looks around, says nothing, and then shuffles off. The rest of the family assume he's gone a bit mushy in the melon, but as we learn in an amusing twist, he hasn't. He is quite correct in thinking there is nothing much to say.

Though the play would have been improved by folding these characters and their sorrows into a plot, as it stands *Aristocrats* is Friel at his very best. His characters are rich and human, his dialogue ranges from clever to insightful without ever sounding like a writer labored over it, and his feel for his characters is perfectly balanced by a bemused detachment that avoids easy satire or sneering condescension. Ballybeg may be fictional, but Friel made it breathe and sigh and ache and face its limitations.

Art

# Panoramic Rothko

by *Karen Wilkin*

Say “Mark Rothko” and we visualize the signature works that have become synonymous with his name—the so-called Classic paintings, large canvases constructed with soft-edged floating rectangles of disembodied color, some radiant, others brooding and dark. But Rothko (1903–70) didn’t start out making paintings of this type. Born Marcus Rothkowitz in Dvinsk, Russia (now Daugavpils, Latvia), he immigrated at the age of ten, with his family, to Portland, Oregon. In 1923, after two years at Yale, he moved to New York and enrolled at the Art Students League, where he began painting representational images loosely derived from Cézanne. By the late 1920s, Rothko had forged a close friendship with Milton Avery, and by the early 1930s, like the older artist, he was painting expressionist figures.

Yet Rothko showed landscapes, rather than figures, in his first (and critically well-received) one-person exhibitions, held in 1933, in Portland and at the Contemporary Arts Gallery, New York, perhaps because he thought they were more marketable. And everything changed in the mid-1940s, when Rothko abandoned representation, first experimenting with Surrealist-inflected dreamscapes that announced him as an innovator to be reckoned with and then, despite the attention awarded to these symbolic images, gradually eliminating even fleeting allusions. But it wasn’t until 1949 that he began making the economical, elegant abstractions that his name conjures up—paintings so stripped to essentials that they repudiate totally his early

interpretations of the world around him and even put to question the haunting works that established his reputation in the mid-1940s.

The journey from Cézannian landscapes and loose-limbed figures through symbolism to pared-down abstractions is charted in detail by “Mark Rothko: Paintings on Paper” at the National Gallery, Washington, D.C., organized by the museum’s associate curator Adam Greenhalgh, the lead author of the Rothko catalogue raisonné.<sup>1</sup> The title is precisely accurate. The works on view are made variously with watercolor, ink, acrylic, and even occasionally oils on different kinds of paper supports, but they are never sketches or studies. Everything in the exhibition is as ambitious and complete as any work on canvas, an equivalence emphasized by Rothko’s wanting his paintings on paper to be mounted and presented as if they were stretched canvases, without frames, rather than being matted and put under glass, like conventional watercolors. He clearly did not regard works on paper as secondary. In various campaigns during the four-plus decades of his working life, he made astonishing numbers of them, many quite large, sometimes coexistent with canvases. His exhibitions of large watercolors in New York and San Francisco, in 1946, were, in fact, his first commercially successful shows, and the works he considered to be his first mature

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1 “Mark Rothko: Paintings on Paper” opened at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., on November 19, 2023, and remains on view through March 31, 2024.

efforts were watercolors. His 1961 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, for which he helped to select paintings, began with four watercolors from the 1940s. They were the earliest works included, a signal of how he saw his evolution.

The first gallery of “Mark Rothko: Paintings on Paper,” devoted to works from the early and mid-1930s, is perhaps best considered as a backstory. We encounter views of the landscape near Portland translated into Cézannian repetitive touches and rhythmic strokes, with an appealing sense of light; in the most successful of these—views of the city from a high vantage point—references to buildings and man-made structures add a strengthening subtext of geometry to the patches of foliage. We meet chunky figures, mostly clothed and seated, built with emphatic brushstrokes, and some thickset nudes. A woman in a blue coat, sitting in a red armchair, seems an homage to Cézanne’s portrait of his wife in a similar chair. Casually constructed figures on the beach, in tender colors, bear witness to Rothko’s friendship with Avery. Some are sturdy, while other wispiest characters threaten to dissolve into vertical brushmarks, preparing us for what comes next: gatherings of ambiguous biomorphic creatures, now aquatic, now insect-like, now suggesting microscopic life-forms, always mysterious and usually arrayed vertically, like performers on a shallow stage, called into being with soft-edged pools of color and heartbreakingly delicate drawing. Color is usually subdued, at times earthy, with browns and tans bleeding into deep blues and reds; at other times, whites drift across like low-lying clouds. The fragility and suavity of Rothko’s drawing contrasts with occasional bleeds and, more frequently and dramatically, with vigorous wiping out or even scraping of the robust surface.

Moving through the installation, we discover that, as is always true of Rothko’s mature paintings on paper, the variations in paint application he devised, from ineffable transparencies to fierce swipes, become integral to the mood and affect of the works. None of this is vis-

ible in reproductions, which makes the opportunity to see the real thing irreplaceable. (It can be argued, however, that at just under one hundred works, many closely related, and most, except for the earliest and latest, about the same size, “Mark Rothko: Paintings on Paper” is a little too much of the real thing.)

Rothko’s enigmatic watercolors of the mid-1940s remind us how fascinated he and his circle were by the archaic, the primitive, the mythological, and the idea of the collective unconscious. His friend Adolph Gottlieb alluded to alchemy and the story of Oedipus in his Pictographs. His colleague David Smith haunted the Egyptian collection of the Metropolitan Museum. Rothko’s titles, such as *Prehistoric Memory*, *Ancestral Imprint*, *Omen*, and *Vessels of Magic*, to list only a few, offer clues to his aspirations. Sir J. G. Frazer’s *The Golden Bough: A Study of Magic and Religion*, a compendium of how corresponding myths run across cultures and through time, seems to have been widely read or at least discussed by artists in the 1930s and ’40s, the way publications of Zen Buddhism were in the 1950s, while in 1943 the literary quarterly *Chimera* devoted an entire issue to myth and the influence of Freudian and Jungian theories of how myths are reenacted in our lives. In June of that year, Rothko and his friends Barnett Newman and Gottlieb affirmed their interest in myth and symbol in a letter to *The New York Times* responding to a bewildered critic’s review of the 1943 Federation of Modern Painters and Sculptors exhibition. “There is no such thing as a good painting about nothing,” they wrote. “We assert that the subject is crucial and only that subject matter is valid which is tragic and timeless. That is why we profess spiritual kinship with primitive and archaic art.”

Rothko soon stopped titling his works, but his imagery (at least for a while) remained unchanged, as did his avowed subject matter. Even when he was acclaimed internationally for his Classic paintings, recognized as a master of luminous, disembodied zones of just plain, beautiful color detached from any vestiges of reference, he insisted that he was interested only “in expressing basic human

emotions—tragedy, ecstasy, doom” and described himself as “the most violent of all the American painters. Behind those colors there hides the final cataclysm.” Whatever we think of this characterization, “Paintings on Paper” allows us to follow how different ways of putting on (and taking off) paint—dry sweeps, rhythmic streaks, abrupt wipes, transparent layerings—begin to overwhelm the suggestions of abstract personages in the watercolors of the 1940s. In an untitled work made about 1947—a loose fabric of patches of tawny browns and silvery grays—the frail outlines have disappeared, so that the zones of color float free.

Next step, beginning in the late 1940s: the Multiforms, compositions of largish, ragged-edged zones of thinly applied color that jostle each other for dominance and/or compete with small pats and strokes. There’s a lot going on in the Multiforms, sometimes a little too much for their size. Color has intensified to clear yellows, oranges, and pinks in the works at the National Gallery. Rothko’s impulse, we discover, was to simplify and clarify. We next encounter an assertive stack of broad, horizontal bands cutting across a vertical sheet. In *Untitled* (ca. 1949), extended rectangles are layered over other rectangles barely glimpsed beneath them, shifting, elusive expanses of closely related hues that nevertheless influence the color imposed on top: transparent gray/green brushed over pink, murky yellow/green over orange, chalky salmon over yellow, with two duller, warmer orange blocks subdividing it; trails of red and orange escape from underneath. That none of the colors is precisely nameable is an indication of Rothko’s strength as a colorist at his best.

The rest of the exhibition is dedicated to works made between 1956 and 1969, with the majority dating from the last two years of Rothko’s life before his suicide early in 1970 at the age of sixty-six. They are essentially Classic paintings, vertical and confrontational, with their paper supports mounted in various ways so that they are hung on the wall like stretched canvases. They range from slightly under three

feet to six feet high, their mood shifting from intense and clamorous to dulled-down and reticent, with the taped-off white borders of the late works heightening the implicit drama of the interior. In the strongest works, Rothko surprises us with his orchestration of hues. Saturated blues, blacks, misty grays, and dull reds like barely extinguished embers can seem to have more presence as *color* than full-bore yellows, reds, and oranges. The dark paintings can be eye-testing and rewarding. Several 1969 paintings demand attention with ample black blocks hovering over purple or ultramarine; in one, an escape below of warmer mulberry changes the mood, while in another, an almost unseeable difference between blocks of red/black and green/black becomes overwhelmingly important.

Given Rothko’s ability to animate and keep us engaged by what we might call “non-colors,” the selections from a series known as Brown and Grays come as a surprise. The works on view range from five to six feet tall, each divided into two sections, one brown, the other subtle permutations of gunmetal and tarnished silver. The “horizon” where the two zones meet or overlap is at a different height in each of the exhibited works, but despite this variation in structure and despite the aggressive brushmarks agitating the fields of brown and gray, the results are strangely inert. The wall text tells us that when Rothko showed the series to friends and fellow artists, they were nonplussed by the somber quality of the works; the artist, we learn, was surprised and disappointed by their lack of enthusiasm. (Elsewhere, the labels can be overly literal, rather than informative, equating bright color with happiness in Classic paintings or urging viewers to interpret the enigmatic forms of the surrealizing works as figures.)

To avoid triggering the disappointment of the Brown and Grays’ first viewers, the installation ends on a more cheerful note, with a group of works, also made in 1969, that explore fresco-like, relatively high-key color. They are presented as a coda even though they do not postdate the bleak Brown and Grays. Like the Brown and Grays, the works in the show’s finale are built of two main blocks of color, sometimes with slim, emphatic

bands above and below; like the Brown and Grays, too, they are tall and layered. They revel in complex, almost indescribable hues—damped-down pink, faded rose and salmon, silvery grays, and Piero della Francesca blues, often tempered by hints of something we can't quite identify underneath. The vigor of the broad brushstrokes with which Rothko has built these forthright paintings brings the most compelling of the series to life.

That we can see those brushstrokes is crucial to our experience of just about all the mature work in "Paintings on Paper." Rothko sometimes combined media, exploiting the particular characteristics of each for its formal possibilities as well as its expressive effect. In the surrealizing works of the mid-1940s, he used ink for slender lines and watercolor for pools of color, sometimes combining opaque and transparent watercolor in the same work. In the 1960s, he employed oil on watercolor paper and then, like many of his colleagues,

adopted acrylic in 1968. Whatever the medium, Rothko made us aware of his hand, leaving visible evidence of the energy with which he transferred pigment to a surface. The physicality of the paintings on paper at the National Gallery is one of their most striking characteristics. The floating blocks of color in Rothko's paintings on canvas can seem to possess color without materiality, as if he were somehow presenting us with *redness* or *blueness* as a purely visual phenomenon, wholly abstracted, for the eye only. (Whether that visual phenomenon conveys tragedy, ecstasy, or doom, as well as triggering a limitless set of wordless associations, is a question for the individual viewer.) Rothko's paintings on paper are more substantial, probably because of the way paint sits up on a hard surface. Spend time at the exhibition at the National Gallery, and you can mentally recapitulate the history of the making of the works on view, ponder what Rothko did and when he did it, and speculate about why. It's the closest we'll come to watching him work.

*We mourn the passing of*  
*Timothy Jacobson (1948–2024)*  
*A valued contributor to The New Criterion*

# Brown in town

by James Panero

In late January, The Winter Antiques Show returned to the Park Avenue Armory. Correction: make that “The Winter Show.”<sup>1</sup> Five years ago, as this venerable exposition fell under new management on its sixty-fifth anniversary year, the word “antiques” was struck from its title. Like that brown furniture in your grandmother’s attic now scented with camphor and racism, the past has lost its market value to the present. Against the mystery cult of the new, who dares to appear antique?

And so, much of The Winter Show in recent years has felt like Terminal D Duty Free. Aisles of bangles, baubles, and beads make the presentation an ahistorical muddle. Maybe this is the point. How better to get “younger collectors interested in material culture at large,” in the words of expo leadership, at the Young Collectors Night DJ party? Fortunately, it has not all been out with the old and in with the new for what remains arguably America’s most important antiques fair. Now seventy years old, The Winter Show’s ten-day assembly of dealers should be seen as an heirloom event—one dedicated to benefiting the East Side House Settlement, now in the South Bronx, as it has since the fair’s founding in the 1950s.

