

The New Criterion

January 2021

A monthly review *edited by Roger Kimball*

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The New Criterion *January 2021*

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Notes & Comments: January 2021

The “Dr.” will see you now

“Trelawney was always changing his style—even his name, too, I believe, which is, of course, no more Trelawney than my own is. Nor does anyone know why he should be addressed as Doctor.”

—Anthony Powell, *The Kindly Ones* (1962)

Joseph Epstein is indisputably one of America’s finest essayists. He is also one of the most wide-ranging. He writes lively and companionable reconsiderations of such major writers as Matthew Arnold, Henry James, and George Santayana. These are intellectually substantial pieces whose learning is considerable but lightly worn.

He writes occasional essays after the fashion of a Mencken, a Macaulay, or a Montaigne. And he writes brief, timely op-eds whose hallmarks are humor, moral insight, and quiet humanity. Epstein is sometimes decorously polemical. He is always entertaining.

Epstein is no stranger to controversy. He has, in the course of a long career, often attracted the ire of the politically correct establishment. Dyspeptic feminists, especially, exhibit an allergy to his writing, as do other scolds, churls, and campaigners for causes—anyone, in short, more generously endowed with a sense of his or her own election than a sense of humor.

Although he is the recipient of many awards and honors, Epstein’s trespasses against the brittle carapace of sisterhood have not proceeded without cost to him professionally. It was one such foray, for example, that ended his editorship of *The American Scholar* (1975–97), a literary quarterly that flourished greatly under his guidance but that has since declined into a backwater of unread and unreadable bulletins from the babbling fount of inveterate self-congratulation.

Epstein’s latest’s transgression appeared last month in the pages of *The Wall Street Journal*. It was a light-hearted op-ed called “Is There a Doctor in the White House? Not if You Need an M.D.” In it, Epstein pokes gentle fun at Jill Biden, who on January 20, 2021, is slated to become First Lady of the United States. He also offers her some sound advice. Some fifteen years ago, Mrs. Biden took an Ed.D. degree at the University of Delaware with a dissertation on—wait for it!—“Student Retention at the Community College Level: Meeting Students’ Needs.”

Apparently Mrs. Biden likes to call herself “Dr. Biden,” a proclivity that Epstein says “sounds and feels fraudulent, not to say a touch comic.” She should, Epstein advised, drop the title, if for no other reason than it communicates less honor than affectation and social insecurity.

In the United States, anyway, it is generally understood, though seldom mentioned in polite society, that the less distinguished one's academic institution, the more likely one will insist upon the honorific "Dr." And that's for Ph.D. degrees. The degree of Ed.D.—officially a "doctor of education"—is, let's be candid, more a certificate than a degree. Yes, one is entitled to the title "Dr." But it's only a short step, or half step, up from those entertainers and purveyors of boutique soaps who style themselves "Dr." or "Doc": "Dr. Bronner," for example, or "Doc Watson."

In this country, in most situations, "Dr." is an honorific properly reserved for medical doctors. We understand that there are notable exceptions—"Dr. Henry A. Kissinger" comes to mind—but exceptions do not make the rule.

In short, we believe that Mr. Epstein was doing Mrs. Biden a favor by pointing this out—though it is doubtless true that he was also doing his readers a favor by pointing it out publicly. "Delicious" was the word many connoisseurs employed.

But neither Team Biden nor the woke establishment that embraces the Bidens appreciated the effort. Indeed, their response was swift, irate, and uncompromising. In a robust response to the response, Paul A. Gigot, the editor of *The Wall Street Journal's* editorial page, described the tsunami of complaint that Epstein's article elicited. It started slowly, he noted, but quickly grew to "a flood of media and Twitter criticism, including demands that I retract the piece, apologize personally to Mrs. Biden, ban Mr. Epstein for all time, and resign and think upon my sins." Clearly, he concluded, the outcry was a calculated "political strategy."

Michael LaRosa, Mrs. Biden's press secretary, sounded the gong of feminist outrage.

"If you had any respect for women at all," he wailed in a tweet, "you would remove this repugnant display of chauvinism from your paper and apologize to her." That imprecation was still reverberating when Doug Emhoff, the husband of Kamala Harris, assured the world that "Dr. Biden earned her degrees through hard work and pure grit." Not just grit, you see, but *pure* grit in pursuing, like a pedagogical gastroenterologist, "student retention" at community colleges!

We suspect that Gigot is correct. "My guess," he said, "is that the Biden team concluded it was a chance to use the big gun of identity politics to send a message to critics as it prepares to take power. There's nothing like playing the race or gender card to stifle criticism." No, indeed, there isn't. And Northwestern University, the institution at which Epstein taught for many years, got the memo.

A communiqué from the English department came wrapped up in snotty academic presumption just in time for the holidays. "The Department is aware that a former adjunct lecturer [a former *adjunct lecturer*, mind you, not one of us important tenured profs] who has not taught here in nearly 20 years has published an opinion piece that casts unmerited aspersion on Dr. Jill Biden's rightful public claiming of her doctoral credentials and expertise." An official university bulletin expanded on this theme of credentialism. "Joseph Epstein was never a tenured professor at Northwestern [er, so what?] and has not been a lecturer here since 2002." Then comes one of our favorite wheezes, asserting your commitment to something you actually despise and reject: "While we firmly support academic freedom and freedom of expression [sure you do], we do not agree with Mr. Epstein's opinion and believe the designation of doctor is well deserved by anyone who has earned a Ph.D., an Ed.D., or an M.D." They conclude by firing up the beacon of virtue signaling and letting the light shine wide. "Northwestern is firmly committed to equity,

diversity and inclusion, and strongly disagrees with Mr. Epstein's misogynistic views."

If Epstein were being misogynistic in pointing out a home truth to Jill Biden, was *The Washington Post* engaging in xenophobia when it made fun of the foreign-born Hungarian-American commentator and Trump supporter Sebastian Gorka for identifying himself as "Dr. Gorka?" He "likes to be called 'Dr. Gorka,'" *WaPo* sniffed in 2017. But "he gets his way only in conservative media." And what about Ben Carson? The current Secretary of HUD is also the former Director of Pediatric Neurosurgery at the Johns Hopkins Children's Center, that is, a real doctor. Yet *The New York Times* regularly identifies him as "Mr. Carson" even as it lovingly refers to Jill Biden as "Dr." Is that racist, or is it merely intolerant woke leftism in action? As the author and commentator Glenn Reynolds sharply observed, "It's good to see the weight of our journalistic and academic establishments being brought to bear to protect the self-esteem of a rich, powerful white woman."

In an American context, Melania Trump is a genuine exotic. She hails from a small country in the Balkans, is fluent in half a dozen languages, and has devoted herself with what Mr. Har—er, Emhoff—might call "hard work and pure grit" to achieve success far from the coddled purlieus of government sinecure. We do not remember a single women's magazine featuring her on its cover over the last four years, despite her physical beauty and glamour. *The New York Times* has not been rushing puff pieces about her into print, nor has academia rallied round with its lackeys to flatter her.

Last month, after the electors met to cast their votes for him, Joe Biden once again made a plea for unity. "Now it's time to turn the page . . . to unite and to heal," he said. We applaud that sentiment. But we wonder what he means by "unite" and "heal." To judge by the actions of the institutions supporting

his cause in this sorry episode, "turning the page" might just be euphemism for sweeping everything and everyone out of step with his program into the oubliette. It was not an encouraging sign that Northwestern University, in addition to issuing its *pronunciamentos* about Epstein, should go full Orwell (or full Stalin) and erase him from their website listing emeriti faculty, despite those earnest declarations of support for "academic freedom and freedom of expression." As Gigot warned in his column for *The Wall Street Journal*, "This is how cancel culture works."

It is very rare that Gigot responds in print to criticism of what appears in his pages. Doubtless this is because he understands that criticism is a natural part of the metabolism of opinion journalism. In the normal course of our political life, it is not only expected but salutary. People have different points of view about contentious issues. A respectful airing of those differences is or should be part of the lifeblood of democracy. If Gigot stepped into print over this contretemps, it was not so much to defend Epstein or even to respond to the chihuahua-like yapping of his interlocutors. It was to sound an alarm against that "big gun of identity politics" he found operating in the background.

The governing strategy of identity politics is not to encourage free expression but to shutter it. In essence, it is a totalitarian enterprise, deploying the shibboleths of race, gender, and radical egalitarianism to enforce a stultifying conformity. It is heartening to see Gigot affirming that, at one of our nation's most important newspapers, "these pages aren't going to stop publishing provocative essays merely because they offend the new administration or the political censors in the media and academe." If, as we suspect, the preview we just witnessed was a sort of sighting shot, it suggests that Gigot is going to have his hands full dealing with ever more intolerant efforts to "turn the page" and enforce ghastly new modes of "healing" and "unity."

Fyodor Dostoevsky: philosopher of freedom

by Gary Saul Morson

On December 22, 1849, a group of political radicals were taken from their prison cells in Petersburg’s Peter and Paul Fortress, where they had been interrogated for eight months. Led to the Semenovskiy Square, they heard a sentence of death by firing squad. They were given long white peasant blouses and nightcaps—their funeral shrouds—and offered last rites. The first three prisoners were seized by the arms and tied to the stake. One prisoner refused a blindfold and stared defiantly into the guns trained on them. At the last possible moment, the guns were lowered as a courier galloped up with an imperial decree reducing death sentences to imprisonment in a Siberian prison camp followed by service as a private in the army. The last-minute rescue was in fact planned in advance as part of the punishment, an aspect of social life that Russians understand especially well.

Accounts affirm: of the young men who endured this terrible ordeal, one had his hair turn white; a second went mad and never recovered his sanity; a third, whose two-hundredth birthday we celebrate in 2021, went on to write *Crime and Punishment*.

The mock-execution and the years in Siberian prison—thinly fictionalized in his novel *Notes from the House of the Dead* (1860)—changed Dostoevsky forever. His naive, hopeful romanticism disappeared. His religious faith deepened. The sadism of both prisoners and guards taught him that the sunny view of human nature presumed by utilitarianism, liberalism, and socialism were preposterous.

Real human beings differed fundamentally from what these philosophies presumed.

People do not live by bread—or, what philosophers called the maximalization of “advantage”—alone. All utopian ideologies presuppose that human nature is fundamentally good and simple: evil and apparent complexity result from a corrupt social order. Eliminate want and you eliminate crime. For many intellectuals, science itself had proven these contentions and indicated the way to the best of all possible worlds. Dostoevsky rejected all these ideas as pernicious nonsense. “It is clear and intelligible to the point of obviousness,” he wrote in a review of Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina*, “that evil lies deeper in human beings than our social-physicians suppose; that no social structure will eliminate evil; that the human soul will remain as it always has been . . . and, finally, that the laws of the human soul are still so little known, so obscure to science, so undefined, and so mysterious, that there are not and cannot be either physicians or *final judges*” except God Himself.

Dostoevsky’s characters astonish by their complexity. Their unpredictable but believable behavior reminds us of experiences beyond the reach of “scientific” theories. We appreciate that people, far from maximizing their own advantage, sometimes deliberately make victims of themselves in order, for example, to feel morally superior. In *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880), Father Zosima observes that it can be very pleasant to take offense, and

Fyodor Pavlovich replies that it can even be positively distinguished.