Beyond the gewgaws, this year’s Winter Show presented a welcome homage to its own past. Mixed in among the booths of some seventy

dealers, an exhibition titled “Focus: Americana” curated by Alexandra Kirtley of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, brought together pieces from several of the show’s historical exhibitors, some of whom still participate, and others who left long ago. Taken together, this fascinating assembly spoke to the importance of The Winter Show in raising the profile of American antiques over its seven-decade run and made the case for their value today.

Highlights here were many, including a tall case clock by Major Timothy Chandler, *circa* 1810, along with a fire screen “with framed theorem still life,” *circa* 1830, both on view from David A. Schorsch–Eileen M. Smiles Fine Americana. Olde Hope offered up a pine overmantel panel with a vernacular painting of a white house from New York or New England *circa* 1820–40. Levy Galleries brought a Hepplewhite mirror with an original floral finial and an eglomise-gilded panel of a farm landscape, made in New York *circa* 1795. Jeffrey Tillou Antiques presented a portrait of Santa Claus “painted in 1845 by John Vanderyn for the cabin on the river steamer *Santa Claus*—owned by Ezra Fitch,” according to a label on its verso. Allan Katz Americana brought a whirligig of a New York Seventy-ninth Infantry Regiment Highlander in tartan parade attire, the only known such carving in existence, from *circa* 1860–80. Meanwhile Kelly Kinzle Antiques presented “Richard Andrus, His Horn Made at Roxbury October 5th 1775,” a decorated powder horn attributed to the Simsbury Carver. Also from Kinzle was a

<sup>1</sup> The Winter Show was on view at the Park Avenue Armory, New York, from January 19 through January 28, 2024.

miniature wall clock of mahogany and painted glass signed by David Brown, *circa* 1820, and a harvest face-jug by Charles Decker—an expressionist example of Tennessee’s Keystone Potter *circa* 1875. Altogether, the presentation of “Focus: Americana” revealed the wonder and strangeness of American craft, with pieces that rose to the level of fine art while retaining their folk traditions.

With fewer collectors deeply invested in historical periods and styles, the hope today is that buyers will at least view such antiques as stand-alone works that can be mixed into more contemporary, Instagrammable settings. As with “Focus: Americana,” it was reassuring to see two current dealers dedicated to colonial, British, and American antiques flanking the show’s entrance. On one side, Cove Landing presented a George I “Mulberry Wood” bureau cabinet, *circa* 1725, with a mottled veneer that would put an abstract expressionist to shame. Meanwhile, across the entry hallway, Levy Galleries displayed a Chippendale tall case clock, *circa* 1770, next to a Federal eagle-inlaid tall case clock, *circa* 1800. Inside the booth, a Federal table attributed to the workshop of Thomas Seymour, *circa* 1805–12, spoke to the increasing interest in furniture designed for “lady’s work.”

Hirschl & Adler Galleries brought its own worktable “in the Sheraton Taste,” *circa* 1810, attributed to Thomas Seymour, with a similarly suspended fabric workbag for yarn and linen. This piece was paired with a burled-elm pier table with tole columns, *circa* 1815–19, along with paintings and watercolors by Thomas Cole and Edward Hopper. Nearby, Daniel Crouch Rare Books displayed John Mitchell’s fascinating *Map of the British and French Dominions in North America*, published in 1755, along with other cartographic curios, including the Adrian Naftalin collection of maps of the—checks notes—*Jewish* Holy Land.

Rounding out these attractions was a pair of George III reverse-glass cabinets featuring Grand Tour vignettes, *circa* 1780, attributed to Ince and Mayhew, from Hyde Park Antiques; a sixteenth-century bowl with a painting of John the Baptist by Pontormo at Robert Simon Fine Art; a stag hunt by John Wootton

and other sporting scenes at Red Fox Fine Art; fifteenth-century books at Les Enluminures; a *circa* 1932 oil-and-gouache of a pet dog by Pierre Bonnard at Jill Newhouse Gallery; and artifacts by Northwest Coast Indians at Tamberan Gallery. Such a collection of historical objects is almost enough to make you forget our present circumstances.

The Winter Show serves as a pendant to New York’s annual auctions for historical art and antiques, which take place the following week. Squeezed between the two is Master Drawings New York, an initiative that brings national and international galleries to the Upper East Side, where they partner with local venues for wall space.<sup>2</sup> Now in its eighteenth season, this year Master Drawings New York came under the leadership of Christopher Bishop, a New York gallerist with an eye for misattributed work. Employing a similar sense of connoisseurship to this undervalued gathering of galleries and collectors, Bishop introduced a new level of organization and scholarship to the endeavor that presented a welcome abundance of work in seemingly every available corner of the neighborhood—with only a few days to see it all.

Clustered in galleries around the Metropolitan Museum and continuing down to Sixty-fourth Street, twenty-six exhibitors mounted these special exhibitions of works on paper from the fifteenth century to the present. Highlights this year included, at Nicholas Hall and W. M. Brady & Co., a portrait of the young Henry William Mathew by John Flaxman, dynamic studies by Il Guercino, drawings by Boucher and Corot, and an unpublished drawing by Lorenzo Baldissera Tiepolo. Abbott and Holder brought over forty-eight British works on paper from its London-based showroom, including a capriccio landscape by Robert Adam, a visionary bedroom sketch by William Blake, and a delicate J. M. W. Turner watercolor once owned by John Ruskin—along with a handsome printed catalogue. Colnaghi Elliott Master Drawings presented

2 Master Drawings New York was on view from January 27 through February 3, 2024.

orientalist portraits by Jean-Léon Gérôme and Leopold Carl Müller alongside an exhibition of portraits and seascapes by the Spanish master Joaquín Sorolla. Meanwhile David Nolan Gallery, in collaboration with Donald Ellis, presented “Fort Marion and Beyond: Native American Ledger Drawings, 1865–1900,” an exhibition of seventy-five sketches by Arapaho, Cheyenne, Hidatsa, Kiowa, and Lakota artists from the nineteenth century.

The book trade remains a welcome gateway to the cultures of the past, with much of it accessible to a range of readers and collectors. Judging by the crowds at recent New York book fairs, the hard copy has become only more attractive in our digital world for its tactile pleasures and literary delights, while providing the ultimate backup to our evanescent bits and bytes. As collecting institutions have become radicalized by identity politics (see “A library by the book,” my essay in *The New Criterion* of December 2022), personal libraries are more essential than ever before.

Last September, the upstart Empire State Rare Book and Print Fair set up shop for the first time inside St. Bartholomew’s Church on Park Avenue. The show was a welcome competitor to the more established (and woker) International Antiquarian Book Fair, put on every April by the Antiquarian Booksellers’ Association of America. An extra pleasure of its ecclesiastical venue was hearing Paolo Bordignon, St. Bart’s organist and choirmaster, perform on the fair’s opening night.

This season, just up the street, the Grolier Club, America’s oldest society of bibliophiles, founded in 1884, continued its run of significant public programs with two must-see exhibitions on view at once. “Whodunit? Key Books in Detective Fiction,” installed in the second floor gallery, was a page-turner.<sup>3</sup> With more than ninety books from the Grolier member Jeffrey Johnson’s collection of early detective novels, the exhibition featured stand-outs ranging from the first American edition of

3 “Whodunit? Key Books in Detective Fiction” was on view at the Grolier Club, New York, from November 30, 2023, through February 10, 2024.

*Memoirs of Vidocq* (1834), to the first collection of Sherlock Holmes stories (1892), to Agatha Christie’s first novel (1920). Edgar Allan Poe, Charles Dickens, Wilkie Collins, and Anna Katherine Green were among the list of accomplices in a thrilling show that was criminal to miss. Especially appreciated was Johnson’s own testimony, provided in wall labels, of his discoveries as a collector.

Meanwhile, on view through April in the club’s main exhibition hall, “Judging a Book by Its Cover: Bookbindings from the Collections of The Grolier Club, 1470s–2020,” reveals the Grolier’s advancement of bookbinding as both collecting interest and craft.<sup>4</sup> Thanks to the creation of the society’s own bindery in the late nineteenth century, for example, club members no longer had to send their rare books off to France for treatment. Drawing on the society’s holdings, the exhibition pairs the club’s own work with a hundred examples of rare bindings, starting with a circa 1473 brass-and-pigskin volume of *The Jewish Wars* by Josephus and *Ecclesiastical History* by Eusebius, through a jeweled miniature *Whole Booke of Psalmes* (1673), on up to a gilded free-hand design by Ulrich Widmann from 2019. Most rewarding are those bindings that speak to the contents within, for example, Ernest Lefébure’s *Embroidery and Lace* of 1888, with boards covered in green ribbed silk embroidered in delicate floral patterns.

To cap off the antiques season, in late January Sotheby’s filled out its multiple floors on York Avenue with its “Masters Week” sales.<sup>5</sup> These days, works by, or of, non-whites and non-men are the hot commodities. Institutional buyers must pursue “diversity” or risk DEI ire. That explains the run-up in prices for the saccharine paintings of Élisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun, who has been achieving records at auction for her work as a female Old

4 “Judging a Book by Its Cover: Bookbindings from the Collections of The Grolier Club, 1470s–2020” opened at the Grolier Club, New York, on January 17 and remains on view through April 13, 2024.

5 “Masters Week” was on view at Sotheby’s, New York, from January 26 through February 3, 2024.



Master (Old Mistress?). At the same time, institutions must be seen delivering up their permanent collections to the deaccessioning of the vanities. In the latest Sotheby's sales, the Metropolitan Museum offered paintings from its "permanent" collection by George Romney, Joshua Reynolds, Thomas Gainsborough, Henry Raeburn, and Johann Liss. With proceeds meant to "benefit the acquisition fund," we might assume those returns will not be used to purchase more Romneys, Reynoldses, and Gainsboroughs.

Nevertheless, it may be good to get such art into the hands of collectors who will value it, and it is a pleasure to see these works as they go up for sale. In the February 1 auction titled "Master Paintings & Sculpture Part I," *The Western Wall* (ca. 1890), a painting by Gustav Baurfeind, bore detailed witness to the historical importance of that holy site. Equally interesting was a charming Swabian School altarpiece of Saint Ursula, circa 1480–90, which at one time

passed through the hands of the Monuments Men, who restituted the work from the clutches of Hermann Göring. In "Master Paintings Part II," a Veronese oil of the creation of Eve, circa 1570–80, sold off by the Art Institute of Chicago after nearly a century in its collection, could have been yours for the price of New York's worst studio apartment. In the February 2 sale of "Old Master and British Works on Paper," a sketchbook drawing of a bridge near Epsom by John Constable, circa 1806, was estimated at \$5–8,000 but ended up selling for much more. Meanwhile, the sale of "Master Sculpture & Works of Art" remained particularly undervalued, with fourteenth-century ecclesiastical French sculpture going for four digits.

In fact, it is worth noting that the highest jump of Masters Week was the sale of six gym shoes once worn by Michael Jordan. As that suite of sneakers sold for eight million dollars, no Old Master can hope to be like Mike.

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## Forthcoming in *The New Criterion*:

Poetry: a special section in April

*with essays by Peter Filkins, Katie Hartsock, William Logan, Amit Majmudar, Pascal Quignard & others*

Abortion in France *by Laurent Lemasson*

Under the Tuscan spell *by Benjamin Riley*

Going south *by Alexander Chula*

## Music

# New York chronicle

by Jay Nordlinger

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Longtime readers will know that I regularly quote Ned Rorem on the split between performers and composers. In an interview, back in 2002, he pointed out to me that performers and composers were basically one and the same until the early twentieth century. There were exceptions, of course: singers would probably not have been expected to compose their own music. But think of Chopin and Paganini (to take easy examples). They played what they wrote, and wrote what they played. For the last hundred years, however, performers and composers have tended to stay in their separate “lanes.”

Rorem himself was a composer. (He died in 2022.) He depended on other people to play, and sing, his works—which they did (though not as often as he would have liked). Today, there are some important performers who “roll their own,” as I like to say: who compose their own music. I think of four pianists, immediately: Marc-André Hamelin, the Canadian; Stephen Hough, the Brit; Daniil Trifonov, the Russian; and Fasil Say, the Turk. This last is especially bold about programming his own music. Half of his recent recital in Carnegie Hall was devoted to it.

In the first half, however, he played Bach and Beethoven—or rather, Bach-Busoni and Beethoven. He led with Busoni’s arrangement of the Chaconne from Bach’s violin partita in D minor. He has an acute sense of rhythm, Say does, or of timing, if you like. I once heard Leon Fleisher (the late pianist) say something like this: “What does it mean to have good rhythm? Often it means coming in

at the last possible second—the last possible millisecond—without being too late.” Fasil Say has that quality.

In his hands, the Chaconne was big, very big. Gargantuan, even. He was not playing Bach, I reminded myself, but Busoni, arranging Bach. Was Say too aggressive? No. But he walked right up to the line without crossing it—which is like coming in late without being too late.

Staying with the key of D minor, Say played Beethoven’s Sonata No. 17, Op. 31, No. 2, known as “The Tempest.” It was indeed tempestuous. (Never mind that Beethoven did not bestow the nickname himself.) Say was liberal in interpretation without being eccentric. The music was dramatic, not polite—I think Beethoven would have approved.

Regular readers will know that I often say, “No fair lookin’” No fair holding a player’s physicality, or gestures, against him. Music is an aural art. Having said that, I must report that Fasil Say conducts himself. Not slightly, as other pianists do (Mitsuko Uchida, let’s say). Full out. When an arm is free, he extends it, conducting broadly. Sometimes two arms are free, when he is using the sustain pedal. We say that a pianist “play-conducts” when he is leading a concerto from the keyboard. Well, Fasil Say play-conducts when there is no orchestra.

Does he do it to show off? Is he bringing Vegas to the concert hall? I don’t think so. I think he’s doing what comes naturally. I suspect he does it in the privacy of his own home.

He began the second half of his recital with a recent sonata of his, Op. 99, which he subtitles “New Life.” It is typical of music from Say’s pen. He reaches within the piano to pluck the strings. The piano sometimes sounds like a zither. The music is improvisatory (though written down). It is classical music that is jazzy; it is sometimes more like outright jazz.

Say has a lively, restless mind. And a listener senses that the music means a lot to the composer, personally.

Say continued with *Four Ballades*. (You know who else wrote four ballades: Chopin.) The first of them is dreamy, and you could even call it “ballade-like.” It is also jazzy and pop-like. I thought of Burt Bacharach. This ballade is a song without words, and you almost feel that it *ought* to have words. The final ballade brings a touch of the Oriental, as we used to say in the bad old days. Turkey is where East and West meet. And they do so in Say’s music as well.

He ended the printed program with an early piece of his: *Black Earth*, Op. 8. It is a typical Say piece: with plucking, with improvisation (or the feel of it), with jazziness, with Turkishness. The end, soft, strikes me as a prayer.

The crowd wanted encores, and it was a joy to hear Say launch into “Summertime”—his treatment of it. (He honors Gershwin’s key, too: B minor.) The crowd whooped as he began his next encore: his famous arrangement of the Rondo alla turca which concludes Mozart’s Sonata in A, K. 331. (A Turk arranging a Turkish rondo, get it?) Another leading pianist of today, Arcadi Volodos, made his own arrangement of the Turkish Rondo. A third pianist, Yuja Wang, does something inspired: she plays a combination of the two.

Fasil Say is a valuable musician on the scene, playing the canon and rolling his own.

The Cleveland Orchestra announced that its music director, Franz Welser-Möst, will serve in that post through the 2026–27 season. It will have been a cool twenty-five years. That is a long tenure, in this day and age. Mengelberg served fifty years in Amsterdam; Mravinsky served fifty years in Leningrad. But shorter tenures are now the rule. And Welser-Möst seems Mengelbergian, or Mravinskyan, compared with the norm.

In the National Basketball Association, some teams have two head coaches per season. Gregg Popovich has been the head coach in San Antonio since . . . 1996. He may hit thirty years. Popovich and Welser-Möst stand out as exceptions.

Welser-Möst and the Cleveland Orchestra came to Carnegie Hall for two concerts. The maestro looks the same as he always has, really (if with grayer hair). My friend Fred Kirshnit, the late critic, said that Welser-Möst resembles Gustav Mahler, in concert tails and round, wire-rimmed glasses. True. And the Clevelanders’ first concert had a Mahler theme, of a sort.

It began with a work by Ernst Krenek. In 1924, Krenek was married, very briefly, to Gustav and Alma’s daughter Anna. In 1928, Krenek wrote his *Little Symphony*—which is what the Clevelanders played. Writing this piece, Krenek was in a “popular” mode: music of the people, by the people, and for the people. It has, among other things, two mandolins and two banjos. It is a little corny, but it is also nifty. Puckish, rude, clever.

From Welser-Möst and the Clevelanders, it was oddly sober, overly polite. The piece sounded as though the players were merely reading through it (competently, of course).

In 1922, Alma asked Krenek to see whether he could complete an unfinished manuscript of her late husband: that of his Symphony No. 10. Krenek saw that this was not possible. The only movement we have from the symphony—in proper Mahlerian shape—is the opening Adagio. This is what the Cleveland Orchestra next played.

It should tear your heart out. On this night, however, I doubt there was a wet eye in the house. (This is a line I borrow from my above-mentioned friend Fred.) To add insult to injury, the pizzicato at the end was poor. Welser-Möst then kept his hands in the air, to ward off applause. He did not want the moment to be spoiled. But if an audience is truly moved—is truly transported—there is no need for raised hands.

The second half of the concert was all-Bartók, beginning with the String Quartet No. 3. Huh? Stanley Konopka is a veteran violist with the orchestra, and he made an arrangement of this quartet for string orchestra—for double string

orchestra. Was this necessary? No. Is it necessary to do only the necessary? No. Konopka's is a fine arrangement, working well, and the orchestra played it sensitively and beautifully.

Last on the program was a showpiece, a zany piece: *The Miraculous Mandarin*, Bartók's pantomime ballet. This reading was, again—a little sober. Overly polite. Rough edges were cushioned, and shock value was absent. Do I want flat-out nuts? No, but—well, listen to Huckleberry Finn: “Aunt Sally she's going to adopt me and sivilize me, and I can't stand it.” Be careful about adopting and sivilizing a score such as *The Miraculous Mandarin*.

There was much excellent playing in the orchestra, naturally, and some of it came from the principal clarinet, Afendi Yusuf, who was born in Ethiopia. He holds the Robert Marcellus Chair. Marcellus was the principal clarinet in Cleveland from 1953 to 1973. He was one of the most admired orchestral musicians of the twentieth century. I imagine that to hold his chair is both an honor and a burden.

Visiting orchestras often play an encore, but the Clevelanders gave us none. In feeling a little sore about this, I remind myself of an old joke. Two ladies are leaving the club after lunch. One says, “The food has gotten so lousy.” The other says, “Yeah, and such small portions.”

Over the years, I have heard Franz Welser-Möst give tepid performances. I have heard him give superb and exciting ones. I think of three operas, all by Strauss: *Salome*, *Der Rosenkavalier*, and *Elektra*. Let me throw in a fourth opera, Beethoven's: *Fidelio*. That was unforgettably wonderful. Welser-Möst may have been somewhat uninspired on that night in Carnegie Hall, but I knew I would hear him inspired again soon—and it happened the very next day, when he started Cleveland's second concert with a Prokofiev symphony: the Second (a rarity). To borrow a phrase from the American founding, there was “energy in the executive.”

Five days later, a pianist came to Carnegie Hall for a recital. He was Behzod Abduraimov, the Uzbekistani, born in 1990. Glancing at the program, I saw that he was to begin with Franck's Prelude, Chorale, and Fugue. (Or I thought

I saw that.) “Good for him,” I said to myself. “I'm glad the young man is playing such ‘old-fashioned’ pieces.” When he began playing, I was puzzled. This was not the Franck piece. I looked at the program again. I had read too fast. Abduraimov was playing Franck, all right, but the piece was the Prelude, Fugue, and Variation in B minor, for organ, arranged for the piano by Harold Bauer.

Harold Bauer! There is a name from the past. Bauer (1873–1951) was a renowned pianist, teacher, and author. When I was a kid, I had a book by him which I believe was called *The Literature of the Piano*. I can't find it on the internet (which is suspicious). I can picture my copy's black, tattered cover. At any rate, Bauer played his arrangement of the Franck organ piece in Carnegie Hall in April 1912. And here was a young man from Central Asia playing it, more than a century later. Bauer would surely have been pleased.

Abduraimov next played something from the home front: *The Walls of Ancient Bukhara*, an eight-movement suite by Dilorom Saidaminova, an Uzbekistani born in 1943. These movements are postcards, or impressions—I think we are even entitled to describe them as “Impressionistic.” One of the movements, mysterious, reminded me of a Debussy prelude: *The Sunken Cathedral*. Other movements are assertive or playful. Ms. Saidaminova is a composer with something to say. And Behzod Abduraimov did well by her, playing deftly (and pedaling the same way, I might add). Unless I miss my mark, he played with affection, too—maybe some national or cultural pride.

The young man moved on to Ravel: *Gaspard de la nuit*. His playing of it astounded me. This is a famously—infamously—difficult piece. Abduraimov played it with ease. Everything was clear, intricate, fleet, accurate. Abduraimov was almost matter-of-fact, not sweating. He might as well have been playing a two-part invention. I thought of the word “facility”—which relates to “easiness.” I thought of a phrase, a cliché: “unseemly ease.” Honestly, Abduraimov's handling of *Gaspard* was stupefying.

Was there anything wrong with it? Yes. The last movement, “Scarbo,” ought to be more

electric, more diabolical. For Abduraimov, it was kind of a walk in the park (not at night, with goblins about). Regardless, I stood as soon as he was finished. I would have held myself cheap if I hadn't.

To begin the second half of the program, Abduraimov played a piece by Florence Price, whose works are suddenly everywhere. She was an American, whose dates are similar to Harold Bauer's: 1887 to 1953. Abduraimov played her *Fantaisie nègre* No. 1 (there are four of them), which is a Lisztian treatment of a spiritual: "Sinner, Please Don't Let This Harvest Pass." Mr. Abduraimov was virtuosic, of course, and touching—touching in this offering to an American audience (I thought of Marian Anderson singing "Sinner, Please," and Leontyne Price, and others).

He concluded his printed program with *Romeo and Juliet*—the ten pieces that Prokofiev plucked from his ballet and arranged for the piano. In these pieces, Abduraimov tended to be spiky, crunchy, percussive. The music did not much sound like the ballet. It sounded like a Prokofiev piano sonata. "And that is correct," I thought. Abduraimov was not trying to copy an orchestra; arranged for the piano, this music is something different.

By the way, Abduraimov had some technical difficulties in the Prokofiev. I mention this in the spirit of "man bites dog." I did not think Abduraimov capable of technical difficulties.

His first encore was Rachmaninoff—the Prelude in G major. This was a favorite encore of Horowitz, who played it ineffably. It was ineffable from Abduraimov, too. He demonstrated a singing line. And he executed the lightest trill you could ever hope to hear. I thought he should then play the G-minor prelude and call it a night. But he next played a little Tchaikovsky piece: the "Neapolitan Song" from the *Children's Album*. (He did not articulate it very well, strangely.)

Abduraimov came out once more—and there was the Prelude in G minor. I believe he had a memory slip in it. But—pardon me if this is cute—he played a genuinely memorable recital.

Like the Cleveland Orchestra, the Boston Symphony Orchestra came to town for two concerts at Carnegie. In between came the Philadelphia Orchestra. The Chicago Symphony Orchestra opened the hall's season. The New York Philharmonic plays nearby, at Lincoln Center. So, there's your "Big Five." But it is unwise to speak of a "Big Five" these days, I think. For one thing, you would not want to exclude the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra under Manfred Honeck.

On their second night, the Bostonians presented an opera in concert: *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*, by Shostakovich. The performance was led by the BSO's music director, Andris Nelsons. He is a protégé of his fellow Latvian Mariss Jansons, the late, great conductor. The last piece I ever heard Jansons conduct was *Lady Macbeth*. I believe he would have been proud of Nelsons at Carnegie Hall—would have saluted him.

Nelsons had the Bostonians sounding like a Russian orchestra, with growling low strings, impudent woodwinds, brash brass. *Lady Macbeth* is an "orchestral" opera in any case. With the orchestra on the stage, rather than in a pit, it comes across that way all the more.

Singing the title role was Kristine Opolais, the Latvian soprano. She did justice to this role, both daunting and rewarding. She was once married to Maestro Nelsons. Can you think of another divorced couple who still worked together? At the moment, I can think only of Charles Dutoit (the conductor) and Martha Argerich (the pianist).

As we were leaving the hall, a veteran musician said to me, "I feel privileged to have been here." That spoke for me, too.

The media

# Getting away with it

by James Bowman

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A curious column on *The Wall Street Journal's* op-ed page toward the end of January put its headline in the imperative mood. “Lay Down Your Weaponization,” commanded the *Journal* on behalf of its columnist Andy Kessler. He was citing numerous examples from both left and right on the political spectrum of writers accusing somebody else—it’s always somebody else—of “weaponizing” something that is not usually thought of as a weapon: the law, the border, the climate, information, even children. “By using the word ‘weaponizing,’” wrote Mr. Kessler, “writers are strengthening, exaggerating, magnifying, embellishing and, what the heck, weaponizing the word.”

All very true, of course, except for the part about “strengthening.” On the contrary, the overuse of the word, or of any word, weakens rather than strengthens it. The more things there are supposedly being “weaponized,” the less persuasive the case for any particular instance of alleged “weaponization”—as Mr. Kessler’s column itself acknowledges. I think he might do well to reflect on the possibility that such weakening results from a deliberate strategy, hatched in the media hive, to rob certain instances of actual weaponization of their rhetorical sting—including the weaponization of the media themselves against dissenters from the progressive orthodoxy.

But perhaps you think that sounds like a “conspiracy theory”? It wasn’t so long ago that the identification of a conspiracy theory behind some bit of polemical writing or speaking was enough to banish it to the fringes of

our political spectrum. But that too became an overused term—right around the time of “Crossfire Hurricane,” an actual and not a theoretical conspiracy to destroy the presidency of Donald Trump. Similarly, as Michael Barone points out in the *Washington Examiner*, right at the beginning of the COVID panic “the dismissal of the lab-leak hypothesis as a ‘conspiracy theory’ was, in fact, the result of a conspiracy.”