In fact, people harm themselves for many reasons. They tear at their own wounds and derive a peculiar pleasure from doing so. They deliberately humiliate themselves. To their own surprise, they experience impulses stemming from resentments long suppressed and, as a result, create scandalous scenes or commit horrible crimes. Freud particularly appreciated Dostoevsky's exploration of the dynamics of guilt. But neither Freud nor most Western readers have grasped that Dostoevsky intended his descriptions of human complexity to convey political lessons. If people are so surprising, so "undefined and mysterious," then social engineers are bound to cause more harm than good.

The narrator of *The House of the Dead* describes how prisoners sometimes, for no apparent reason, suddenly do something highly self-destructive. They may attack a guard, even though the punishment—running a gauntlet of thousands of blows—usually proves fatal. Why? The answer is that the essence of humanness lies in the possibility of surprise. The behavior of material objects can be fully explained by natural laws, and for materialists the same is true of people, if not yet, then in the near future. But people are not just material objects, and will do anything, no matter how self-destructive, to prove they are not.

The whole point of prison, as Dostoevsky experienced it, is to restrict people's ability to make their own choices. But choice is what makes us human. Those prisoners lash out because of their ineradicable craving to have a will of their own, and that craving is ultimately more important than their own well-being and, indeed, than life itself.

The nameless narrator of Dostoevsky's 1864 novella *Notes from Underground* (usually called "the underground man") insists that the aspiration of social sciences to discover the iron laws of human behavior threatens to reduce people to "piano keys or organ stops." If such laws exist, if "some day they truly discover a formula for all our desires and caprices," he reasons, then each person will realize that "everything is

done by itself according to the laws of nature." As soon as those laws are discovered, people will no longer be responsible for their actions. What's more,

All human actions will then, of course, be tabulated according to these laws, mathematically, like tables of logarithms up to 108,000. . . . there would be published certain edifying works like the present encyclopedia lexicons, in which everything will be so clearly calculated and designated that there will be no more . . . adventures in the world. . . . Then the crystal palace [utopia] will be built.

There will be no more adventures because adventures involve suspense, and suspense entails moments that are truly momentous: depending on what one does, more than one outcome is possible. But for a determinist, the laws of nature ensure that at any given moment only one thing can happen. Suspense is just an illusion resulting from ignorance of what must be.

If so, then all agonies of choice are pointless. So are guilt and regret, since both emotions depend on the possibility that we could have done something else. We experience what we must, but we accomplish nothing. As Tolstoy expressed the point in *War and Peace*, "If we concede that human life can be [exhaustively] governed by reason, then the possibility of life is destroyed."

The supposedly "scientific" view of humanity turns people into objects—literally dehumanizes them—and there can be no greater insult. "All my life I have been offended by the laws of nature," the underground man wryly observes, and concludes that people will rebel against any denial of their humanness. They will engage in what he calls "spite," action undertaken "just because," for no reason except to show they can act against their own advantage and contrary to whatever so-called laws of human psychology predict.

"They call me a psychologist; this is not true," Dostoevsky wrote. "I am merely a realist in the higher sense, that is, I portray all the depths of the human soul." Dostoevsky denied being a psychologist because he, unlike prac-

titioners of this science, acknowledged that people are truly agents, who make real choices for which they can properly be held responsible. No matter how thoroughly one describes the psychological or sociological forces that act on a person, there is always something *left over*—some “surplus of humanness,” as the philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin paraphrased Dostoevsky’s idea. We cherish that surplus, “the man in man” as Dostoevsky called it, and will defend it at all costs.

A passage in *Notes from Underground* looks forward to modern dystopian novels, works like Yevgeny Zamyatin’s *We* (1920–21) or Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932), where heroes rebel against guaranteed happiness. They want their lives to be their own. Put man in utopia, the underground man observes, and he will devise “destruction and chaos,” do something perverse, and, if given the chance, return to the world of suffering. In short, “the whole work of man seems really to consist in nothing but proving to himself continually that he is a man and not an organ stop. It may be at the cost of his skin; but he has proved it.”

In an essay ostensibly devoted to the Russian craze for séances and communication with demons, Dostoevsky addresses the skeptical objection that since these devils could easily prove their existence by giving us some fabulous inventions, they couldn’t exist. They are just a fraud perpetrated on the gullible. With tongue in cheek, Dostoevsky replies that this argument fails because devils (that is, if there are devils) would foresee the hatred people would eventually feel towards the resulting utopia and the devils who enabled it.

To be sure, people would at first be ecstatic that, “as our socialists dream,” all needs were satisfied, the “corrupting [social] environment, once the source of all flaws,” had vanished, and there was nothing more to wish for. But within a generation,

People would suddenly see that they had no more life left, that they had no freedom of spirit, no will, no personality. . . . they would see that their human image had disappeared. . . . that their lives

had been taken away for the sake of bread, for “stones turned into bread.” People would realize that there is no happiness in inactivity, that the mind which does not labor will wither, that it is not possible to love one’s neighbor without sacrificing something to him of one’s labor. . . . and that *happiness lies not in happiness but only in the attempt to achieve it.*

Or as the underground man observes, social engineers imagine a world that is “completed,” a perfect finished product. In fact, “an amazing edifice of that type” already exists: “the anthill.” The anthill became Dostoevsky’s favorite image of socialism.

Humanness, as opposed to formicness, requires not just product but process. Effort has value only when it can fail, while choices matter only if the world is vulnerable and depends in part on our doing one thing rather than another. Ants do not make choices. “With the anthill, the respectable race of ants began and with the anthill they will probably end, which does the greatest credit to their perseverance and staidness. But man is a frivolous creature, and perhaps, like a chessplayer, loves only the process of the game, not the end itself.”

Perhaps, the underground man reasons, “the only goal on earth to which mankind is striving lies in the incessant process of attaining, or in other words, in life itself, and not particularly in the goal which, of course, must always be ‘twice two makes four,’ that is, a formula, and after all, twice two makes four is no longer life, gentlemen, but is the beginning of death.” When you multiply two by two the result is always the same: there is no suspense, no uncertainty, no surprise. You don’t have to wait and see what those multiplying digits will come up with this time. If life is like that, it is senseless. In a paroxysm of angry wit, the underground man famously concludes:

Twice two makes four seems to me simply a piece of insolence. Twice two makes four is a fop standing with arms akimbo barring your path and spitting. I admit that twice two makes four is an excellent thing, but if we are to give everything its due, twice two makes five is sometimes also a very charming little thing.

In the same spirit, a character in Dostoevsky's novel *The Idiot* (1869) remarks: "Oh, you may be sure that Columbus was not happy when he had discovered America, but while he was discovering it. It's life that matters, nothing but life—the process of discovering, the everlasting and perpetual process, and not the discovery itself?"

People are always in the making or, as Bakhtin expressed the point, they are "unfinalizable." They retain the capacity "to render *untrue* any externalizing and finalizing definition of them. As long as a person is alive he lives by the fact that he is not yet finalized, that he has not yet uttered his ultimate word."

Ethics demands that we treat people as people, not as objects, and that means we must treat them as endowed with "surprisingness." One must never be too certain about others, collectively or individually. In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Alyosha explains to Lise that the impoverished and humiliated Captain Snegiryov, who in his pride has refused a large sum of money offered him, will certainly take it if offered again. Having saved his human dignity, he will surely accept the gift he so badly needs. Lise replies:

Listen, Alexey Fyodorovich. Isn't there in all our analysis . . . aren't we showing contempt for him, for that poor man—in analyzing his soul like this, as it were, from above, eh? In being so *certain* that he will take the money?

Dostoevsky understood not only our need for freedom but also our desire to rid ourselves of it. Freedom comes with a terrible cost, and social movements that promise to relieve us of it will always command a following. That is the theme of the most famous pages Dostoevsky ever wrote, "The Grand Inquisitor," a chapter in *Karamazov*. The intellectual Ivan narrates his unwritten "poem" in prose to his saintly brother Alyosha to explain his deepest anxieties.

Set in Spain during the Inquisition, the story opens with the Grand Inquisitor burning heretics in an auto-da-fé. As the flames scent air already rich with laurel and lemon, the people, like sheep, witness the terrifying spectacle with

cowed reverence. It has been fifteen centuries since Jesus promised to return quickly, and they yearn for some sign from Him. With His infinite pity, He decides to show Himself to them. Softly, silently, He moves among them, and they recognize Him at once. "That might be one of the best passages in the poem, I mean, how they recognized Him," Ivan remarks with wry self-deprecation. How do they know he is not an imposter? The answer is that when you see divine goodness, it is so beautiful that one cannot doubt.

The Inquisitor also knows who the stranger is—and promptly orders his arrest! Christ's vicar arrests Him! Why? And why do the guards obey and the people not resist? We learn the answer to these questions when the Inquisitor visits the Prisoner in His cell and unburdens his heart to him.

Throughout human history, the Inquisitor explains, two views of life and human nature have contended with each other. Each changes its name and specific dogmas to suit time and place, but remains the same in essence. One view, which the Inquisitor rejects, is Jesus's: human beings are free and goodness has meaning only when freely chosen. The other view, maintained by the Inquisitor, is that freedom is an insufferable burden because it leads to endless guilt, regret, anxiety, and unresolvable doubts. The goal of life is not freedom, but happiness, and to be happy people must rid themselves of freedom and adopt some philosophy claiming to have all the answers. The third Karamazov brother, Dmitri, has remarked: "Man is broad, too broad; I'd have him narrower!" and the Inquisitor would ensure human happiness by "narrowing" human nature.

Medieval Catholicism speaks in the name of Christ, but in fact it represents the Inquisitor's philosophy. That is why the Inquisitor has arrested Jesus and intends to burn him as the greatest of heretics. In our time, Dostoevsky makes clear, the Inquisitor's view of life takes the form of socialism. As with medieval Catholicism, people surrender freedom for security and trade the agonies of choice for the contentment of certainty. In so doing, they give up their humanness, but the bargain is well worth it.

To explain his position, the Inquisitor retells the Biblical story of Jesus's three temptations, a story that, in his view, expresses the essential problems of human existence as only a divine intelligence could. Could you imagine, he asks rhetorically, that if those questions had been lost, any group of sages could have re-created them?

In the Inquisitor's paraphrase, the devil first demands:

Thou wouldst go into the world . . . with some promise of freedom which men in their simplicity . . . cannot even understand, which they fear and dread—for nothing has even been more insupportable for a man and a human society than freedom. But seest Thou these stones in this parched and barren wilderness? Turn them into bread, and mankind will run after Thee like a flock of sheep.

Jesus answers: "man does not live by bread alone." Just so, the Inquisitor replies, but that is why Jesus should have *accepted* the devil's temptation. People do indeed crave the meaningful, but they can never be sure they distinguish the truly meaningful from its counterfeits. That is why they persecute non-believers and try to convert or conquer nations of a different faith, as if universal agreement were itself a proof. There is only one thing that no one can doubt: material power. When we suffer great pain, that, at least, is indubitable. In other words, the appeal of materialism is spiritual! People accept it because it is *certain*.

Instead of making people happy by taking away the burden of freedom, the Inquisitor reproaches Jesus, You increased it! "Didst Thou forget that man prefers peace, and even death, to freedom of choice in the knowledge of good and evil? Nothing is more seductive for man than his freedom of conscience, but nothing is a greater cause of suffering." People want to *call* themselves free, not to *be* free, and so, the Inquisitor reasons, the right course is to call unfreedom freedom of a higher kind, as socialists, of course, usually do.