Both these conspiracies, by FBI and Justice Department officials and Dr. Fauci and friends, respectively, are still denied by their perpetrators, presumably relying on people’s memory of those false-by-definition “conspiracy theories” of old. It just goes to show what good cover the charge of “conspiracy theory” is for real conspiracies—but also how both conspiracy theories and real conspiracies have become a part of everyday life for consumers of the media.

The formerly crank-dominated “fringes,” in other words, are now occupying more and more of the center ground that once shunned them. Surely, you would think, all men and women of goodwill must agree in deploring what Victor Davis Hanson calls “The Hysterical Style in American Politics”—by which he means, among other things, the weaponization (if you’ll pardon the expression) of the 2008 financial crisis by the Obama administration.

“Hysterical” might seem to some to go one better than “weaponized,” so we should not be surprised to read in *Newsweek* a few days after Mr. Hanson’s column appeared: “Biden Must Keep Defending Democracy

Against GOP Hysteria” by one David Faris of Roosevelt University.

Wait a minute! Remind me. Which side is it again that is being hysterical? Let’s call the whole thing off! I think maybe Mr. Faris would settle for that—just as long as he still gets to label President Trump a threat to democracy. Have you heard about that, by the way? President Trump being a threat to democracy, I mean. My guess is that you have. Everybody has. We have indeed heard little else from Mr. Trump’s opponents as to why they oppose him. And yet almost nobody seems to be complaining about *that* trope’s overuse or hysterical character. One who has noted it is that honest lefty Matt Taibbi, who writes that

“Protecting democracy” in the Trump context will be remembered as having served the same purpose as Saddam’s mythical WMDs, the shots fired in the Gulf of Tonkin, or Gaddafi’s fictional Viagra-enhanced army. Those were carefully crafted political lies, used to rally the public behind illegal campaigns of preemption. Voters, by voting, “protect democracy.” A politician who claims to be doing the job for us is up to something. The group in the current White House is trying to steal for themselves a word that belongs to you. Don’t let them.

He, for one, understands that continually making the charge of threatening democracy against somebody else is a pretty good cover for you if you’re threatening democracy yourself—say, by trying to keep Mr. Trump off the ballot in the next election.

As I have commented in this space several times—beginning with “Lexicographic lies” in *The New Criterion* of October 2012—the meaning of the word “lie” in political parlance has changed completely. Now it can and usually does mean no more than an honest mistake, or even just “something I disagree with.” Back in the days of “Bush lied; people died,” the semantic sleight of hand kept the word’s emotional punch intact for anyone unscrupulous enough to misuse it. But it could not survive the extreme overuse of the newly redefined word by the “fact checkers”

of *The Washington Post* who purported to catalogue 30,000-plus “lies” supposedly uttered by President Trump. As a result, both the charge of lying and, under that cover, lies themselves have proliferated to the point where everybody assumes that lying politicians are the norm—which, of course, is good news for the liars, whoever they may be.

The conspiracy theory that Mr. Faris regards as an example of “GOP hysteria” is one of his own imagination involving a GOP belief in a diabolically clever plot by Joe Biden personally, along with his Democratic henchmen, to orchestrate the multiple felony prosecutions currently pending against Mr. Trump. “Let’s set aside for the moment,” he writes, “the fact that when Republicans aren’t crediting him with a devious and meticulously planned legal persecution of Donald Trump, they are saying that he is a doddering old fool, beset by dementia, whose presidency is operated by some unnamed regent.”

Yes, by all means, let’s set that aside. But what if it is the “unnamed regent” rather than Mr. Biden himself who is organizing the “legal persecutions” of Mr. Trump? Or what if the Democratic Party and media groupthink on the subject of the former president is such that no central organizer is required? There’s plenty of evidence to suggest that there has long been a sort of bidding war among Democratic lawyers and media folk to see whose hatred of Mr. Trump burns the brightest and who is therefore most forward in pronouncing him guilty of any crime that one of their number may find him or herself in a position to charge him with.

“The most tendentious objection to Trump’s various prosecutions,” writes Mr. Faris, “is that they make America a ‘banana republic.’” You will gather from this that he doesn’t believe in the “banana republic” thesis himself. In fact, he thinks that “most people who use this term”—“banana republic”—“haven’t the slightest clue what it means or refers to.” I must admit he has a bit of a point there. Nobody, including Mr. Faris himself apparently, can know what it means anymore. Why, there are countries where bananas grow like weeds along the roadside that aren’t engaged in the

type of shenanigans we're seeing in Poland at the moment. And there's not a banana tree to be found within a thousand miles of Poland.

But the newly elected government of Donald Tusk, the head of the Civic Platform party, is vigorously prosecuting leaders of the previous government, of the Law and Justice party, and that would seem to fit the description by Mr. Faris of a "banana republic" as one that is "characterized by politically motivated prosecutions of current or former officeholders." In Poland, however, you'd have to say the more obvious comparison is with the even more previous government of the Communist Party. It was a Pole, after all, Ryszard Legutko, whose *The Demon in Democracy* (2016) pointed us toward the growing similarities between old-fashioned communism and the new, post-Soviet version of "liberal democracy."

"Communist," along with "banana republic," must presumably be added to the list of weaponized political epithets—including, of course, "weaponized"—all of which may be supposed to have lost, or to be in the process of losing, their force through overuse and which are thus ready for the rhetorical mothball fleet or knacker's yard. This will, of course, give considerable satisfaction to communists and the leaders of banana republics everywhere.

When it comes to the quasi-legal but avowedly political matter of impeachment, *The Wall Street Journal* has that matter, too, well in hand—at least, in more recent times, if the would-be victim of the proceedings is a Democratic officeholder. "Don't Impeach Alejandro Mayorkas," wrote Michael Chertoff, the homeland-security secretary under President George W. Bush, for the *Journal* around the same time as Mr. Kessler's column on "weaponization." "House Republicans," read the subtitle, "are misusing the process to target an official who has done nothing wrong." Two days later the *Journal's* editorial board weighed in with "Impeaching Mayorkas Achieves Nothing," averring in addition that "a policy dispute doesn't qualify as a high crime and misdemeanor."

These claims are arguable. I don't think that announcing, under oath, that the border is se-

cure when it quite obviously is nothing of the kind can fairly be described as doing "nothing wrong." At the very least it has to constitute contempt of Congress. Nor am I sure that so comprehensive a failure to enforce the law that he is sworn to uphold is quite accurately described as "a policy dispute." But then I'm not a lawyer. The point is that these and other journalistic wishes to turn down the rhetorical heat in our highly polarized public square seem increasingly to be made in the interest of Democratic officeholders.

Behind all such editorial decisions there lies, I believe, an attempt to be—or at least to appear to be—calm, even-handed, and moderate in the editors' approach to the passionate and often rhetorically extreme airing of grievances on both sides that has come to characterize American politics during the Trump era. Another example is provided by the *Journal's* Holman W. Jenkins Jr., who writes that

Mr. Trump can be expected also to intrude at least some discussion of the country's problems and Mr. Biden's handling of them, whereas Mr. Biden plans a campaign of Trump, Trump, Trump, implying any price (even a second Biden term and more Biden policies) is worth paying to keep Mr. Trump out of the White House.

This doesn't mean Mr. Biden isn't still a decent bet to win. That's how unpopular and untrusted his opponent is. So, here we are, Democrats, if you like living dangerously; if you like making sport of the election; if you seek a possible cliff-hanger in the Electoral College or even a hung election in the House if enough disgruntled voters opt for a third party.

Almost any outcome is likely to be contested; norm violations will be rampant on both sides—Mr. Biden skipping the debates, his prosecutors trying to put Mr. Trump in jail, Mr. Trump using the courtroom as his campaign stump to delegitimize the legal system.

Let's look a little closer at this claim that "norm violations will be rampant on both sides," followed by three compelling examples of what those "norm violations" are likely to be. I don't think "skipping the debates" really counts as a "norm violation": it can't be only partisans who



wish that the debates had been skipped in 2020 and hope they will be in 2024. Few expect them to be in the least enlightening or likely to change anybody's mind. Only the media's thirst for blood-politics could make them happen this year.

Trying to put Mr. Trump in jail certainly *is* a norm violation. A massive one. And yet it is implied here that Mr. Trump's calling attention to the fact and using it "to delegitimize the legal system" is also a norm violation. It seems pretty clear to me that the legal system has delegitimized itself by allowing itself to be, ahem, *weaponized* in this way.

I suppose it can be considered some improvement on the rest of the mainstream media's open advocacy on behalf of Mr. Biden that the *Journal* is thus bending over backwards to cry a plague o' both your houses. But I don't see it winning back a lot of the public trust that Bret Stephens, for one, thinks the media have lost. Mr. Stephens, now of *The New York Times*, left the *Journal* because it seemed to him too favorable toward the first Trump administration, but is now writing from his new perch at the *Times* "The Case for Trump . . . by Someone Who Wants Him to Lose."

Talk about backhanded compliments! Yet this gesture may be in part a reflection of his regret over the same weaponization of the media that I mentioned to start with—though he doesn't use that word—including, presumably, his own little platoon of the media army. About this he says that

Even my liberal friends complain that some of the coverage they encounter, especially about culture, tilts so far left that it manages to leave them simultaneously bored and outraged. The plague

of ideologically loaded adjectives is another big problem, as is reporting that too often is just opinion writing masked in quotes from experts.

Golly, I wonder whom he can have had in mind here?

After all, however, the undoubtedly best recent example of an overused word or concept's providing cover for the real thing is the word "genocide." As I write, I can almost hear the word echoing down the George Washington Parkway from the chants of demonstrators up the road who are blocking the bridges over the Potomac between Washington, D.C., and Virginia. "Genocide" allegedly practiced by the Israelis against the Gazan Palestinians is routinely paired by the demonstrators with their own aspirational elimination of the Jewish presence "from the river to the sea"—the hoped-for genocide to be practiced by the Palestinians against the Jews.

Needless to say, it is only the former alleged genocide that received a hearing before the International Court of Justice, at the insistence of South Africa, that shining example of tolerance and human rights. Of course it's all a part of the Left's boy-who-cried-wolf strategy. Throw around the word "genocide" promiscuously and falsely and often enough and eventually people will be so blasé about it that they will be in no position to recognize a real genocide—like a real weaponization or a real threat to democracy—when it comes along. The pro-Hamas demonstrators obviously believe we have already reached that point. As Matt Taibbi might say, don't let them get away with it.

## Books

# The Machiavelli effect

by Paul A. Rahe

Harvey Mansfield is a wonder. In the course of a long and distinguished career as a political scientist, he translated Machiavelli's *Prince*. He co-translated that figure's *Florentine Histories* and his *Discourses on Livy* as well as Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*. He edited a one-volume selection of the correspondence of Edmund Burke. He published books on Tocqueville and on party government as it is conceptualized in the writings of Burke and Bolingbroke. He devoted volumes to subjects as varied as manliness, the spirit of liberalism, America's constitutional soul, and what undergraduates need to know about the study of political philosophy. He penned a lengthy commentary on Machiavelli's *Discourses on Livy* and wrote a monograph on the executive power as discussed in Machiavelli and his successors.

When, twenty-eight years ago on the eve of his sixty-fifth birthday, Mansfield ushered into print a collection of the essays he had written on the Florentine, one might have been forgiven for thinking that this was his valedictory contribution to the republic of letters. One would certainly not have supposed that in his ninety-second year he would bring forth yet another such volume—but here we have it, in *Machiavelli's Effectual Truth: Creating the Modern World*.<sup>1</sup> It has been well worth the wait.

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1 *Machiavelli's Effectual Truth: Creating the Modern World*, by Harvey C. Mansfield; Cambridge University Press, 250 pages, \$105.

These two collections have something in common and should perhaps be read in tandem. Each boasts a title that is deliberately ambiguous. When one works one's way through *Machiavelli's Virtue*, the first of these two volumes, one quickly becomes aware that Mansfield has in mind not only the conception of *virtù* articulated in the Florentine's works. He is also asking his readers to assess the man's peculiar excellence. The like is true of the volume under review here.

Mansfield is interested not only in what Machiavelli had in mind when he coined the word *effettuale* and deployed it in the fifteenth chapter of *The Prince*, juxtaposing “the effectual truth of the thing” (*la verità effettuale della cosa*) with “the imagination of it”; when he dismissed as irrelevant “imagined republics and principalities that have never been seen or known to exist in truth”; and when he suggested that “a man who wants to make a profession of good in all regards must come to ruin among so many who are not good.” He is also interested in Machiavelli's achievement—the *verità effettuale* of his life and of the works that he penned. In short, he wants to see the man hoist by his own petard—judged by the standard he set up for weighing the significance of everything—and he shows us that this is what Machiavelli himself both expected and desired.