To make people happy, one must banish all doubt. People do not want to be presented with information that, as we would say today,

contradicts their "narrative." They will do anything to preclude unwanted facts from coming to their attention. The plot of *Karamazov*, in fact, turns on Ivan's desire not to admit to himself that he desires his father's death. Without allowing himself to realize it, he makes the wished-for murder possible. One cannot begin to understand either individual people or society unless one grasps the many forms of what might be called preventive epistemology.

The devil next tempts Jesus to prove His divinity by casting Himself down from a high place so God will save him by a miracle, but Jesus refuses. The reason, according to the Inquisitor, is to show that faith must not be based on miracles. Once one witnesses a miracle, one is so overawed that doubt is impossible, and that means faith is impossible. Properly understood, faith does not resemble scientific knowledge or mathematical proof, and it is nothing like accepting Newton's laws or the Pythagorean theorem. It is possible only in a world of uncertainty, because only then can it be freely chosen.

For the same reason, one should behave morally not to be rewarded, whether in this world or the next, but simply because it is the right thing to do. Behaving morally to earn a heavenly reward transforms goodness into prudence, like saving for retirement. To be sure, Jesus performed miracles, but if you believe because of them, then—despite what many churches say—you are not a Christian.

Finally the devil offers Jesus the empire of the world, which He rejects, but, according to the Inquisitor, should have accepted. The only way to keep people from doubt, he tells Jesus, is by *miracle, mystery* (just believe us, we know), and *authority*, which universal empire would ensure. Only a few strong people are capable of freedom, the Inquisitor explains, so your philosophy condemns the overwhelming portion of humanity to misery. And so, the Inquisitor chillingly concludes, we "have corrected Thy work."

In *The Possessed* (1871), Dostoevsky predicts with astonishing accuracy what totalitarianism would be in practice. In *Karamazov* he asks whether the socialist idea is good even in theory. The revolutionaries in *The Possessed* are

despicable, but the Inquisitor, on the contrary, is entirely selfless. He knows that he will go to hell for corrupting Jesus's teaching, but he is willing to do so out of love for humanity. In short, he betrays Christ for Christian reasons! Indeed, he outdoes Christ, who gave his earthly life, by sacrificing his eternal life. Dostoevsky sharpens these paradoxes as much as possible. With his unmatched intellectual integrity, he portrays the best possible socialist while elucidating arguments for socialism more profoundly than real socialists ever did.

Alyosha at last exclaims: "your poem is in praise of Jesus, not in blame of him, as you meant it to be!" Since all the arguments have come from the Inquisitor, and Jesus has uttered not a word in response, how can that be? Ask yourself: having heard the Inquisitor's arguments, would you choose to surrender all choice in exchange for a guarantee of happiness? Would you have everything decided for you by some wise substitute for parents and remain a perpetual child? Or is there something

higher than mere contentment? I have asked my students this question for years, and none has agreed to accept the Inquisitor's bargain.

We live in a world where the Inquisitor's way of thinking grows increasingly attractive. Social scientists and philosophers assume that people are simply complicated material objects, no more capable of genuine surprise than the laws of nature are capable of suspending themselves. Intellectuals, ever more certain that they know how to achieve justice and make people happy, find the freedom of others an obstacle to human well-being.

For Dostoevsky, by contrast, freedom, responsibility, and the potential for surprise define the human essence. That essence makes possible everything of value. The human soul is "so little known, so obscure to science, and so mysterious, that there are not and cannot be either physicians or *final* judges," only un-finalizable people under the God who made them free.

“Middlemarch” & the heart’s reasons

by Myron Magnet

“Know thyself” is easy to say; but how, exactly, are we mortals supposed to obey the Delphic command? Surely not through the human “sciences.” Psychology, sociology, and anthropology all seem misapplications of a method of inquiry too abstract to explain messy human reality, depersonalizing what is quintessentially personal. If you want to make sense of human actuality, to ponder what makes our lives meaningful and why we do what we do, think what we think, and hope what we hope, the best guide I know is literature.

A recent rereading of *Middlemarch* brought that thought home forcefully, and the decades since my last reading have taught me also to appreciate why so many authors consider this the greatest of all English novels, one of the few, Virginia Woolf thought, written for grown-ups. No one can pluck out the heart of our mystery, but in this 1871 novel George Eliot—the pen name of the formidable and unconventional Mary Ann Evans—comes as close as anyone to showing how our inner feelings and wishes interact with our outer circumstances, with the social and cultural climate that surrounds us, and with our personal relationships to shape our identity and fate.

Eliot sums up the complexity of her enterprise in an epigram that heads Chapter 53:

It is but a shallow haste which concludeth insincerity from what outsiders call inconsistency—putting a dead mechanism of “ifs” and “therefores” for the living myriad of hidden suckers

whereby the belief and the conduct are brought into mutual sustainment.

Like the root systems of plants, so much that forms and motivates us happens below the surface, hidden not only from outsiders but also from ourselves. Our identities are organic, not mechanical. As Eliot says twice in the novel, “character is not cut in marble—it is not something solid and unalterable. It is something living, and changing,” a vital process no simple cause-and-effect equation can explain.

As literature so often does, *Middlemarch* takes courtship and marriage as its laboratory. While the proliferation of choices opened to women since Victorian times has changed marriage in the process, *Middlemarch*’s two central marriages nevertheless don’t bear out one character’s typically Victorian dictum that “a woman, let her be as good as she may, has to put up with the life her husband makes for her.” Nor did George Eliot have a conventional Victorian marriage. She lived openly for a quarter-century with the philosopher and proto-psychologist George Henry Lewes, who couldn’t divorce his wife, and who left his kids behind—though the unmarried Eliot called herself Mrs. Lewes. And today, no less than in Victoria’s day, the relationship we moderns have with our spouse or significant other(s), like our relationships to all those close to us, figures no less formatively in our lives.

Marriages are dialectical, “altering with the double change of self and beholder,” in

Eliot’s phrase. And their dynamics are hard to interpret. We see them like a water drop viewed under a microscope, which at first seems teeming with tiny microbes serenely feeding themselves to a larger protozoan. Increase the magnification, though, and you’ll discover hitherto invisible hairlets on the larger creature, sweeping to create a current that sucks in its prey. That’s an emblem, Eliot thinks, of how we half-blindly seek to swallow and assimilate each other, reflexively to use one another for our own purposes, always unclear about who is driving whom—who is active, and who is passive.

In the first of *Middlemarch*’s marriages, the intellectually and ethically passionate Dorothea Brooke, not yet twenty when we meet her in 1829, doesn’t exactly fall in love with Edward Casaubon, a clergyman and scholar well over twice her age and, like her, belonging to the landed gentry. Rather, an idealist in the most literal sense, she pours all her yearning for “some lofty conception of the world,” for “intensity and greatness,” into her belief that Casaubon embodies “the higher inward life,” that he is a man “with whom there could be some spiritual communion; nay, who could illuminate principle with the widest knowledge: a man whose learning almost amounted to a proof of whatever he believed!” She imagines that “he thinks a whole world of which my thought is but a poor two-penny mirror.”

And how does she reach this lofty conclusion? Well-born but (like most girls of her time) ill-taught, an orphan under the guardianship of her amiable but feckless landowning uncle, she has learned enough to know that Casaubon looks like Godfrey Kneller’s iconic portrait of John Locke—intense but remote, sharp-featured, gaunt, and worn. She hears raptly his account of his ambitious plan, on which he has spent years filling notebook after notebook with research jottings, to write a grand, unifying treatise, *The Key to All Mythologies*, which will show how the countless traditional stories that the world’s peoples use as metaphors to illuminate life’s mysteries all cohere, because they are distorted or embellished fragments of an account originally given

man by God. What project could be grander, making its author, Dorothea thinks, half scholar, half saint? Imagine: the multiplicity of tales about the world’s origin and purpose add up to a single narrative that, if not literally true, is a mirror of divine truth! She could learn from him, she thinks, “a binding theory which could bring her own life . . . into strict connection with that amazing past.”

Since she was a little girl, Dorothea says, she always wanted to use her life “to help some one who did great works,” just as the blind John Milton’s daughters read to him and wrote down his great epic of sin and evil from dictation. Marrying Casaubon, she thinks, “would be like marrying Pascal. I should learn to see the truth by the same light as great men have seen it by.” As we all sometimes do, she reasons by analogies, not always accurate; and with such historical comparisons as her guide, no wonder she values a key to all mythologies. But did she know one of Pascal’s most memorable aphorisms: “The heart has its reasons, of which reason knows nothing”? George Eliot certainly did.

In their brief courtship, Casaubon never misrepresents what he expects from marriage. “The great charm of your sex,” he tells Dorothea, “is its capability of an ardent, self-sacrificing affection, and herein we see its fitness to round and complete the existence of our own.” But Dorothea doesn’t grasp how much self-suppression, rather than self-realization, this frigid self-centeredness has in store for her. After all, the “difficult task of knowing another soul” Eliot remarks, is all the more difficult for those “whose consciousness is chiefly made up by their own wishes”—like all of us, some of the time—and the task is made harder still by our confusion about how much of our sentiments are creations of our minds and hearts or are accurate responses to others. As one character replies to another’s charge that he is being disagreeable, “Disagreeable is a word that describes your feelings and not my actions.”

Casaubon’s account of his magnum opus is all about the grandeur of his intention, which opens to Dorothea’s imagination unbounded vistas and a thrilling sense of revelation and liberation. “In relation to his authorship, he leaned on her young trust and veneration; he

liked to draw forth her fresh interest in listening, as a means of encouragement to himself?” an antidote to his fear that other scholars don’t respect him and that he will never finish the task at which he has toiled so long in such loneliness. After all, he too is human and thus “the centre of his own world; . . . liable to think that others were providentially made for him.” He feels no surprise, therefore, at the fluke that a beautiful young woman wants to cheer him on and devote her life to helping him—though the faintness of the passion he feels for her does surprise him. The poetic tradition, which he no less than Dorothea has taken as a guide, has overexaggerated the power of romance, he concludes.

On their honeymoon, though, Dorothea starts to doubt. During their courtship, she had attributed to her faulty understanding any apparent incoherence in his explanations. But now she suspects that his thesis really doesn’t add up, that it is but a jumble of fragments and false analogies. In her eyes, “the large vistas and wide fresh air which she had dreamed of finding in her husband’s mind were replaced by ante-rooms and winding passages which seemed to lead no whither.” Distracted by confuting other mythologists’ niggles, squinting over them with his little candle which makes him ignore the sunlight, “he easily lost sight of any purpose which had prompted him to these labours.” Instead of sailing with him on boundless seas of thought, Dorothea finds herself “exploring an enclosed basin.”

Perhaps a little push would get him unstuck, Dorothea thinks. So she asks the question that has frozen the blood of anyone who has ever written a Ph.D thesis: isn’t it time to stop filling notebooks with research? “Will you not make up your mind what part of them you will use, and begin to write the book which will make your vast knowledge useful to the world?” She’ll gladly help by taking it down from his dictation. Of course, no words could be “more cutting and irritating” to him, for they inflame the doubts that he has strained to dismiss as the morbid fears that must haunt any author. And her question sparks his further dread that her comforting worship of him might give way

to “disrespect, and perhaps aversion.” So his manner toward her turns cold and belittling.