Mansfield and Machiavelli resemble one another in one particular. There is something boyish, something positively mischievous, something delightful and audacious about

their prose, and they are both graced with wit. Mansfield had a good time in fashioning the essays collected in this volume, and those who have the patience to work their way through them will have a good time, too. All that it takes is time, determination, a taste for transgression, and a sense of humor. (Nor should readers be dissuaded by the hardcover edition's hefty price tag; the paperback costs only \$34.99.)

This is not an ordinary scholarly volume. There is nothing in it that smacks of the pedant. More often than not, Mansfield does not even bother to prove his point. In some passages, he even warns his readers that the point is beyond proof. In others, he asks them to compare one passage with another, and he suggests that there is more to what Machiavelli is attempting to convey than immediately meets the eye. Those who cannot imagine that a writer of yesteryear could pull one's leg will hate this book.

When, for example, the Florentine tells his readers that Christianity "has shown the truth and the true way," scholars bereft of literary instincts are apt to suppose that, for all of the criticism that he directs at what he sometimes pointedly calls "the present religion," Machiavelli is a believer. Mansfield suggests the contrary—that "the truth and the true way" intended by the Florentine has to do with technique. On this reading, Christianity "has shown the truth and the true way"—but only in the sense that, by dint of its success, it has disclosed "the effectual truth" of political life by revealing just how effective spiritual warfare by way of propaganda can be. On this reading, Jesus Christ was not a prophet unarmed—not in the most important regard.

To grasp what Mansfield is up to, one must first read *The Prince* (with special attention paid to chapters 6 and 15), then read and reread the preface of Machiavelli's *Discourses on Livy*, chapter 2 of the second part of that work, and the first chapter of its third part. In the end, everything turns on whether the "new orders and modes" said in the sixth chapter of *The Prince* to have been articulated by the "new" princes most to be admired are akin to the "new modes and orders" that Machiavelli claims, in the preface to his *Discourses on Livy*,

to have discovered himself. If they are akin, one must accept that the Florentine thinks of himself as a new prince of sorts and that he regards himself as a prophet on the model of Jesus Christ . . . armed only with a book (but well-armed nonetheless). Mansfield's audacity consists in this: he merely asks that one reread *The Prince* and the preface to the *Discourses on Livy* with such a possibility in mind, and then he encourages one to read on through the rest of these two works in the same fashion.

Of course, Mansfield is not the first to have suggested such a reading of these texts. As he himself makes abundantly clear, that honor belongs to Leo Strauss, who made this argument in his *Thoughts on Machiavelli*. What distinguishes Mansfield's account from that of Strauss is the emphasis he places on the word *effettuale*. It was a new word in Machiavelli's time, and it was quickly picked up—most tellingly, in the King James version of the New Testament where it is deployed again and again. The word's virtue, as Machiavelli would have it, is not only that it redirects attention away from "what should be done" to "what is done." It also forces one to attend to what is effective.

As Mansfield observes, when Machiavelli singles out necessity as a constraint on statesmanship, he is not simply suggesting that, in the political sphere, circumstances arise—war, for example—in which one must do what is otherwise forbidden. Classical and Christian political thinking encompassed this possibility. What Machiavelli is saying is something much, much harsher and much more subversive. The fifteenth chapter of *The Prince* does not describe how princes and others should treat enemies. Its focus is on their relations "with subjects and with friends." The effectual truth of Machiavelli's account of human relations is Hobbes's war of all against all. The only difference is that Hobbes conceives of the social contract as a means of escape and that, had Machiavelli been confronted with Hobbes's argument, he would have laughed out loud. His position is that what Aristotle and others called "friendship" is a snare and a delusion, that Christianity is an elaborate and very effective con worthy of imitation,

and that there is no escape from what Hobbes terms “the state of nature.” What Hobbes says regarding the human condition before the emergence of civil society—that in it there is no justice and that “force and fraud” are therein “the cardinal virtues”—is true, in Machiavelli’s opinion, thereafter as well.

Mansfield’s Machiavelli harbors for weakness nothing but contempt. As “a form of education,” he explains, the Christian religion “makes us esteem less the honor of the world.” Thanks to the “ambitious idleness” (*ambizioso ozio*) of its clergymen, it confers “more glory on men who are humble and contemplative than on those who are active.” It lodges “the greatest good in humility, abjectness, and contempt for human things,” and it renders “the world weak” and gives “it in prey to wicked men, who can manage it securely, seeing that the collectivity [*università*] of men, in order to go to paradise, think more of enduring their thrashings than of avenging them.”

The Florentine’s aim is to restore “the honor of the world.” To this end, he embraces violence, cruelty, and war and suggests that this *modus operandi* is compatible with a Christianity liberated, under his influence, “from the cowardice of those who have interpreted our religion according to leisure and idleness [*ozio*] and not according to *virtù*.”

There are those—and they are numerous—who cannot stomach the idea that a thinker as incisive and entertaining as Machiavelli could be as committed to violence and cruelty as appears to be the case, and they attempt to turn him into an Italian patriot, a democrat, a proto-liberal, or a humanitarian of one sort or another. One of Mansfield’s great virtues is his refusal to give way to this temptation. He acknowledges that the author of *The Prince* is given to exaggeration—that he takes pleasure in shocking his readers. But he resists the inclination to moralize the man who was in later generations thought to have supplied the devil with his moniker “Old Nick.” There is nothing soft, gentle, or yielding about Mansfield’s Machiavelli. The Florentine’s occasional reference to “the common good” he rightly treats as trickery

comparable to the assertion that Christianity “has shown the truth and the true way.” The “common good” in question is either the theft and redistribution of other peoples’ lands or “the common good of each”—which is to say, it is an individual good that other individuals also receive. The political community, for Mansfield’s Machiavelli, is no more communitarian than a band of thieves. “To want to acquire,” as the author of *The Prince* puts it, is “a very natural and ordinary thing.”

In the preface to his *Discourses on Livy*, Machiavelli compares himself with Christopher Columbus and his fellow Florentine Amerigo Vespucci. Therein, when he claims that he has discovered “new modes and orders,” he adds that he has charted a path hitherto “untrodden by anyone.” In this connection, Machiavelli attributes to himself an *impresa*, an enterprise. That he will not be able to carry this *impresa* to its conclusion he readily acknowledges. Others, he predicts, will complete the work.

Most scholars give this preface a pass. Their Machiavelli is an ordinary humanist, distinguished from his fellows only by his literary gifts and his predilection for boasting. Mansfield, by way of contrast, takes the Florentine at his word—in part because, as he demonstrates, Francis Bacon and Montesquieu did just that. It is his contention that, with the phrase *la verità effettuale della cosa*, Machiavelli really did effect a revolution—that he laid the foundation both for modern science, with its single-minded focus on what Aristotle’s followers called efficient causation, and for the Enlightenment, prepared by Hobbes and Locke and taken up by the likes of David Hume, Montesquieu, and Adam Smith.

At the end of the fifteenth chapter of his *Prince*, Machiavelli suggests that the virtues and vices examined by Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas—the qualities, as they and he put it, for which men are praised and blamed—should not be judged for their intrinsic worth. Nor should they be assessed in light of their putative value in the eyes of an imaginary god. Instead, they should be regarded as poses to be adopted or avoided solely with an eye to their contribution to *la securtà e il bene essere suo*—i.e., to one’s own security and well-being. In Mans-

field's opinion, it was Machiavelli's shocking critique of the Aristotelian and the Christian teachings concerning moral virtue that inspired the profound reorientation of learning and of politics championed by Bacon, Hobbes, Locke, Hume, Montesquieu, and Smith.

Those familiar with the line of argument presented by the essays collected in this volume should probably read them in the order in which they are presented. Those to whom Mansfield's account is unfamiliar and may seem far-fetched, if not preposterous, might profit from beginning with the appendix, wherein Mansfield takes on those who regard Machiavelli as a man of his time. They should then turn to the essay in which he compares Machiavelli with his Florentine predecessor Leonardo Bruni—for it is in the latter piece that he outlines in some detail the thinking of Aristotle and makes clear the character of Machiavelli's radical break with classical political philosophy and the humanism of his own time. The remaining essays can then be read in the order in which they appear. In the first four, Mansfield lays bare the character of Machiavelli's *impresa* and shows the manner in which, like David in his confrontation with Goliath, he pursues victory by taking up the arms of his foe. In the last two essays, mindful that Machiavelli's aim was the conquest of *fortuna*, Mansfield examines the man's own *fortuna* as an author, the *verità effettuale* of his literary endeavor: its impact on subsequent thinkers.

This examination is incomplete. What is said is meant to be suggestive. In it, Mansfield looks at two of the Florentine's heirs, Montesquieu and Tocqueville. To the former, he devotes a chapter of ninety-seven pages in the form of a commentary on the man's *Spirit of the Laws*. This chapter is much shorter and much more narrowly focused than the book-length commentary he devoted to Machiavelli's *Discourses on Livy*. Otherwise, it is similar. To read it with profit, one must review the material in Montesquieu about to be discussed, then read Mansfield's discussion with the entirety of Montesquieu's great tome ready to hand, and then reread the pertinent chapter in Montesquieu.

Mansfield's interpretation of Montesquieu is no less speculative and audacious than his account of Machiavelli's thinking. There will be some who find it outlandish. But, in one important particular, it may prove to be uncontroversial. For Mansfield demonstrates that, in *The Spirit of the Laws*, Montesquieu accepts Machiavelli's challenge to restrict one's purview to the *verità effettuale*; that he follows Hobbes and Locke in deploying this weapon against Machiavelli himself; and that he carries their project further by putting commerce at the center of modern life. If the standards by which everything is to be judged is the individual's *securtà e bene essere* and man really is by nature an acquisitive animal, then the mode of acquisition favored by Machiavelli, war and conquest, can hardly be preferred to technological progress and commerce.

The last chapter in the volume is brief. It was drafted by Mansfield's late wife Delba Winthrop and recast by him. Its focus is Tocqueville, who mentions Machiavelli in *Democracy in America* only once. It is a fitting conclusion to this book nonetheless. For in that monumental study, as Winthrop and Mansfield demonstrate, Tocqueville traces the effectual truth of the revolution that Machiavelli initiated and shows that it backfired on its instigator.

Machiavelli was an admirer of spiritedness. The Florentine wanted his readers to study and practice the art of war. He charged Christianity with rendering men weak and slavish. But, by debunking moral virtue and every species of highmindedness, by repudiating otherworldliness, by elevating acquisition, and by reorienting politics towards individual security and well-being in this world, he prepared the way for a new and, to Tocqueville's way of thinking, far more debilitating species of weakness and slavishness. The Frenchman's fear was that, under the tutelage of a polity devoted to promoting security, well-being, and the acquisition of property, the citizens would be nothing more than "a herd of timid and industrious animals, of which the government is the shepherd." And the remedy he suggested included a revival of highmindedness and of the otherworldly Christianity that Machiavelli had spurned and sought to replace.

## Golden Graham

*Deborah Jowitt*

*Errand into the Maze:*

*The Life and Works of Martha Graham.*

Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 480 pages, \$35

*reviewed by Rupert Christiansen*

What we loosely call modern dance—barefoot and liberated from the symmetries of classical ballet—didn't originate with Martha Graham, although it's commonly supposed it did. A generation before she emerged in the late 1920s, Émile Jaques-Dalcroze had established the eurythmics movement at Hellerau, Isadora Duncan had long been swirling and skipping without tutus or pointe shoes, and German Expressionists were ardently beating their breasts and silently screaming.

But it was Graham who most persuasively enlarged the possibilities and consolidated this new vocabulary into compelling theatrical expression. The force and depth of her vision and personality propelled modern dance beyond its avant-garde niche into the heart of mid-twentieth-century American culture, spreading worldwide post-war through the tours her company made in the Cold War period and disseminating its influence through acolytes such as Erick Hawkins, Merce Cunningham, Paul Taylor, and Glen Tetley. For five decades, her achievement was the yardstick by which everyone in the field was measured.

Both her life and career were remarkably long: born in 1894, she continued dancing into her seventies and was still choreographing a year before her death at the age of ninety-six in 1991. Over that period her artistry remained underpinned by her belief that the motor of dance was embodied in the pelvic thrust of sexual intercourse and parturition, allied to the power of the torso, encasing the lungs, the heart, the gut, the diaphragm. She was not inconsistent or complicated: there was some truth in one colleague's assessment that "she lived by working with the dancers. That was it." Exploration of only two major themes, the soul of America and the Greek myths of womanhood, characterized the majority of her creative output,

and an indomitable will always drove her—"the center of the stage is where I am," she said, with the emphasis firmly on the personal pronoun. "In terms of her ego, she always had to create a tremendous drama around herself," noted Hawkins, her ex-husband and dance partner: that was both a good and bad thing.

Deborah Jowitt's new study of Graham's life and work, titled *Errand into the Maze*, enters a crowded bibliography. Graham's own memoir, selective though it is, remains a useful source, as do her notebooks. Among the several biographies in the catalogue, Agnes de Mille's is outstanding—vivid and astute, informed both by personal acquaintance and an insider's knowledge of dance. The academic industry has also been busy producing scholarly monographs analyzing her aesthetics and practices.

To all this rich conversation Jowitt contributes no disruptive revelations or smoking guns. She refrains from gossip, remaining almost primly reticent on the matter of Graham's decline into chronic alcoholism and tight-lipped over her final infatuation with the photographer Ron Protas, whose management of her legacy was contested in a bitter legal battle. The result is not a fun read: the Graham that emerges from these pages is a dedicated artist rather than a *monstre sacré*, and as a personality, she leaves a misleadingly pallid impression.

What Jowitt has to offer, assembled from archival visual recordings as well as her own memories of performances, is a meticulous and serious chronicle of Graham's oeuvre, described in almost forensic detail that is short on poetic evocation. Few challenges in writing can be so testing as the attempt to pin the wordless fluidity of dance to the page, and Jowitt sometimes sounds clunkingly literal-minded as she painstakingly rehearses the passage of arms through legs and palms raised heavenwards. Rendered into words, Graham's imagination ends up sounding distinctly prosaic.

An early influence on Graham's Presbyterian upbringing was her doctor father, an "alienist," who followed a primitive school of psychiatry that believed movement betrayed emotion. Perhaps an even deeper influence was the warmth and lushness of her adolescence in

Santa Barbara. “California swung me in the direction of paganism,” she said; “I remember running in absolute ecstasy into the sun with my arms open to the wind.” You wouldn’t do a thing like that in smoke-choked Allegheny, where she had spent her earliest years.

By the end of the First World War, having disappointed her father’s hope that she would attend Vassar and opted for a “school of expression instead,” she was making her mark in the Denishawn troupe, committed to a sort of ethnographic tourism inspired by fantasies of the dances of Asia, Mesoamerica, and the ancient world. This set her on course, but by the mid 1920s, she had emancipated herself from the style’s kitschier elements—which would now be scorned as “cultural appropriation”—and settled in the lively bohemia of Greenwich Village. Here she espoused free love, immersed herself in Nietzsche and Schopenhauer, and began developing her own aesthetic, free of decorative nonessentials and following modern architecture’s insistence that form should follow function. No more titillation, no more prettiness: dance should be soul-stirring and thought-provoking.

It was a manifesto that caught the bleak mood of the Great Depression, and as dancer and choreographer Graham became a New York celebrity, dining with the Roosevelts, parodied by Fanny Brice, and featured on the cover of *Vanity Fair*. Through the 1930s she insisted “of things American the American dance must be made”—a claim borne out in her historical pageant *American Document*, her tribute to Emily Dickinson *Letter to the World*, and the hugely popular *Appalachian Spring*—but in the 1940s she became increasingly absorbed in Jung’s ideas about archetypes and the timeless figures of Greek myth, powerfully incarnating the psychodramas of Medea in *Cave of the Heart*, Jocasta in *Night Journey*, and Ariadne in *Errand into the Maze*.

Meanwhile her personal life was turning messier and messier. Having drifted away from her solid and reliable musical mentor Louis Horst, she became infatuated with her leading male dancer, Hawkins, fifteen years her junior, and married him. The swift collapse of their relationship precipitated a downward spiral,

even as her reputation grew globally. When a back injury obliged her to give up dancing in 1970, she started drinking very heavily and became fractious and autocratic. Her finest creative work was behind her, and her finances were always precarious. She was not one to retire gracefully. A sense of humor was not among her qualities; a sense of her own importance emphatically was: “a little oriental deity, a little goddess, an empress, like a miniature Japanese doll,” said Agnes de Mille.

In Graham’s protracted old age, the White House showered honors on her, critics were unfailingly respectful, celebrities such as Halston, Madonna, and Liza Minnelli did homage, and the media granted her a legendary status reinforced by her regal demeanor. But her time was up—by the 1960s, there were new kids on the block, Martha Graham was a rocking-chair grandma, and modern dance had moved on to something less weighted and pretentious. As Paul Taylor, an apostate from her cult, put it, “all that grandeur seemed like pomposity.” Today her oeuvre survives in the work of the company that still bears her name, but its power is now that of something solemnly archaic rather than viscerally vital. Deborah Jowitt’s book is an honorable tribute to its subject and a valuable record of her history, but one doubts that it will spark reassessment or revival.

## Interwar lessons

*Richard Dannatt & Robert Lyman*  
 Victory to Defeat:  
 The British Army, 1918–40.  
 Osprey Publishing, 352 pages, \$35

*reviewed by Leo McKinstry*

Lord Dannatt is perhaps the best known British general of the last half century. His high prestige stems from his image as a resolute leader who, during his time in command, was willing to challenge his political masters and fight for the interests of his soldiers. Since he retired as chief of the army in 2009,

his reputation for defiance and integrity has helped him forge a successful career as a military commentator.

Yet the public's respect for him is not universally replicated among the professionals and politicians who worked with him. To his critics, his egocentric thirst for publicity failed to match the quality of his judgment. "I've never known a man so lacking in self-awareness," one senior officer who served with him told me recently. Nor was his army's record in action impressive. Stumbling operations in Iraq and Afghanistan badly shook American faith in Britain's military prowess. Moreover, as a pundit, he has not been distinguished by any originality of viewpoint or gift for vivid language. The propagation of conventional wisdom, wreathed in clichés, is his speciality.

These strengths and weaknesses come through in his new book, which analyzes how Britain's ruling class squandered the British army's victory in 1918 so badly that within little more than twenty years the expeditionary force was routed in France by the German Reich. Written jointly with the fine historian and former soldier Robert Lyman, Dannatt's study puts forward the thesis that Britain willfully ignored the lessons of the remarkable triumph in the First World War and instead, desperate to avoid another conflict, slid into the cowardice and complacency of appeasement. In essence, the authors seek to answer the question bitterly posed in September 1939 by General Hastings Ismay, a key figure in the War Cabinet Secretariat and later Winston's Churchill trusted liaison officer. As he recorded in his memoirs, at the outbreak of war Ismay felt

furious—furious with ourselves as with the Nazis. Less than twenty-one years had passed since the Germans had lain prostrate at our feet. Now they were at our throats. How had we been so craven to allow this to happen?

Dannatt and Lyman set out a host of potential explanations. One was the blindness to the scale of the British military's achievement in overcoming Germany on the battlefield through its mastery of

an artillery-dominant offensive in which machine-gun equipped infantry worked closely with tanks, combat engineers and aircraft, deploying a sophisticated approach to warfighting in which a single weapon was crafted from many constituent parts.

Contradicting the fashionable view that the British Army on the Western Front was made up of "lions led by donkeys," the account sheds light on the commanders' innovative methods in breaking through the German lines. But the popular press, rather than extolling this success, focused on the mass slaughter of the battles of the Somme and Passchendaele, thereby feeding a public mood of revulsion, which in turn inhibited greater spending on armaments even after Hitler came to power.

In the wake of the horror at the trenches, pacifism became a serious political cause in Britain, while the Labour Party, in a long spasm of wishful thinking, put all its faith in the League of Nations and called for the abolition of the Royal Air Force. For reasons of political expediency, not even the center-right Conservatives, traditionally the party of strong defense, dared to run counter to this tide. As late as 1935, the Tory prime minister Stanley Baldwin felt compelled to assure voters that there would be "no great armaments." According to the authors,

there was no money for military expansion, but neither was there any for innovation, combined-arms training or preparation for future expeditionary warfare.

Among other factors that weakened Britain's capacity to wage a European war were the following: the overstretch in resources because of Britain's imperial commitments; the lack of planning and imagination in the War Office; the preference of the electorate for welfare rather than defense; the guilt-tripping propaganda about the Versailles Treaty that blamed the rise of Hitler on the cruelty of the 1919 peace treaty; an absence of unity not only between the three services but also within the army, which was plagued by single-issue lobbyists and tribalism; the defensive mentality bred by



France's creation of a network of fortifications, called the Maginot Line, on its eastern frontier; and the long-term impact of the ten-year rule, introduced in the 1920s, which held that Britain would not be engaged in any conflict on the Continent for at least a decade.

These arguments are all made powerfully, backed up by thorough research. The authors have toiled hard in the archives to set out their case. But there is little that is new here. The impulse to blame spineless politicians for the failure to stand up to Germany and prepare for war is as old as the Hawker Hurricane fighter and as tired as inhabitants of an air-raid shelter during the Blitz. Yet again, Neville Chamberlain, first as chancellor, then as prime minister from 1937, is wheeled out as a deluded mediocrity who failed to meet the military requirements of the hour. "It was his repeated refusal to consider the creation and deployment of a war-fighting force that was the most cataclysmic failure of this period," they write.

But is this really true? If the British Expeditionary Force had been twice as large in 1940, would defeat in France have been avoided, or would the disaster have been even greater? Given the brutal potency of the Blitzkrieg, pouring money into the British Army could have been an act of epic folly, especially if such growth had come at the expense of the RAF and the Royal Navy. In fact Chamberlain had the military priorities correct. He concentrated government funds on building up the RAF, particularly fighter defenses, through the creation of a chain of radar stations and the introduction of the Spitfire and Hurricane fast monoplanes. Chamberlain never receives the credit, but he was one of the key architects of the victory in the Battle of Britain, which changed the course of history. Furthermore, it was his shrewd handling of the economy as chancellor that pulled Britain out of the slump in the early 1930s and enabled the government to embark on the air-expansion program that ultimately saved Britain and the world. As always in orthodox histories, Chamberlain is condemned for appeasement, but how much choice did he really have? There was no appetite for war in 1938 in either Britain or France, and at least his policy bought time to rearm.

The book is written in a concise, straightforward style, but too many clichés riddle the text. So the concept of Irish self-government is "put on the back burner" in 1914, and the British Army "took its eye off the ball" in 1918. Tigers are made of paper, towels are thrown in, hats are hung, punches are not pulled, balloons go up, and countries are dragged "kicking and screaming" into the twentieth century. At one point, the book announces that "the problem was one of baby and bathwater"; at another Chamberlain is described as "the whipping boy for the policy of appeasement," which does not really make sense.

In the final pages, the authors use the experience of the 1930s to urge a far bigger defense budget today in Britain. But that case would have been more powerful if the Ministry of Defence had not of late been so extravagantly wasteful, if spending priorities had not been so eccentric (epitomized by the creation of two vast aircraft carriers that need almost half of the Royal Navy for protection), and if the recent record of the British Army in combat, including under Dannatt, had been stronger.

## A deathless dialogue

*Marcus Tullius Cicero,*  
*edited and translated by Quintus Curtius*  
*On the Nature of the Gods.*  
Fortress of the Mind, 228 pages, \$30

*reviewed by Michael Fontaine*

Atheists—and that's nearly everyone in my neck of the woods—might see the title of Quintus Curtius's latest triumph and be tempted to shuffle along. The gods? Their "nature"? Isn't that something for the faithheads?

How wrong they would be, for Cicero's often forgotten treatise is *the* foundational work of free thought in the Western tradition. Written less than two years before he was assassinated, *On the Nature of the Gods* is the funnel point of all prior Greek theorizing on who or what is responsible for everything in existence—if anyone or anything *is* responsible, that is. (Remember that ancient Greek

texts did not circulate in the West until the end of the Middle Ages or later; even today, much of the Greek philosophy referenced by Cicero is lost to us.) For, as Cicero himself asks in it,

What about those who have said that the whole idea of the immortal gods was invented by wise men for the sake of political and social order, so that religion might guide to their responsibilities those who could not be led there by rational argument?

Eighteen centuries later, the French philosophe Voltaire looked back and pronounced *On the Nature of the Gods* “one of the two finest books human wisdom has ever written.” It’s not hard to see why: all the ancient origins of the Enlightenment are to be found right here in it. And in Quintus Curtius’s outstanding new translation, it is now easier than ever for the non-Latinist to see what Voltaire was so excited about.

Quintus Curtius is the pen name of the trial attorney and former U.S. Marine Corps officer George J. Thomas. Since first encountering his work eight years ago, I have become a committed apostle. Quintus is the finest translator of Cicero we have seen in many years, and he deserves credit for helping to launch the resurgence of interest in Cicero’s philosophical works that is now thriving outside the ivory tower.

*On the Nature of the Gods* is a philosophical dialogue, to be sure, but it’s set up like a joke. Just as the proverbial priest, rabbi, and minister walk into a bar, so here an Epicurean, a Stoic, and an Academic skeptic walk into a villa. And instead of wrangling back and forth and blow for blow, as they might in one of Plato’s dialogues, the three worthies here make long speeches akin to a lawyer’s brief, a sermon, or a best-case scenario for the gods. When one finishes, the next speaker immediately steps forward to skewer that speech. The starting point of the first speech, the Epicurean’s, is the obvious proposition that the gods don’t exist at all.

Again, anyone who assumes that such a debate among philosophers is ancient history or settled science would be grossly mistaken.

All three worldviews flourish all around us and shape lives presently; they have merely donned new robes and new identities. First, the Epicurean of antiquity is the secular humanist of today. He is your garden-variety atheist, albeit one canny enough to dissemble his disbelief in public. Next, with an ardent commitment to divine providence and intelligent design—more on that in a moment—yesterday’s Stoic is today’s Christian. And finally, the Academic skeptic of ancient times is the agnostic of today: the man or woman who deems the evidence too inconclusive to decide either way.