For all her struggle to deny it, Dorothea has to recognize that her husband will never produce his *Key*—that he is “a failure,” and that he probably knows it too. Reverence turns to pity for so much lost labor and waste of life, and she treats him with tenderness. For him, her pity is the last straw. Little as he expected it, his sense of self is now inextricably bound up with her opinion of him: so deeply interconnected are we, George Eliot thinks, that we inhabit each other’s identities, with the irony that those we expected to incorporate can in the end incorporate us. Casaubon, fiercely proud and morbidly sensitive, reads her tenderness as “the certainty that she judged him” and found him wanting. He wrongly takes her every silence, every remark, as “an assertion of conscious superiority.” We misinterpret one another according to our fears no less than our hopes.

So, when she tries to slip her arm reassuringly through his, he holds himself unresponsively rigid.

It is in these acts called trivialities that the seeds of joy are for ever wasted, until men and women look round with haggard faces at the devastation their own waste has made, and say, the earth bears no harvest of sweetness—calling their denial knowledge.

For what is she being punished? Dorothea wonders. Is it her fault that she mistakenly believed in him and submitted to him, shrinking and constricting her life rather than enlarging it, as she’d hoped? “In such a crisis as this,” Eliot writes, “some women begin to hate.”

Eliot—it’s her novel, after all—at this point gives Casaubon a heart attack, not fatal but a warning that time is running out and he’ll never finish the book on which “he had risked all his egoism.” His response is monstrous. He asks Dorothea to promise, in case of his death, both not to do what he would “deprecate, and apply yourself to do what I should desire”—without specifying what he is asking and reluctant to take no for an

answer. Dorothea asks for a night to think before making so outlandish a vow. A haunted night it is, as she pictures wasting her life sorting through jumbled fragments that could never prove a misconceived theory. Yet her compassion for her husband’s pain at knowing that his life’s work otherwise surely will mean nothing makes her shrink from hurting this “stricken soul,” however well she knows that only “the ideal and not the real yoke of marriage” could compel her to “bind herself to a fellowship from which she shrank.” But her sense of self lives in ideals, including an ideal of honor that would not let her break so unreasonable a promise once made. She goes to Casaubon to give her word and finds him—providentially—dead.

In her perplexity over the promise to lash herself to the wreckage of her husband’s opus, Dorothea didn’t notice the other half of his demand—*not* to do what he deprecated. Having realized something about her she hadn’t, he had presumed to swallow and assimilate her from beyond the grave even more tyrannically than she had imagined. With enough self-knowledge to recognize, belatedly, that a beautiful, intense young woman might not find him “unmixedly adorable,” he perceived—as she had not—that she was falling in love with his young cousin, Will Ladislaw. Accordingly, his will stipulated that she’d receive nothing if she married Ladislaw, a provision the more egregious because it casts suspicion on his consummately honorable wife. Dorothea’s “violent shock of repulsion” at this slur frees her, and she seals up and locks away her dead husband’s useless instructions for proceeding with his useless work, consigning him to oblivion, as he would have consigned her.

From Eliot’s sympathetic and inward portrait, it’s easy to guess how deeply she identifies with Dorothea. Not so with the wife in the second of *Middlemarch*’s central marriages. Eliot understands Rosamond Vincy as fully as she understands Dorothea, and with some sympathy. But character, while ductile and shaped by circumstances, choices, and relationships, nevertheless has a certain fixed and inborn core, and in Rosamond’s case that is a

placid self-centeredness that Rosamond can’t entirely help but is hard for Eliot to like.

If the author’s understanding of this character is more from the outside in than the inside out, that’s partly because Rosamond is massively superficial. The striking beauty of that surface goes some way to explaining this trait. With her alluring shape, her hair so fine and purely blond that it resembles the perfection of a baby’s blondness, and her “lovely little face set on a long fair neck,” which she moved “under the most perfect management of self-contented grace,” no wonder that the “very nerve and muscle in Rosamond was adjusted to the consciousness that she was being looked at.”

Her superficiality runs deep. “She was by nature an actress of parts that entered into her *physique*: she even acted her own character, and so well, that she did not know it to be precisely her own.” The daughter of Middlemarch’s manufacturer-mayor—the novel is set in the years leading up to the watershed Reform Bill of 1832, which extended the vote from the landed gentry to manufacturers and merchants—she has been the star pupil at the Midlands mill town’s finishing school, from which she graduated as “that combination of correct sentiments, music, dancing, drawing, elegant note-writing, . . . and perfect blond loveliness, which made the irresistible woman for the doomed man of that date,” Eliot writes with the archness she can’t resist in describing Rosamond. “She was not in the habit of devising falsehoods,” Eliot adds, “and if her statements were no direct clue to fact, why, they were not intended in that light—they were among her elegant accomplishments, intended to please.”

Please she did, and the town’s monied bachelors swarmed around her, shyly, awkwardly, and not quite to her liking. For she had seen, and envied, the aristocracy, and felt she belonged among them. With the “cleverness to discern very subtly the faintest aroma of rank,” she draws a bead on Tertius Lydgate, a doctor newly arrived in Middlemarch, whose refined taste, impeccable clothes, and “careless politeness of conscious superiority” mark him as gentry-born, the nephew of a baronet.

Ambitious and superbly trained, Lydgate has no thoughts of marriage. Instead, he has in mind two grand projects that together “unite intellectual conquest and the social good.” His practical scheme is to set up a hospital dedicated to the treatment of fevers, in order to quarantine in case of epidemic, to advance knowledge by specialization, and perhaps to serve as the nucleus for a new medical school in that reforming era. As intellectually ardent as Dorothea, he has, in addition, a theoretical project. Recent research had moved beyond thinking of the body’s organs separately to a new understanding that a living organism is a system composed of a variety of primary tissues that form the various organs, and a knowledge of these tissues and the ways in which they can fail is essential to scientific diagnosis and treatment. Perhaps, Lydgate hypothesizes, there exists a tissue even more fundamental than these, a “primitive tissue” out of which all these develop. If he could find it, would that not shed an even brighter light on the mechanisms of disease and lead to more effective cures? This is as sweeping a unifying theory as Casaubon’s *Key*—and Eliot, a regular reader of *The Lancet*, was suspicious of grand unifying theories—but even non-scientists now know about stem cells and DNA.

Lydgate, Eliot writes, is determined not to become “one of those failures” who sets out to change the world but ends up “shapen after the average and packed by the gross,” scarcely ever conscious of how “their ardour in generous unpaid toil cooled as imperceptibly as the ardour of other youthful loves, till one day their earlier self walked like a ghost in its old home and made the new furniture ghastly.” But he does turn into a failure in his own eyes, like Casaubon and others in this novel, one of whose themes is failure. *Middlemarch* traces the subtle process of Lydgate’s change, which—as is often the case, Eliot remarks—is the consequence of his marriage. He is a case study in how little we often know our own feelings—as Lydgate is certain that his perception of Rosamond as “what a woman ought to be” doesn’t mean he is falling in love with her—and of how, in “the stealthy convergence of human lots,” our lives mutually modify each other, shaping our

destinies and even our very identities in ways we don’t foresee, wish, or approve.

With a copy of the American Psychiatric Association’s *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* in hand, you might readily diagnose Rosamond’s narcissistic personality disorder. But what a dry sense you would get of her inner emptiness and self-estrangement, as she fashions herself according to “her own standard of a perfect lady, having always an audience in her own consciousness.” You wouldn’t feel how arid and impoverishing it must be to live within her egoistic entitlement. Above all, what you would miss is how such a character, while remaining apparently passive, can spark and stoke that gradual process of change that fatefully remakes another’s life. It’s that drama that interests Eliot, and such dramas are literature’s primitive tissue.

Not that the skeptical Eliot thinks that even literature is an infallible source of knowledge. Sure, it enshrines the empirical wisdom that acute observers have drawn from the experience of mankind, but understanding it requires as close attention as *The Lancet* does. Lydgate, certain that he knows all that’s necessary about love and marriage from youthful reading and traditional lore, has resolved not to consider wedlock for at least five years anyway, so as to focus on medicine. So he is surprised to find that all Middlemarch, and Rosamond herself, thinks his constant, careless flirtation is serious courtship, and he abruptly stops his visits. After a long absence that he is sure has dispelled everyone’s misconceptions, he impulsively drops in, without examining his own motives. He is surprised to find Rosamond so sad and withdrawn; surprised, when their eyes meet at last, to see tears in hers; surprised that he can’t help kissing them away; surprised to leave her house an engaged man. More careful study of literature, Eliot might caution, would have taught him that the heart has its reasons, of which reason knows nothing.

It also might have taught him to probe Rosamond’s character enough to avoid a marriage that brings him only grief. Like Casaubon, he pours out to his betrothed his high professional ambitions with “an ardour which he

had fancied that the ideal wife must somehow worship as sublime.” But in time he learns that she cares about his talent and intellectual striving only for the prestige they might bring him—and her, by reflection—like a ribbon in his buttonhole. Medicine and medical research are distasteful to her. All that disease and cutting up of dead bodies reminds her of vampires—a nice gothic touch in a novel in which people feed on each other. The part of Lydgate she values least is the part he cherishes most. Instead of the eager help and interest that Dorothea lavishes upon her husband’s work, Lydgate, whose undertaking really is valuable, gets “blank, unreflecting” indifference, which corrodes his resolution.

Alongside his intellectual ardor, though, Lydgate has what Eliot calls his “spots of commonness”—his “hereditary habit, . . . unreflecting egoism,” and naivety of expecting effortlessly to have good servants, good boots, good silver, and the proper glasses for Riesling. Under other circumstances, such expectations might be harmless, but wedded to Rosamond’s sense of entitlement, they turn toxic. Lydgate rents one of the town’s best houses, fills it with furnishings to match, buys his beautiful wife beautiful jewelry, and soon finds himself so deep in debt that his chief creditor sends in an appraiser to inventory the furniture and silver he has pledged as collateral, to Rosamond’s mortification.

Lydgate is mortified too, but at his own imprudence, and he resolves to cut spending. Raising the subject with Rosamond, he hopes for understanding, comfort, and support, but she feels only “offence and repulsion” at his distress and stern tone, instinctively thinking that the sternness is directed at herself and certain “that no one could justly find fault with her,” for she is perfect. Hearing of the debt, she says, “But what can *I* do, Tertius?”—a response that chills Lydgate to the marrow, because he sees how alone he is in this trouble—even more alone than he yet knows, given that Rosamond’s feeling about the trouble and his consternation is that “if she had known how Lydgate would behave, she would never have married him.” He tries to be gentle, to reason

with her about the need to economize, but his peremptory tone returns when he forbids her to ask her father for money, knowing that he has none to give. When he tells her that their jeweler has offered to take back some of their silver and jewelry, she refuses to look at the list he has made, and tells him to return what he likes, “leaving Lydgate helpless and wondering. . . . It seemed she no more identified with him than if they had been creatures of different species and opposing interests.”

She’ll go to her parents’ house when the appraiser comes, she tells him, and he responds with a look that “had in it a despairing acceptance of the distance she was placing between them.” But he pulls himself together and tries again. “Now we have been united, Rosy, you should not leave me to myself in the first trouble that has come.” And she replies with her unquenchable self-focus: “Certainly not. I shall do everything it becomes me to do.” But her passive resistance to his economizing is unrelenting. Since “the world was not ordered to her liking, and Lydgate was part of that world,” she never looks at him, radiating a “studied negation by which she satisfied her inward opposition to him without compromise of propriety.” Heartsick at their growing estrangement, bedeviled by money worries, Lydgate chafes at his sense of “wasted energy and degrading preoccupations” that bars him from the “grand existence in thought and effective action lying around him.”

Rosamond’s passive resistance turns to active sabotage when Lydgate decides to rent out their house and take a cheaper one. She surreptitiously countermands his orders to the real-estate agent and falsely tells the prospective new tenant that the house is unavailable. When Lydgate flatly rejects her suggestion that he ask his gentry relatives for help, loath to humiliate himself by admitting his plight to people he despises, she secretly writes a pleading letter to his uncle. The baronet replies not to her but to him, assuming he put her up to writing such a letter. Chiding Lydgate for such “roundabout wheedling” conduct, his uncle bluntly refuses help. So Rosamond has doubly shamed him before his family, both for his improvidence

and his supposed unmanliness. The baronet, like Lydgate before his marriage, has his own hereditary habit of assuming that the husband is the master of the family.

However active, even vigorous, Rosamond’s interference, and however destructive the consequences, her seamless sense of perfection makes her impervious to guilt, or even reason. Lydgate’s angry rebuke for her meddling “make[s] her shrink in cold dislike, and to become all the more calmly correct, in the conviction that she was not the one to misbehave, whatever others might do.” Her father, her husband, the baronet, the creditor—all are in the wrong.

In fact there was but one person in Rosamond’s world whom she did not regard as blameworthy, and that was the graceful creature with the blond plaits and with little hands crossed before her, who had never expressed herself unbecomingly, and had always acted for the best—the best naturally being what she best liked.

Faced with such narcissistic passive aggression, if you’ll excuse the jargon, what is Lydgate to do? He feels

that half-maddening sense of helplessness which comes over passionate people when their passion is met by an innocent-looking silence whose meek victimized air seems to put them in the wrong, and at last infects even the justest indignation with a doubt of its justice.

In addition, he loves her and dreads seeing that love slip away—the more so, perhaps, because, like Dorothea, he has had an uncle for a guardian in place of dead parents, and a coldly distant uncle, at that. Whom is he to love if not his wife, whose self-love is so consuming that she has none to spare for him, though her approval can turn to dislike? Her reproaches reverberate in his mind—“You have not made my life pleasant to me of late”; “the hardships which our marriage has brought on me”—and fill him with the dread that he and Rosamond might “sink into the hideous fettering of domestic hate.” With this fear—more that he should stop loving her than she

him—he rationalizes every excuse for her he can dream up, with the result, says Eliot, that “she had mastered him.” It takes two to engineer the dynamics of a marriage—“So command/ Exists but with obedience,” as Eliot puts it in another chapter epigraph—and he chose to comply. “Perhaps if he had persisted in his determination to be the more because she was less,” Eliot remarks dubiously, everything might have turned out better, but “his energy had fallen short of its task.”

Both partners have participated in this outcome, but Eliot is clear that both are not equally to blame. “Rosamond’s discontent with her marriage was due to the conditions of marriage itself,” Eliot judges, “to its demands for self-suppression and tolerance, and not the nature of her husband.” With a different character and the same financial circumstances, how different things might have been, since they merely need to economize, not starve. As Lydgate muses, “[T]wo creatures who loved each other, and who had a stock of thoughts in common, might laugh over their shabby furniture, and their calculations how far they could afford butter and eggs. But . . . in Rosamond’s mind, there was not room enough for luxuries to look small in.”

But there’s a final blow, and it’s worse. The financial backer of Lydgate’s projected hospital, the banker Nicholas Bulstrode, is being blackmailed by someone who knows that he began his career working for a London jeweler who fenced stolen goods on the side. Shadier still, the hyper-pious banker later married his boss’s widow, after promising to launch a search for her runaway daughter and falsely reporting that she couldn’t be found, though both he and the blackmailer had discovered her whereabouts. At his wife’s death, he inherited her fortune, a large part of which would otherwise have gone to her daughter and her grandson. With that deviously acquired inheritance as his seed capital, Bulstrode moved to Middlemarch, grew rich and powerful as the town’s chief banker and philanthropist, and remarried. The blackmailer comes to Bulstrode’s country house for a payoff, falls ill there, is treated by

Lydgate, and dies after several days. By chance, a Middlemarch townsman, returning from a trip, has heard the blackmailer tell Bulstrode’s history in a distant town and spreads it all over Middlemarch. All immediately suspect Bulstrode of murder—though his guilt is equivocal—and they suspect Lydgate, who is entirely innocent but is known to be deeply in Bulstrode’s debt, of complicity.

After a couple of days of ostracism by the townsfolk, without a word from Rosamond, “as if they were both adrift on one piece of wreck and looked away from each other,” Lydgate asks her if she has heard “[t]hat people think me disgraced.” She says she has, and Lydgate waits to hear an avowal of trust from her, a declaration that she knows him to be a man of honor. She says nothing. As he gathers his strength for one last effort to explain himself and make his innocence clear, she suddenly bursts out that now they must move to London. “I cannot go on living here,” she exclaims, with her trademark self-focus. “Whatever misery I have to put up with, it will be easier away from here.” I, I, I!

Lydgate gives up: “He had chosen this fragile creature, and had taken the burthen of her life upon his arms. He must walk as he could, carrying that burthen pitifully.” They move to London, where he prospers tending the rich, migrating in the summers to treat them in a European seaside resort. He publishes a treatise on gout, then thought to be a disease of overindulgence—and a far cry from the research he had planned to do. Though his practice prospers, to Rosamond’s satisfaction, “he always regarded himself as a failure: he had not done what he once meant to do.” When he dies at fifty, Rosamond marries a richer and older doctor, enjoys riding out with her four daughters in a showy carriage, and speaks of her happiness as “‘a reward’—she did not say

for what,” but probably meant, says Eliot, for putting up with Lydgate.

How might Rosamond have behaved? Eliot gives us a counter-example in the second Mrs. Bulstrode, who hears the rumors about her husband from her brother, Rosamond’s father, and shares his belief that they are true. However flighty, superficial, and showy,

this imperfectly-taught woman, whose phrases and habits were an odd patchwork, had a loyal spirit within her. The man whose prosperity she had shared through nearly half a life, and who had unvaryingly cherished her—now that punishment had befallen him it was not possible to her in any sense to forsake him.

She knows at once that she will “espouse his sorrow, and say of his guilt, I will mourn and not reproach,” but she needs time to pull herself together and “sob out her farewell to all the gladness and pride of her life.” She locks herself in her room, takes off all her fine jewelry, changes into a plain black dress, unpins her hair and brushes it down, and then goes down to him and puts her hand on his. They can’t speak but weep together. “His confession was silent, and her promise of faithfulness was silent.” And unlike Bulstrode, Lydgate is *innocent*.

Earlier in the novel, when Lydgate examines Casaubon after his first heart attack, he feels a certain pity, denatured by a streak of derision, at the scholar’s distress that he might not live to finish his book. Lydgate was then too young and unused to disaster to feel “the pathos of a lot where everything is below the level of tragedy except for the passionate egoism of the sufferer,” Eliot remarks. It’s that pathos of the human condition that suffuses *Middlemarch*, irradiated by Eliot’s infinitely understanding compassion.

Uneasy lies the head: Lee in Lexington

by Allen C. Guelzo

Robert Edward Lee was sixty-three years old when he died on October 12, 1870, in Lexington, Virginia, just one hundred and fifty years ago. He had once been a strikingly handsome man, “a model of all that was noble, honorable, and manly” in the eye of a British visitor to his headquarters in 1862. Eight years later, Lee had aged dramatically. Photographs taken of him that summer capture a tired, stooped posture, deep, exhausted facial lines, and an utter absence of light in his eyes. And no wonder. Lee had begun suffering the first evidences of heart disease as early as June 1860, when he began complaining of pain from “rheumatism.” His health was not improved by the stress of leadership during the Civil War, especially since Lee was fifty-five when he assumed command of the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia, significantly older than almost all the great campaigners of the nineteenth century (Wellington at Waterloo was forty-six, Ulysses S. Grant at Vicksburg was forty-one, George McClellan was thirty-seven at Antietam). Not surprisingly, Lee suffered a major heart attack in March 1863. Although he recovered to direct an invasion of Pennsylvania that summer, he probably suffered at least one more episode of heart trouble in September of 1863.

For Lee, the war ended on April 9, 1865, when he surrendered the Army of Northern Virginia to Grant. There was no prospect of returning to his pre-war home at Arlington, overlooking Washington, D.C., since the Arlington property had been sold for taxes to the United States government, and was in the

process of being converted into a national cemetery for the Union war dead. He lived briefly in rented quarters in Richmond, but after he was indicted for treason by a federal jury in Norfolk, he was anxious to put as much distance as possible between himself and any possible legal pursuit, and in August, he accepted the invitation of the trustees of Washington College in far-off Lexington to become the college’s president. He arrived in Lexington in September, and on October 2 he was officially sworn into the presidential office. He was no longer wearing his uniform, only “a military coat divested of all marks of rank; even the military buttons had been removed.”

Lee was an unlikely choice for a college president. He had served for three years as superintendent of his *alma mater*, the United States Military Academy at West Point, but that position had involved little more than implementing micro-managerial directives from the Army’s Chief Engineer in Washington and writing unsympathetic letters to the parents of cadets who had been dismissed. The glamour of his name, however, sufficed for the Lexington trustees. They did not expect much more. “’Tis his name we want,” wrote one of Lee’s former generals to the trustees, “Let the course of studies be determined by a board of professors—not by him.”

But Lee had no intention of playing figurehead. He undertook a major overhaul of the college’s classical curriculum, insisting Cicero and Ovid would have to share space with practical and vocational subjects. “The

fundamental principle of the Collegiate System should be to give to the Commercial, Agricultural & Mechanical Classes the advantages of an education but adapted to their wants," he explained, and no one in Lexington was prepared to quarrel with General Lee. Above all, Lee was a recruitment magnet. Southerners too young to have enlisted under Marse Robert now had the chance to enroll under him. The student body accordingly swelled from a minuscule seventeen in 1865 to 411 three years later, almost the equal of the University of Virginia. Lee, declared the *Richmond Times*, had become the college's "second founder."

All this came at a cost to Lee's precarious health. He suffered a third heart attack in the summer of 1867, admitting that "it seems to me if all the sickness I ever had in all my life was put together, it would not equal the attack I experienced." When he was finally able to return to work, he was so weakened that "the affection in my chest under which I labour, adhesion of the lungs & pleura or whatever it is, incapacitates me from exertion & as yet I cannot walk farther than from my house to the College without pain, & I have to proceed carefully at that."

By the spring of 1870, Lee's physical decline was becoming noticeable to the faculty, the trustees, and even to the students of the college. "I don't think I ever saw a man break down more rapidly than he has in the last year," one student wrote. In March, a faculty committee took matters into its own hands and proposed that he "take at once a journey and a couple of months' relaxation," and allow "a professor to attend to his duties during his absence." The vacation appeared at first to restore him. At the opening faculty meeting in September, he looked so much better that one professor was elated "at the increased prospect that long years of usefulness and honor would yet be added to his glorious life." But the photographs taken by Michael Miley during the summer told a different tale. On September 28, Lee suffered a stroke, and though he showed signs of improvement, his weakened heart could not support a recovery. He died on the morning of October 12.