The biggest surprise is that in these pages, this last figure—the skeptic—settles on a worldview very close to deism, the philosophy which says yes to a creator god but no to miracles, divine revelations, prophecies, human stand-ins, and the like. Hardly anyone is a self-affirming deist today, but the philosophy flourished in colonial America and can be detected in the founding political documents of the United States.

Far and away the most compelling feature of the book is that once each speaker has had his say, his perspective is subjected to sustained—indeed, withering—cross-examination. As Cicero must have realized from his legal work, no finer instrument for exposing hokey has ever been devised. As he has a character say here,

It doesn’t as easily come to my mind why something might be true, as why it might be false. . . . If you ask me what I think the nature of the gods might be, I probably wouldn’t have an answer.

Thus in Book I, the Epicurean/secular humanist goes on at length about how the universe simply . . . *is*: how random atoms falling through space and evolution explain everything, and that, yes, the gods do exist, but they dwell far away and have nothing to do with us at all.

That stance on the gods will remind readers of Stephen Jay Gould, the Harvard paleontologist who used to maintain, with a straight face, that science and religion are “non-overlapping magisteria.” The Stoic/Christian, who speaks up in Book II, immediately singles out the argument

as the artful dodge it is, and he subjects it to a blistering rebuttal. The Stoic regards the gods' benevolence as self-evident. Signs of their beneficent design, plan, and affection are all around us.

Just as some readers will be surprised that the Epicurean theory of evolution long precedes Darwin, so will legions of internet Stoics and cultural warriors be surprised to discover that the argument for intelligent design is not Christian in origin. For example, the Stoic says things such as this:

If a man were to come to a house, gymnasium, or forum, and were to see the underlying rule, plan, and method of everything happening there, he could not conclude that these things came about without an originating agent. He would understand that there is someone who oversees it all, and whose directions are followed.

And this:

The hand is adapted, through the motion of the fingers, for painting, shaping, carving, and eliciting sound from string and wind instruments. . . . Neither the human form and the design of our limbs, nor the power of the human mind and character, could have been made as they are by accident.

Just so, the Stoic is certain that the gods have a plan for us. That plan is what he calls *providentia*, "divine providence," and he explains it at great length. Yet he warns us not to mistake the meaning of that word:

You said this in error, because you thought [the Stoics] created providence as a sort of unique goddess that manages and rules the whole world. But we are dealing here with a truncated term. For example, if one were to say that the Athenian republic is ruled by a "council," the phrase "of the Areopagus" would be missing. So when we say "the world is controlled by providence," we leave out the phrase "of the gods."

Axiomatically, therefore, the Stoic is a firm believer in prophecy and divine intervention. He is sure that we humans are the gods' favorite because unlike all the other animals, we have reason.

Readers today will easily spot problems with these arguments, and not merely because microscopes and telescopes have infinitely improved our understanding of the material universe. Voltaire himself demolished them long ago. The surprising thing—to me, at any rate—is that the speaker of Book III raises the same objections Voltaire did. He lacks the glee and fun of *Candide*, but the criticisms are all there. For example, *is* reason such a good thing? Not so fast, he says:

so too may a grievous moral offense be committed with the aid of reason. The former path is followed by few, and infrequently, while the latter route is chosen by many, and often. This being the case, it would have been better that no reason at all had been given to us by the immortal gods, than that it had been given with such pernicious consequences.

And as for "providence," well, what good is it if it can't prevent evil?

Your "providence" must be condemned, for it gave reason to those whom it knew would employ it for perverse and morally unsound ends. Unless, perhaps, you say that your providence was unaware of this outcome.

That *gotcha!* at the end is but one of many hilarious moments in the book. One of the interlocutors tells a story, for example, about a tyrant who plunders a temple and, sailing safely home, says with a laugh: "Do you see, my friends, how pleasant a voyage is given by the immortal gods to men who have committed sacrilege?"

Would *you* crack a joke like that as you're robbing a church?

Why should we read Cicero's book today? For its own merits, of course. But perhaps we have use for the book beyond the realm of the purely theological, because *On the Nature of the Gods* is anything but a Twitter fight or an HR lecture. As one speaker says,

But I don't want you to think I've come as [the agnostic's] supporter—I'm here to listen. My intention is to be a fair and unbiased listener.

I'm not at all constrained by some knee-jerk, reflexive duty to endorse a predetermined view.

One can apply Cicero's thinking and questioning strategies to some of the many numinous dogmas—social, political, medical, economic, and professional—that regulate our lives in liberal institutions and free societies today.

In any case, as the samples above show, this new translation strikes an ideal balance between readable modern English and scrupulous fidelity to the tone of the Latin. The outstanding introduction and the many succinct notes that round it out make it a complete book in itself. I recommend it highly.

## Back to Bach

*Michael Marissen*

*Bach Against Modernity.*

Oxford University Press, 200 pages,

\$34.95

*reviewed by John Check*

The experience of listening to great music leads many of us naturally to wonder about the lives of the composers who wrote it. In some cases, composers have left documentary evidence—letters, diaries, essays, books—that helps us understand them. One thinks of Arnold Schoenberg's writings collected in *Style and Idea*, or of Richard Wagner's autobiography, or even of Beethoven's Heiligenstadt Testament, in which he consecrated himself to art. With Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750), the case is more complicated: little contemporary documentation exists about his personal life. This, in turn, has led to trouble. His music is so familiar to us that we assume we know him when in fact we really don't.

So holds Michael Marissen, whose *Bach Against Modernity* brings together eleven essays—some long, others quite short, all of them clearly written and closely argued—that shed light on who Bach was and what he wasn't. A professor emeritus at Swarthmore College and the author or coauthor of five books on Bach, Marissen rejects the view that

Bach was “more of a forward-looking, quasi-scientific thinker” than he was “a traditional orthodox Lutheran believer.” Marissen asks us to suspend our assumptions and scrutinize what records we do have.

The book's lead essay examines the ways scholars and listeners of today misunderstand Bach and his music. In a word, they assume he was a more modern figure than he was—an artist first who only incidentally wrote a good deal of liturgical music; a champion of reason and religious tolerance; a man who saw himself as a cosmopolitan and progressive. One by one, Marissen reveals these assumptions to be hollow. For example, he points to Bach's variable use of the initials J. J. (for *Jesu juva*, “Jesus help!”) at the beginning of his scores and S. D. G. (*Soli Deo gloria*, “To God alone be glory”) at the end. It is simply not the case, Marissen demonstrates, that Bach used these initials conventionally, namely in his religious works but not his secular works. He used them most of all when writing his large-scale works. Far from seeing himself as a godlike creator, Bach, in his most ambitious undertakings, sought divine help and humbly expressed his gratitude. In this refutation of conventional wisdom and in others, Marissen is thorough and compelling.

Marissen is also persuasive in his treatment of Bach's personal copy of the Bible, an asset in understanding the composer and his music. Referred to as the Calov Bible (for the name of its editor), this three-volume edition, published in 1681–82, consists of Luther's translation and exegesis of the Bible. Bach's copy contains his own commentary, corrections, and underlinings. Often overlooked and just as often misinterpreted, the composer's Calov Bible, writes Marissen, “provides wide-ranging evidence for Bach's premodern Lutheran world- and life view, and it renders absurd the notion that he had progressivist or secularist tendencies.” He cites examples of misinterpretation that issue from a single word of Bach's within a brief annotation to Exodus. Translating *Vorspiel* as “prelude,” some writers have suggested that Bach drew inspiration for one of his compositions, an eight-part motet, from Exodus 15:20. But this, Marissen shows, does not follow: Bach's commentary in his Calov Bible dates to the

1740s; the composition supposedly “inspired” by the Exodus passage dates to the 1720s. Bach read the Bible closely because he believed it was true. Religion for him was neither pretense nor pretext. It was not mere inspiration for his art.

The longest essay in *Bach Against Modernity* is cowritten with Marissen’s longtime collaborator Daniel R. Melamed, the renowned Bach scholar from Indiana University. They are currently translating the librettos of all of Bach’s cantatas—multi-movement vocal works, many of them composed for the church. Their aim is to show what the librettos likely meant to Bach and to listeners and worshipers of his time. Citing *angenehmes Wort* from Cantata 78 as an example, Marissen and Melamed show how previous translations—as “pleasant Word” or “agreeable Word” or “delightful Word”—fail to capture the Lutheran sense of the adjective. Based on their research, they suggest *angenehmes* is a reference to Luther’s translation of Corinthians 6:2, where it is used to mean “acceptable,” “favorable,” or (what they think best) “propitious.” Lutherans of Bach’s time, they conclude, would have had in mind this weightier sense of the word and applied it to the text from Cantata 78. The errors in English translation can be traced sometimes to an original source, to the score (if available), or to individual parts (if the score is missing). For one thing, Bach’s handwriting can be hard to decipher, and even experts get tripped up. For another, sources sometimes contain incorrect punctuation; in extreme cases, they have no punctuation at all. Running to sixty pages and containing more than 170 footnotes, Marissen and Melamed’s essay is a tour de force. If the best Bach scholars demand a lot from their readers, it is because they demand so much from themselves.

Some of the book’s shorter essays offer commentary on specific pieces. Marissen’s analysis of the soprano aria from Cantata 64 reveals the meaning waiting to be mined in the works of Bach. The text of the aria contrasts the world of man, which “like smoke” must “fade away,” with the promise of eternal life through Jesus. Bach makes a musical representation of the world at the beginning of the aria. Underlying the opening instrumental section before

the soprano’s entrance is a rhythmic pattern: the short–short–long of a dance known as the gavotte. As Marissen shows, this tightly knit gavotte pattern operates on multiple levels of awareness. It is an impressive edifice, and yet, after its initial statement, it begins to erode: its regularity is disrupted, its orderly rhythms become confused. How like the works and world of man. Amid this degradation, the soprano, with its long, held notes on *stehen* (to remain) and *fest* (securely), represents eternal life. The aria as a whole, writes Marissen,

calls attention to several key themes in a pre-modern Lutheran viewpoint that was continually pitted against what conservative Lutherans like Bach took to be the undue and indeed dangerous optimism of Enlightenment thinking.

These themes include the transitoriness of the world, the fallenness of its people, and the reality of eternity.

A pair of essays in Marissen’s book examine Bach in the light of Judaism. The first of these draws on his research for his 1998 book on Bach, Lutheranism, and anti-Semitism. The essay challenges head-on the notion that Bach was some harbinger of the Enlightenment by considering the *St. John Passion*. Religious tolerance may have been an Enlightenment virtue, but the *Passion*, in Marissen’s reading, is far from tolerant in its depiction of Jews. Part of the reason for this is the Gospel itself: references to Jews in John are almost always negative. Part of it has to do with Bach’s immersion in Luther’s work and in the work of Luther’s interpreters: the composer owned a set of the theologian’s collected writings, including two copies of the notorious *On the Jews and Their Lies*. And part of it has to do with the vividness of Bach’s musical setting, particularly in some of the choruses dealing with Jesus and Pilate. In these, Bach “went far beyond the call of duty in musically depicting Jewish opposition to Jesus.” That said, Marissen’s aim is not to excoriate the composer or to denigrate the *St. John Passion*; such would be antithetical to the spirit of a book that emphasizes the distance between Bach’s time and

ours. The aim of the essay, instead, is to invite us to listen more attentively to a great work of art about which debate continues to swirl.

Marissen's chapter on the Brandenburg Concertos, a set of six instrumental works, dispels another misconception about Bach's music: that his sacred music was distinct from his secular music. All of Bach's music was ultimately religious; its purpose was to honor God. Developing this idea, Marissen asserts that the Brandenburg Concertos "are essentially church cantatas with implicit (and therefore harder-to-read) 'texts' that do have real meaning." In the sixth concerto, he finds a likeness of the Christian teaching that the first shall be last while the last shall be first. Prominent melody lines are given to violas, instruments usually heard in supporting roles, while the viols, instruments usually in the spotlight, are relegated to the background. Marissen also points to a number of instances when Bach repurposed music from the Brandenburg Concertos in church cantatas, evidence of his unified conception of music.

This short book is a product of decades of research, but its most important lessons are accessible to all music lovers. True, some readers may find that the composer they thought they knew is different, sometimes quite different, from the one depicted herein. Speaking only for myself, as someone who has taught Bach's music for twenty-five years, I found Marissen's Bach more interesting than I suspected, and I was gently chastened by the reminder that it is our easiest assumptions that often lead us astray.

## Fool me continuously

*Peter K. Andersson*

Fool:

In Search of Henry VIII's Closest Man.  
Princeton University Press, 224 pages,  
\$27.95

*reviewed by Crawford Gribben*

Should you answer a fool according to his folly? This question haunts the pages of an erudite new book. Peter K. Andersson, a historian at Örebro

University in Sweden, has written a short and delightful account of William Somer, fool to Henry VIII and one of the best-known individuals in Tudor England. Somer was the man with whom the king "spent perhaps more time than any other," a subject in four royal portraits, and a witness of Elizabeth I's coronation. He was regarded as a comic genius by William Shakespeare and was remembered in a sequence of seventeenth-century jestbooks and plays. His occasional appearances have continued into Hilary Mantel's *The Mirror & the Light* (2020). Somer defined the archetype of the fool and became a recognizable figure in his lifetime and beyond. Yet, for all of his visibility, even celebrity, he remains "one of the most mysterious individuals" in early modern England.