Both the former Confederate capital in Richmond and Lee's own hometown of Alexandria claimed the body for burial. But neither Lexington nor Lee's wife, Mary Custis Lee, had any intention of allowing Lee's burial to occur far afield, and Lee's oldest son, George Washington Custis Lee, firmly informed the legislature that "the remains have been committed to the authorities of Washington College." Lee's body was dressed in a "simple suit of black," and since furious rains through the weeks before had made shipment of a coffin from Richmond impossible, a slightly undersized one had to be retrieved for use. The confined body was carried to the college chapel (which Lee had designed and where he kept his office) by an "escort of honor, consisting of officers and soldiers of the late Confederate army," followed by Traveller (Lee's "old gray war horse . . . with saddle and bridle covered with crepe") and by the trustees, faculty, and students of both Washington College and the nearby Virginia Military Institute. There, the body was watched over by "a students' guard of honor," with the coffin "open, allowing mourners to gaze upon the face of their friend, general, and president one last time."

Lee was buried on October 15 "in a brick vault" in the basement of the chapel, after a public procession that wound from the chapel through the streets of Lexington, "down Washington street and up Jefferson street to Franklin Hall, thence to Main street," and finally back to the chapel. "Every class, young and old, rich and poor, white and black, turned out to do him honor, for he was the friend of all." Throughout the town, "the buildings were all appropriately draped, and crowds gathered on corners and in the balconies to see the procession pass." In a quiet nod to the political realities of Reconstruction, no Confederate flags were in view, and "the old soldiers" in the procession "wore their ordinary citizens' dress, with a simple black ribbon in the lapel of their coats." At the chapel, Pendleton read the Episcopal burial service, but "No sermon was preached, it having been the desire of General Lee that there should be none." As a hymn was sung, the coffin, "literally strewn with flowers, which had to be removed separately," was

interred in the center of the chapel's basement, under a slab which bore only the inscription, "Gen. Robert Edward Lee, Born Jan 11, 1807 Died Oct 12, 1870." William Preston Johnston, a member of the College faculty, recalled at the burial the singing of "the 124th hymn of the Episcopal collection," which, in the 1859 edition of the Episcopal hymnal, was "Lift your glad voices in triumph on high." But Johnston added that after the interment, "the congregation sang the grand old hymn, 'How firm a foundation, ye saints of the Lord,'" which Johnston claimed "was always a favorite hymn of General Lee's." Oddly, "How Firm a Foundation" nowhere appears in that hymnal, or in the supplement published in 1870, nor did Lee in his letters ever refer to any particular preference in hymns.

The trustees were aware of how much the college stood to lose by Lee's death, and in order to keep Lee's association with the college as prominent as possible, they met on the day of Lee's funeral to retitle the college as "Washington and Lee University," and began deliberating on a "suitable monument" to act as a visible marker for Lee's remains. Even before Lee was buried, a Lee Memorial Association had been formed in Lexington to obtain such a monument, and within days, Mary Lee had given her approval to a plan to rebuild the apse of the college chapel (which would also be retitled as the "Lee Chapel") as a mausoleum for her husband's coffin, with a new crypt on the basement level and an honorific space for the monument on the level above, opening out into the chapel itself. (All of the members of Lee's immediate family, including his father, the Revolutionary War general "Light-Horse Harry" Lee, would eventually be buried there, too).

The upper level of the new apse was to feature a monument to Lee, a recumbent statue not unlike the tomb effigies of European monarchs. The model for Lee's face would be a bust of Lee made by a Richmond sculptor, Edward Virginius Valentine, back in the spring of 1870, and Valentine himself was summoned to Lexington as the most logical sculptor for the tomb effigy. Valentine met

with the Association in November 1870, armed with a variety of photographs and drawings of historic European funeral statuary. Of them all, Mary Lee's preference ran to the recumbent sculpture that adorns the tomb of the nineteenth-century King of Prussia, Friedrich Wilhelm III, in Charlottenburg Castle. (This posed no problem for Valentine, since the Charlottenburg tomb effigy had been sculpted by Christian Daniel Rauch, and Valentine had studied under Rauch's star pupil, August Kiss, in Berlin). Like Lee, Friedrich Wilhelm had resisted a powerful invader; hence, the king's tomb sculpture shows him in battle dress, dozing under a light blanket, as if ready at any moment for the trumpet's blast. Valentine proposed to follow this model, down to the exposed boots of both king and general, so that Lee would appear (like the Prussian king) as if "lying asleep on his field cot during the campaigns of the war," in full Confederate uniform, resting his left hand on a half-hidden sword. The Association wanted no obelisks, no tablets; they wanted an Arthurian figure, ready to awake and lead his people to renewed warfare, and Valentine gave it to them.

The Reconstruction South, however, was not flowing with cash, and it took another four-and-a-half years before Valentine completed the commission, in marble. It took eight years more for sufficient funds to be raised by the Association to have J. Crawford Nielson make the alterations needed in the chapel, and not until 1883 could Lee be reburied in the new crypt, and Valentine's memorial be appropriately installed on the level above, flanked by portraits (of Lee, Washington, Jefferson, and other Southern worthies) rescued from Arlington. Despite Lee's refusal, in the post-war years, to encourage displays of Southern military nostalgia, in 1930 twelve Confederate battleflags (reminiscent of the flags displayed at Napoleon's tomb in Les Invalides) were ranged around Valentine's sculpture.

The dedication ceremonies, in June 1883, were a paean of praise for Lee as the knight-errant of the Lost Cause. In the principal oration, the Confederate veteran and historian John Warwick Daniel declared that, even though an unforgiving Northern government had made

Reconstruction into an intolerable burden, Lee had benignly and “thoroughly understood and accepted the situation.” Resigned to defeat, Lee had “realized fully that the war had settled . . . the peculiar issues which had embroiled it.” Nevertheless, the general was nobly determined to share the South’s “humiliation,” and even though he was “indicted for treason . . . never a word of bitterness escaped from him; but, on the contrary, only counsels of forbearance, patience and diligent attention to works of restoration.” Lee became the South’s Christ figure, bearing the South’s cross (for whose “issues” he had done nothing himself to acquire guilt) and urging nothing afterwards but forgiveness for the madmen who had inflicted his, and the South’s, pain.

Although the Lee Memorial Association hoped that the Lee Chapel would remake Lexington into a “Mecca, visited by caravans of Summer wanderers, who come to do honor” to Lee, the authority of Lexington’s Lee was quickly usurped by a far more dramatic equestrian Lee statue, designed by Antonin Mercié (a professor of sculpture at the *École des Beaux-Arts* and the creator of massive statues of Lafayette and Francis Scott Key) and erected in 1890 in Richmond by the rival Lee Monument Association. For more than a century thereafter, controversy over Lee monuments (and other Confederate statuary) foamed around the Richmond statue, leaving Valentine’s Lee and the Lee Chapel mostly untouched. But on August 12, 2017, fanatical factions of Ku Klux Klan and neo-Nazi thugs clashed in the streets of nearby Charlottesville with black-clad partisans of the “Antifa” Left, leaving one woman dead and the entire nation stunned into silence. Much of the violence in Charlottesville swirled around a twenty-six-foot-high equestrian statue of Lee in one of the city’s parks, and, almost as if the general had become the symbol of a re-energized white supremacy movement, Lee statues in Dallas, Baltimore, and New Orleans—and at the University of Texas and Duke University—were toppled, removed, or defaced. And Lee, at Washington and Lee, would enjoy no exemption.

After all, Lee had committed treason, or at least as close to the Constitutional definition of treason as one could get, and he had done so on behalf of the Confederacy, a cause dedicated to the perpetuation of black slavery. He had, moreover, fought with sufficiently perverse skill to prolong the contest to four years and 750,000 deaths on both sides. He had been a slaveowner, and the manager of slaves, both for the United States government (before the war) and for the Confederacy (during the war), not to mention his serving occasionally as a manager of the slaves of his father-in-law.

Lee pled against the treason charge that the Constitution (at least before the Fourteenth Amendment) left ambiguous *which* citizenship, that of the United States or Virginia, had the greater call on him. Likewise, the record of Lee the slavemaster is ambiguous. In the pre-war years, he condemned slavery as “a moral & political evil in any country,” even though he never lifted a finger to protest it publicly; he only actually owned one enslaved family in his lifetime (inherited from his mother) and voluntarily emancipated them in 1862; in that same year, he supervised the emancipation of his father-in-law’s slaves, in accordance with the old man’s will; and he advocated the recruitment and emancipation of slaves for service in the Confederate army. Although he made no gesture as president of Washington College to integrate the school, he also reproved white students who planned to terrorize freed blacks in Lexington.

Yet, in a fit of rage, Lee presided over the flogging of three slaves in 1859 who attempted to flee Arlington, and may even have taken the whip in hand himself. His attitude toward blacks in the post-war years was politely disdainful, and he preferred the imposition of some kind of racial segregation as a safeguard against black retaliation for the injuries of slavery. “You will never prosper with the blacks,” he warned his youngest son in 1868. “I wish them no evil in the world—on the contrary, will do them every good in my power.” But it remained “abhorrent to a reflecting mind to be supporting and cherishing those” whom Lee would always suspect of “plotting and working

for your injury, and all of whose sympathies and associations are antagonistic to yours." He was not the worst example of an unrepentant Southerner, but he was not the best, either, and was certainly never repentant.

Once Washington and Lee began to integrate in the 1960s, the abundant Lee imagery on the campus increasingly grated on the sensibilities of black students. In August 2014, students successfully pressed the university to remove the displays of Confederate battle flags from the chapel. Three years later, the echoes of the Charlottesville riot had hardly died away before Washington and Lee's president, William C. Dudley, announced that, because of the university's "complex history," it would be necessary to review how Confederate symbols were displayed there. A year-long self-study made it clear that "Lee, our former president and one of our namesakes, has become a particularly polarizing figure," and although the recommendations of a twelve-member commission pulled shy of erasing Lee's name from the institution entirely, they did propose moving official functions away from the Chapel and converting it into a museum, changing all references to Lee from "General" to "President," and replacing portraits of Lee in uniform with portraits in civilian dress, or else replacing Lee portraits

entirely with others "who represent the university's complete history." But only two years later, in the wake of George Floyd's death and the nationwide protests over it, a renewed surge of calls from the faculty demanded the removal of Lee's name from the university, and a special faculty meeting in July 2020 voted by a resounding 79 percent in favor of the Lee removal motion.

It is unclear at this moment what the future of the Lee name will be at the University, since the final decision lies with the trustees and, ultimately, the Virginia state legislature (which is responsible for the university's charter). The likelihood of its retention, however, is dim. What this, in turn, will mean for the Lee Chapel and for Valentine's Lee effigy is even more unpredictable. Although the Floyd protests have involved numerous incidents of statue-toppling and statue defacement, protest gestures have not, at least to this point, involved the removal of tomb statuary or grave desecration. Yet it will be difficult to see how the Lee Chapel and the Valentine memorial can remain, given that they are nagging reminders of the Lee presence at the university. The Lee family in the crypt may also be the object of future removal. Even in their graves, the figures of the Civil War continue to stir us uneasily.

Fabulous Franklin

by John Steele Gordon

There are Founding Fathers and then there are Founding Fathers. While anyone who signed the Declaration of Independence or the Constitution is, virtually by definition, a Founding Father, that doesn't make Button Gwinnett the equal of George Washington in historical importance.

Indisputably, the top tier of the Founding Fathers consists of Washington, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, John Adams, Alexander Hamilton, and Benjamin Franklin, who in fact is the only one of the six to have signed both documents and who, not incidentally, fundamentally helped to shape them and thus to shape the country.

Having signed the Declaration, Franklin was soon dispatched to France, where he proved to be a highly skilled diplomat. Lionized by French society—which he thoroughly enjoyed—he worked hard and successfully to get the French to intervene in the American Revolution, first with money and matériel and then with troops. Without French help it is hard to see how the nascent United States could have prevailed and won its independence. After the Battle of Yorktown brought the war effectively to an end, Franklin helped negotiate a remarkably favorable peace treaty with Great Britain.

So Franklin is undoubtedly one of the giants of American history. Twenty-four states have counties named for him (there is only one named for Gwinnett, in his home state of Georgia), and there are countless eponymous towns. Indeed, there are six towns in the

state of Wisconsin named in his honor, along with schools, colleges, mountains, institutes, a genus of flowering trees (*Franklinia*), a crater on the moon, a unit of electrical charge, and even a Wall Street financial firm, Franklin Templeton Investments.

But, in fact, Benjamin Franklin was much more than just a giant of American history. He was also a giant of the intellectual movement known as the Enlightenment. Before the American Revolution elevated such people as George Washington to world attention, Franklin was by far the most famous American in the world.

In 1753, The Royal Society in London awarded him the Copley Medal—the eighteenth century's equivalent of a Nobel Prize and still very prestigious. He was the first American to be so honored. This puts Franklin in the company of such scientific giants, and subsequent Copley winners, as Darwin, Faraday, Pasteur, and Einstein. In 1756 he became a Fellow of the Royal Society, the first who was American-born. He corresponded regularly with many of the leading scientists of his day and became close friends with several of them.

Franklin received honorary degrees from Harvard, Yale, William and Mary, St Andrews, and Oxford, which is why he is often referred to as “Dr. Franklin,” although his formal education actually ended when he was ten.

Franklin made major contributions to science in the fields of electricity (he coined such words as “battery,” “negative,” and “positive”), meteorology, oceanography, and demography

(a science in which he influenced the thinking of both Adam Smith and Thomas Malthus).

His inventions—none of which he patented, with the express purpose of making them more easily available—included swim fins, the Franklin stove, bifocals, the lightning rod, a means of preventing the counterfeiting of paper money, watertight compartments on ships, a soup bowl that wouldn't slop in heavy weather for use at sea, and the glass harmonica (a musical instrument for which both Mozart and Beethoven composed music). He even came up with the idea of daylight saving time, although, to be sure, that one was meant tongue in cheek.

Franklin was also a best-selling author. His *Poor Richard's Almanack*, issued yearly between 1733 and 1768, sold upwards of ten thousand copies a year and was filled with the aphorisms for which Franklin is still noted, such as "Early to bed, early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise." The *Almanack* has been translated into many foreign languages, including Italian by order of Napoleon Bonaparte when he established the Cisalpine Republic in 1797.

Franklin rates no fewer than four columns in *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations* (Jefferson rates only two). His autobiography, published in many editions after his death, has never been out of print. In 1969 the *Autobiography* became the world's first full-length audio book.

His letters to his family, friends, and a vast acquaintanceship are often a delight to read: warm, witty, and insightful. They make it clear that Franklin was, in the words of his contemporary Samuel Johnson, a "clubbable fellow," who took his fame lightly.

Franklin, in addition to all these extraordinary accomplishments, was also a very successful businessman, the foremost printer and publisher in the American colonies. Born in modest circumstances (unlike all the other Founding Fathers except Hamilton and perhaps Adams, depending on your definition of "modest"), Franklin was by early middle age a wealthy man.

In 1753, he was appointed deputy postmaster general of British North America, along with William Hunter of Virginia. Franklin soon

reorganized postal delivery and speeded up delivery times. Letters between New York and Philadelphia now required only one day to reach their destination. Within a few years, the post office was turning a profit of about £600 *per annum*, which he and Hunter divided between themselves.

If the word *polymath* hadn't already been coined (in 1621) it would have needed to be summoned into existence to describe the extraordinary human being that was Benjamin Franklin.

Franklin was born in Boston, Massachusetts, on January 17, 1706. His father, Josiah, had been born in England, but his mother's family had arrived in New England in 1635. Josiah Franklin was a chandler: a maker of candles and soap. He fathered seventeen children by two wives, of which Benjamin was the fifteenth, and the youngest boy.

Josiah could only afford to give Benjamin two years of formal schooling, at the Boston Latin School. A voracious autodidact, Franklin became one of the most learned men of his age. At the age of twelve, he was apprenticed to his older brother James, who was a printer. When Franklin was fifteen, his brother started publishing the *New-England Courant*, the first really independent newspaper in the colonies. It frequently poked fun at influential Bostonians by means of letters signed with pen names. Franklin wanted to write for the paper as well, but James said no, telling him to keep using his composing stick.

So Franklin disguised his handwriting and slipped a letter under the door of the print shop, using the pseudonym Silence Dogood, supposedly a middle-aged widow. James was delighted with it, and thirteen more letters followed over the next six months and were soon the talk of Boston. The letters poked fun at both important people and many aspects of ordinary life, such as the voluminous hoop skirts that were then the height of fashion. Witty, observant, and wise, the Silence Dogood letters are even more astounding for being the work of a sixteen-year-old boy.

James was outraged when he learned who the author of the letters was, and Franklin

found his apprenticeship, and Boston, more and more oppressive. The following year, he ran away and headed down to Philadelphia, the city associated with Franklin ever since.

Founded only in 1681, Philadelphia had been growing quickly and would become, by the mid-eighteenth century, the largest city in British America and the busiest port in the Empire after London. Founded by Quakers, Philadelphia was less socially stratified than Boston and much more open to the rise of people such as Franklin. But when he arrived in 1723, it still lacked many of the cultural amenities of far older British cities. Franklin helped to change that. Indeed, he became one of the most remarkable civic leaders in all of American history.

He soon found work as a printer, and the colonial governor, Sir William Keith, took an interest in him and promised to back him if he traveled to London to buy printing equipment in order to start his own establishment. Franklin made his way to Britain in 1724 but found the governor's promises of financial backing empty (indeed the governor was mired in debt and later died in debtor's prison in England in 1749).

In London Franklin quickly became acquainted with the intellectual life of the capital, frequenting the coffeehouses where gentlemen met to discuss topics of interest.

Returning to Philadelphia in 1726, Franklin renewed his acquaintance with Deborah Read, whom he had met when he boarded with the Read family when he had first arrived in Philadelphia. He had proposed to her then, but her widowed mother had refused consent owing to his age, uncertain prospects, and his forthcoming trip to London.

While he was in England, Deborah had married another man, but he soon abandoned her, taking her dowry with him and fleeing to Barbados to escape his debts. In 1730, Franklin and Deborah established what was for all intents and purposes a marriage, although it was not a legally binding one, owing to her inability to free herself from her first marriage.

Together they had a son, who died at the age of four of smallpox, much to Franklin's

distress, and a daughter, Sarah. Deborah also raised Franklin's illegitimate son, William, whose mother is unknown. Franklin and his son later had a bitter falling out after William, who served as New Jersey's last royal governor, remained loyal to the king.

Franklin's marriage with Deborah lasted forty-four years until her death in 1774, and while not a deeply romantic relationship, it was based on genuine mutual affection. Towards the end, they lived apart while he was in England from 1757 to 1762 and from 1764 to 1775, but that was because she was afraid of sea voyages and would not accompany him. They remained in constant and affectionate correspondence. As Franklin had Poor Richard explain a few years later, "Keep your eyes wide open before marriage, half shut afterwards."

Franklin opened his own printing establishment in 1728, at the age of twenty-two. It soon flourished. Twenty years later he formed a partnership with his foreman, David Hall. Franklin turned over the business to Hall in exchange for an income of £650 a year, a comfortable upper-middle-class emolument in the mid-eighteenth century. Together with his earnings from printing establishments he had backed in Charleston and New York, the income allowed Franklin to devote himself to his many other interests. By that time he had transformed the life of his adopted city.

Back in 1727, when he was then only twenty-one, he formed the "Junto," modeled on the coffeehouse culture he had found so agreeable in London. It was intended to be a group of "like minded aspiring artisans and tradesmen who hoped to improve themselves while they improved their community." In 1743 the Junto began to evolve into what is today called the American Philosophical Society, a major scholarly organization and the oldest one in the country.

Because books were very expensive in the eighteenth century, Franklin and other members of the Junto formed the Library Company of Philadelphia, the first subscription library in the American colonies. Today its collection has about five hundred thousand books and such treasures as more than two thousand items that once belonged to Franklin himself.

While intellectual life was vitally important to Franklin, he also realized that Philadelphia needed practical improvements. He founded the first volunteer fire company in 1736 and, with the great surgeon Dr. Thomas Bond, founded the Pennsylvania Hospital, one of the first hospitals and the first medical school in the colonies (Bond had needed to travel to Europe for his medical education).

Franklin was also instrumental in starting what is today the University of Pennsylvania, serving as the first president of the board of trustees. Few cities on earth bear the imprint of one man more than Philadelphia bears that of its most famous citizen.

Once free from the work of running a large business, Franklin was able to devote his time to science. It soon made him world famous.

Electricity had been known since very ancient times. There are fish capable of generating an electric field found in the Nile, and it was known that amber, rubbed with fur or silk, would attract light objects because of what is now known as static electricity.

But the nature of this force was a complete mystery, and its only practical application was parlor tricks. (Franklin would add one of his own, a mechanical spider that, when charged, hopped about like a real one.) Franklin began a series of experiments that turned electricity from an amusement to a science, with major consequences in human history.

Before Franklin, there had been thought to be two kinds of electricity, called vitreous and resinous. But in a series of experiments, Franklin showed that they were the same force, only one was positively charged and one negatively. This came to be called Franklin's law of conservation of charge. I. Bernard Cohen, a professor of the history of science at Harvard and the author of a 1956 book called *Franklin and Newton*, wrote that it "must be considered to be of the same fundamental importance to physical science as Newton's law of conservation of momentum."

Lightning was long thought to be a supernatural force, and it was only in the early eighteenth century that a connection between lightning and electricity began to be suspected.

In 1716 Newton had noticed that when a needle had been brought near a charged piece of amber, "The flame putteth me in mind of sheet lightning on a small—how very small—scale."

But how to prove it? Franklin, in one of the most famous scientific experiments in history, found a way. He had written often to Peter Collinson, the Library Company's agent in London, keeping him up to date on his electrical experiments. Collinson, a fellow of the Royal Society, had passed them on to the Society, where they began to circulate among Europe's scientific elite.