Andersson's new book sets out to situate Somer within these changing contexts. He is not the first to have made this attempt. Over the last four centuries, a handful of authors have reconstructed Somer's life, with results that include a mid-seventeenth-century memoir and an entry in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. But the subject is challenging. The materials for a fuller life history simply do not exist. We lack basic information about Somer's birth and death, about his career before his appearance in Henry's court, and about what his life as royal entertainer might have meant. The closest we come to his own speech is in secondhand reporting of celebrated quips, sometimes recorded for the first time several decades after his death. And so Andersson accepts that his book is "not a conventional biography." But he revels in the opportunities that this admission permits. Taking cues from Natalie Zemon Davis, and inspired by her careful reading of historical silences and omissions, Andersson shows how Somer was represented and remembered by those who knew him best—and by others who never knew him at all.

Where did Somer come from? Andersson works hard to create a plausible backstory. He describes how the dissolution of the monasteries that Henry promoted as part of his program of religious reform shattered some of the most important institutions for providing social care. Whatever their other

achievements, monasteries gave a home to those who could not easily integrate into everyday life. In the 1530s, the records of those who were auditing these institutions with a view to reassigning their land and wealth noted the homes they customarily provided for the needy. Some of these men and women were, in the language of the day, “natural fools”—individuals who might now be recognized as having some form of mental or physical disability. In the sixteenth century, however, disability could lead to opportunity. Some of these individuals, Andersson suggests, might have been talent-spotted for a new career as royal entertainer.

So what did it mean for Somer to move to London and take up his new life as a royal fool? Well, Andersson explains, we can forget familiar images of jesters dressed in motley, toying with juggling balls and baubles. That idea developed in the later seventeenth century, a faux-retro trend that was part of the “sentimental image of merry old England.” But in the sixteenth century, fools were of a very different sort. The evidence of the royal portraits is confirmed by court accounts: Somer was dressed in green and festooned with buttons, sporting closely cropped hair and no beard. Yet his role was riven with contradictions. He was at the center of Henry’s court but without any kind of accommodation. His job was to entertain, but he was rarely in front of an audience. He was clearly a man but was dressed to look like a child. He could speak freely to the king but routinely slept with dogs.

These contradictions reach into the heart of Andersson’s narrative. For Somer was, in many respects, tragic. He was habitually abused. He was “lean, hollow-eyed and stooping,” a man who easily fell asleep and could be suddenly aggressive. Suffering from some kind of disability, he was a regular victim of the “bad fun” that also found voice in bearbaiting and public executions. He was valued and despised, laughed with (and at) and beaten, an emblem of innocence and evidence of sin. He was a

man of humble attainments at the center of wealth, display, and power. But, in this world of deception, Somer told the truth. In a sphere of illusion, his authenticity made him a fool. But as a fool, he could share homespun wisdom and make accidental quips—and Henry paid attention. For Somer was a “human conversation piece,” as Andersson brilliantly puts it: a reminder to courtiers of the ordinary world outside the royal walls. In a sense, he stood as a metaphor for the nation at large, a stand-in for those who were governed. His role represented the people to the state. And so the court’s attitude to him was a kind of downward projection of power. For, as Andersson puts it, “the comedy did not derive from what the fool did as much as from what others did to the fool.”

Quite apart from its subject matter, Andersson’s new book is a significant contribution to discussions of historical technique. The study’s method is not just against the grain, it also makes much of absence. Of course, this approach is not without its complications. Andersson recognizes that the image of the fool was developing throughout this period, and that this developing image was being invested with particular tropes. This makes it difficult to evaluate the consistency of Somer’s depictions. It is helpful that the evidence of his appearance provided by a handful of contemporary portraits is confirmed in part by a small number of references in the court’s financial accounts. But the evidence provided by later representations of Somer might be much less useful in reconstructing Somer’s troubled life. At what point do we simply admit that he has escaped us? Or is his disappearance his latest and greatest trick?

Whatever these methodological qualifications, the book’s content is compelling: it offers the prehistory of comedy as the history of disability. Andersson packs a lot of thinking in a short but compelling read. Here’s one fool that we really must take seriously.

# Remembrance of swings past

by John P. Rossi

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Jacques Barzun, the French-born American cultural historian, famously wrote that “Whoever wants to know the heart and mind of America had better learn baseball.” His observation is more than a witty aphorism. Unlike other American sports, baseball is linked to every major development in the nation’s history (yes, including the Revolutionary War). Starting as an improvised urban activity, the game began to take its modern-day form in the 1830s and 1840s, spreading first throughout the Northeast and then gradually by the 1880s to every part of the expanding nation. Initially a pastime for middle-class WASPs, it was embraced by the first great wave of German and Irish immigrants as a way to achieve acceptance as a patriotic American. Later ethnic and racial groups followed the same path—Poles, Jews, and Italians by the 1930s, and Latin players in the 1940s and ’50s. And baseball was popular among black Americans from early on. Attendance at games in the so-called Negro leagues regularly numbered in the thousands; when Jackie Robinson started at first base for the Brooklyn Dodgers on April 15, 1947, breaking Major League Baseball’s color barrier, over half of the 26,623 fans at Ebbets Field were black.

Baseball naturally followed the turn-of-the-century trend toward commercialization and growth. At first an informal club game with a strong social base, the sport was moving toward consolidation into a major industry by the end of the nineteenth century. In the first half of the twentieth, it reigned

supreme among American sports. And over the second half of that century, even as other sports eclipsed it in popularity, baseball retained a peculiar hold on its followers, who are generally considered the most traditionalist of sports fans. Even today, in plotting their yearly calendars, many die-hards mark the beginning of spring not on the vernal equinox, but on the date when their team’s pitchers and catchers report to Florida or Arizona for spring training. (Spring came earliest for fans of the Los Angeles Dodgers this year, with pitchers and catchers reporting on February 9.)

Despite its intimate and long-standing connection to American culture, baseball did not always attract interest among scholars as an American phenomenon. It was, however, the first sport with a serious journalistic tradition. By the late nineteenth century, sports writers wrote about the game for a growing audience, as almost every newspaper in America had a sports section. Most baseball writing before World War II took the form of game reports and summaries for fans who had missed what happened to their favorite team. At the same time, columnists emerged who described the game in greater depth, including such talents as Grantland Rice, Red Smith, and Ring Lardner. Lardner’s baseball writing reached the level of serious literature in such works as *You Know Me Al* (1916), about an ignorant, blowhard pitcher in the second decade of the twentieth century. There were even attempts at historical analysis, usually in the



form of team histories and biographies of former players. Frank Graham and Fred Lieb wrote the best of these; the latter's *Baseball As I Have Known It* (1977), a memoir covering the sixty-six years he spent as a baseball journalist, doubles as a serious analysis of the sport's growing popularity in the early twentieth century.

Hemingway said that all American literature derives from one book, *Huckleberry Finn*. In like fashion, all serious study of baseball—and, by extension, all other American sports—dates from the work of one man, Harold Seymour.

In the 1940s, Seymour was studying for his Ph.D. in history at Cornell University and proposed as his thesis topic the history of baseball, particularly the development of the game in the nineteenth century. The proposal was initially rejected on the grounds that it lacked scholarly significance. Seymour convinced the thesis committee that, on the contrary, there was considerable primary material on the history of the game, and developments in baseball had mirrored what was happening in the nation, particularly the efforts of middle-class workers to find a sporting outlet in which they could participate.

Under the prodding of Dorothy Seymour Wells, his wife and eventual coauthor, Seymour published his thesis in what later became a three-volume history of baseball. The first volume, *Baseball: The Early Years* (1960), covered the various developments of the sport up to approximately 1900 and indicated the reasons for its growing popularity: ease of play, simple rules, and the gradual proliferation of teams and leagues, ending with the professionalization of the sport by the 1870s. Reviews were positive, arguing among other things that Seymour had single-handedly legitimized writing about what was an interesting but otherwise insignificant sporting activity.

The same year that Seymour's book appeared, a now largely forgotten memoir of a baseball season as seen through the eyes of a player, Jim Brosnan's *The Long Season*, also went into print. What made it unique was that Brosnan wrote it himself. It was not an "as told to" baseball book. For the first time, a player reported

what went on in the dugout (or in the bullpen, in Brosnan's case) and captured the range of emotions that players experienced. Angst was a common theme. The baseball establishment was not happy, but the acerbic baseball writer Jimmy Cannon called it the best book about baseball ever written.

Six years later, Lawrence Ritter, a professor of finance at New York University, inspired by the work of John and Alan Lomax in rounding up recordings of American folk music, got the idea to interview players from baseball's early years. For *The Glory of Their Times*, Ritter sat down with twenty-six players from roughly the years 1900–30, when baseball became America's number-one sport. No one had thought to do something like this, largely because the game was viewed as not serious enough to warrant that kind of analysis. The book was an instant success and eventually sold almost 400,000 copies. Ritter gave his royalties, which reached \$250,000, to the players and their families. *The Glory of Their Times* broke ground: it spawned a plethora of books of interviews with players for their perspectives on the game. Since then, there have been hundreds more, none with the charm of Ritter's.

By the 1970s, the history of baseball was beginning to be taken seriously by intellectuals as a topic worthy of study. Even *The New Yorker*, that bastion of culture and upper-middle-class ennui, began to take notice of baseball at the prompting of one its best editors, Roger Angell. Labeled "The Poet Laureate of Baseball," Angell wrote lyrically about the sport, and his studies of the game's uniqueness and centrality to American life, especially his first book, *The Summer Game* (1972), did much to burnish baseball's image. *The New Yorker's* stamp of approval made writing about baseball an acceptable literary endeavor, and the 1970s saw a number of major baseball studies appear: Robert Creamer's 1974 biography of Babe Ruth, which set the standard for future baseball biographical studies; Roger Kahn's influential study of Brooklyn Dodgers players after their careers ended, *The Boys of Summer* (1972); and the pitcher Jim Bouton's exposé of the secret side of a baseball player's life, *Ball Four* (1970). The last changed sports writ-

ing, and perhaps not for the better. Journalists became relentless in exposing the faults and foibles of the game's players and owners. Nothing was off-limits. When one player mentioned his wife had just had a baby, a reporter asked, "Bottle or breast?"

The scholarly study of baseball's past took a major stride forward in 1971 with the founding of the Society for American Baseball Research, or SABR. Its aim was to foster the study of baseball's past and disseminate information about the game and its various intricacies, especially its unique statistical dimension. The organization grew rapidly, and by the 1980s it was revolutionizing the public understanding of baseball's role in American life by examining not just Major League Baseball but also the history of the minor leagues, of minorities in baseball (especially in the Negro leagues, which had their heyday from the 1920s to the late 1940s), and even of women's baseball. In analyzing baseball's statistical records, SABR members have made some surprising statistical corrections: Ty Cobb's lifetime batting average was reduced from .367 to .366, for instance, and Hack Wilson's record single-season RBI total, long thought to be 190, was increased by one. SABR's studies also cleared up many of the sport's popular myths: the game had no single inventor but was derived from various English bat-and-ball games; Abner Doubleday, long revered as one of the sport's founding fathers, in fact had nothing to do with baseball; before the sport was formally segregated in the nineteenth century, a handful of blacks had played in the MLB; and Babe Ruth may have called his home run in the 1932 World Series after all.

A by-product of this new glut of baseball analysis was the development of different methods of measuring baseball success. The leading lights of this new wave of baseball junkies—such as John Thorn, currently the official historian of Major League Baseball, and the statistician Peter Palmer—have

changed the way writers look at the sport. Bill James, often regarded as the dean of this new school of baseball analytics (known as "sabermetrics," a term he coined), published the first edition of *The Bill James Historical Baseball Abstract* in 1985, a detailed, decade-by-decade analysis of baseball history. His new approach de-emphasized hitters' batting averages, for instance, in favor of a more holistic measurement, OPS: on-base percentage plus slugging percentage. To measure pitching success, he focused on individual statistics such as strikeouts or walks (prorated on a per-nine-inning basis) rather than credited wins and losses, which often reflect factors beyond a pitcher's control. Interestingly, after all the new analysis, the greatest baseball player is still the same one that traditional fans knew, Babe Ruth.

Another sign of the growing seriousness of baseball study was the sudden appearance of courses on baseball history on American college campuses. With titles such as "The Myth and Magic of Our National Pastime," "Baseball in American Culture," and "American History through Baseball," baseball courses sprung up across the nation in the 1980s, even at the likes of Penn and Harvard. In 1985, I asked the dean of my school, La Salle University, if he would approve such a course, to be titled "Baseball and American Culture." He was dubious and asked that I show him similar courses taught elsewhere. When I came back with a list of baseball courses offered at over a hundred schools, including one taught by the leading Civil War historian William Gienapp at Harvard, he gave me approval. The total today of such courses must be close to a thousand.

Attempts have been made to use other sports—boxing, football, basketball—to sketch America's unique history, but with little success. Only baseball has been deeply imbedded in American life to the extent that it can be called a cornerstone of our past.