In 1750 Franklin described to Collinson an experiment using an iron rod with a very sharp point twenty to thirty feet high mounted on a church steeple. From this the experimenter could "bring near to the rod the loop of wire that has one end fastened to the leads; he holding it by a wax handle [thereby insulating the experimenter]. So the sparks, if the rod is electrified, will strike from the rod to the wire and not affect him."

When this letter reached the Royal Society it was quickly published and then translated into many foreign languages, including French. In the spring of 1752, two French scientists at the direction of King Louis XV tried the experiment, which worked just as Franklin had hoped. "M. Franklin's idea has ceased to be a conjecture," one wrote to the French Royal Academy. "Here it has become a reality." Franklin became an international sensation.

Franklin himself had been waiting for the steeple of Christ Church to be finished (it remained the tallest building in Philadelphia until the nineteenth century) but then decided to try a variant of the experiment using a kite and key. As one of Franklin's friends, the great chemist Joseph Priestley, later described it, at first Franklin found nothing and thought he had failed. But then he noticed two strands of the hemp string standing erect. "Struck with this promising appearance, he immediately presented his knuckle to the key, and (let the reader judge of the exquisite pleasure he must have felt at that moment) the discovery was complete."

Franklin was wrong about one thing. He had thought the experiment would not be

dangerous. But a Swedish scientist, Georg Wilhelm Richmann, working at the University of St. Petersburg in Russia, died of electrocution while trying to replicate the experiment the following year.

As the 1750s continued and his fame mounted, Franklin began to outgrow Philadelphia. The politics of Pennsylvania had become poisonous with the dispute between those who favored the Penn family's proprietorship and those who opposed it. In 1757, Franklin was sent to England by the Pennsylvania Assembly to lobby for the anti-Penn faction. He thought the task would take five months, but he stayed for five years.

In the 1750s, London, with a population of 750,000, was the largest city in the Western world and the beating heart of the rapidly expanding British Empire. Philadelphia at that time, while the largest city in British North America, had a population of only 23,000. Many highly talented Americans traveled to Europe for training, and a good number, such as the great painter Benjamin West (1738–1820), a close friend of Franklin, never returned. Besides trying to advance American interests, Franklin traveled and often stayed with major figures of the Enlightenment such as Priestley and Erasmus Darwin. He stayed three weeks with David Hume at his house in Edinburgh.

And he continued to collect honors. Visiting Ireland, he was appalled by the poverty, and noted that Ireland suffered the same trade restrictions as did the American colonies, which he feared would end up as poor as Ireland if they weren't eased. In Dublin he was invited to sit on the floor of the house while attending

the Irish Parliament, instead of in the gallery, the first American so honored.

Franklin returned to America in 1762, but he went back to England in 1764 and stayed for a decade. With Deborah's death in 1774, he might have stayed the rest of his life, had events not intervened. But, of course, the rapidly worsening relations between Britain and her American colonies after the French and Indian War ended in 1763 changed that. And though the situation caused his departure from London, it did allow Franklin to add still one more great dimension to his already multifaceted greatness, namely his participation in the founding of the American republic.

Finally, we should note that of all the Founding Fathers, only Benjamin Franklin is often referred to by his nickname, almost as if he were an acquaintance or a favorite uncle, not a historical figure. That can only be because, however high he rose, however great and diverse his accomplishments, he, like Kipling's would-be hero, could "walk with kings—nor lose the common touch."

To perhaps grasp the essence of Benjamin Franklin, let's do a thought experiment. Of the major Founding Fathers, whom would you have most liked to have actually known? George Washington, frankly, would have scared me half to death. I would have detested Thomas Jefferson. John Adams was far too grumpy and censorious to make a good companion. Alexander Hamilton would have worn me out in an hour. But Ben Franklin? Can you think of anyone from that era you would rather spend a rainy weekend at the beach with than he who had "snatched lightning from heaven and the scepter from tyrants"?

Swan

by Bruce Bond

Here, in this writing chamber,
with its desk set, vase of ink,
the faint depressions of the blotter
lit with oil harvested at sea;
our weary insomniac, John
Keats, is not well, though he
cannot know this yet, what
we know, how the story ends.
He cannot see us, his future,
let in a draft from the highlands
and whisper of his ailment.
He is too busy looking out
on a world that is half-dark,
half-garden and a ghost-reflection
of the self who, mesmerized
by silence, marks the dying fall
of poems in an empty room,
to hear in words the emptiness.
It is a piece he will not finish,
though he works night into day
talking with disconsolate gods
bereft of acolytes and a sense
of humor. That said, his speaker,
our sole avatar, barely speaks,
though all the pantheon is there
on the vine-beleaguered portico,
each a scrap of marble in a plot
whose civic matrix is dismantled,
whose mortar mists at daybreak,

where cobbles of the otherworld
jewel against the bright onset.
It will be life to see them, he writes,
but what he sees he sees through
like a window laid across a stand
of oak whose unheard tunes are
sweeter, clearer, he tells himself,
whose story comes to a stream made
of glaciers in decline, goliaths
of weather and the long clear pull
of its turbulence, downstream.
Once men walked across the water,
and children followed, and the willows
leaned down like lions to the lyre.
Women traced their silhouettes
on the walls of caves, and when
they died, the shadows remained
and drew our shadows, in kind, to them.
as if our death had met its match.
The bodies of the killing fields
would not be still and rose the way
tidal waters do and exalted tones
as their horrors rise, undaunted.
Iron from the veins of leopards
poured over the lips of cataracts,
and the names they bore were a river's
name, and their god a river still.

When I was a kid, I had a puppet,
a lion with one eye, his ear
eaten by rain or rot or some
corrosive creature. A castaway
I found in the bushes, or he
found me, his face half-alive,
the other half-blind, and I laid
my voice in the darker portion.
What was that you lost, my friend

leaned in to ask me, *that key*
to the boathouse, life before life,
that lamentation in the ocean.
He was talking about a dream
I had, the childhood I left,
my other father and the small
red pail of sand, and then. I woke.
A wave rolled through my chest.
It broke and, in the silence, roared.
Tonight, in the mausoleum
stillness, as day burns down its house
of glass and calls it *progress*,
my wife lights a Shabbat candle,
and I see the smoke her mother
saw, the ovens of the war years,
their ecstasies of filth and cinders.
Beauty overpowers all other
considerations, the writer writes,
and then he hears a gold bell
in a nearby room and answers
with bowls of mangoes and broth
and towels to wipe the discharge
from his brother's lip. His gods
grow more and more contagious,
the air metallic, the verses more
difficult to finish, though he swears
an oath. He breathes into the corpse
of earth to swell the core, to raise
a fountainhead of dolls and monsters.

Terror writes what terror burns,
each dawn, and the sun gods die,
and the sky moves still. Clouds tear
like hands from a helicopter rope.
So what is lost, or spent, what
superannuations of sunk realms.
What gems inside the marble

forehead of the heroine if not
the theater dark that holds her
to us. Ask the man who coughs
blood into his brother's name.
Blood dries, the name continues.
In a day or two, it pales, it dries,
all things drawn through the mirror
of each other. Remember me,
says the movie that cannot move
beyond its dull montage: stone
lion, stone lamb, stoned retirement
home and boy who is its gardener.
You could live this way for years,
in a graveyard of the stars, writing
melancholic odes with real wine
in them. A drowsy numbness could
pain your sense, until one night
in the labyrinths of Rome, you
lose your way. The café awnings
fold their wings in the cold façade,
and a downpour drowns your coat
and hair. When a god dies, what then.
You could submit to starvations
and bleedings, the terrible science
romance is made of, and find comfort
in the company. And why not.
Go on. Make them fabulous,
these Athenas dying of neglect,
their robes in ribbons, luxurious
as rope that floats above the factories.
Make them idols out of beach
glass and expenditures of breath
grown deep and weary from the journey.
Sometimes the more merciful view
is a porch in ruins. *The beauty
of decaying things*. On the far side
of the world, there is a word for that,
for rust that eats across the signage.
A word for the heads of flowers
bent beneath the burden of light,
for the brittle legs of bees,

green striations of a stream
gone dry, a word for the scratch
of hieroglyphic on the gold-plate
tomb that no one understands.
A word for the father when he
has no words, but looks out on
the sea with a voice that makes
no sense, and, yes, I nodded, yes.
The red door of the eye swings
wide to say, you too, come, sit.
I can't sleep either. Dead lions,
patriots, letters on the far side
of the suffering that makes them
sing, come. Put a little music
on. Or not. You are not alone.
You with your gash of diamonds
bound in a common fabric.
A man's infection lies inside you,
in petals of ash and abandoned
pages, the disinfected bucket
and scanned line, the sharp green scent
of lime on things that go unspoken.
In you, the decomposition
that winter brings to an end.
And in the sap that aches one
April over breakfast: you. You.
In the dinner passed in silence,
the distant shrieking of a swan.

Letter from Paris

Drink a rum

by *Anthony Daniels*

Arriving in Paris at the Gare de Lyon is a very different experience from arriving at the Gare du Nord, the difference being (as differences tend to be) a sociologically instructive one.

In the Gare de Lyon, one sees the France of Robert Doisneau, the romantic photographer, in the Gare du Nord more that of Céline, the poet of degradation. Put another way, the Gare de Lyon and the Gare du Nord are those, respectively, of what the great French historical demographer Emmanuel Todd calls *la France protégée* and *la France exposée*, the France protected and the France exposed. The inhabitants of these two countries are, on the one hand, the educated with well-paying jobs, employed in the dynamic economy, enjoying all kinds of social protections including property-owning parents, and on the other the precariat, with ill-paying jobs without security and a life of permanent difficulty in making ends meet. In Paris, at least, there is an ethnic difference between these two countries, though no doubt there is overlap. In the Gare de Lyon, the whites are in the majority; in the Gare du Nord a minority.

In the arrivals hall of the clean and airy Gare de Lyon, one sees young lovers reunited, as if posing for a photo by Doisneau (apparently, his most famous picture, of the kiss, was indeed posed). By contrast, arrival at the Gare du Nord is anxiety-provoking: at least it provokes *my* anxiety. I feel uncomfortable there, as if something unpleasant—a riot, a bombing, a crime—is about to happen. Perhaps this signifies nothing more than my incurable bourgeois

prejudice, but the constant pullulating hubbub unsettles me. One is inclined to paranoia in a social environment of which one understands little.

Once in the Gare du Nord I saw a small crime committed that affected me more deeply than perhaps was warranted by its seriousness alone. An American tourist and his wife, just arrived from the airport, were standing on an escalator. He had a telephone in his shirt pocket. A black man in front of him turned and took the telephone. The American tourist was quick: he grabbed the phone back from the thief, who then scurried off, shouting insults at his intended victim.

What struck me about this tiny episode was not the crime itself but the fact that the would-be thief was more outraged than the victim of the would-be theft. His fury had the edge of righteous indignation to it. How dare the man grab back his phone! It was his duty to let it go; after all, he was rich and the would-be thief was poor. The demands of social justice trumped those of private property.

The other aspect of the episode that struck me was the sheer confidence of the would-be thief in his own impunity. Acting in broad daylight, and not caring who saw him, he could be absolutely sure that no one would attempt to stop him, either from slow-wittedness or pusillanimity (you never know these days what weapons people are carrying), or even from ideological sympathy with him. There is an optimistic side to this reflection, of course: the question is not why so many crimes take place in conditions of impunity, but why so

few. Perhaps the generality of mankind is better than one might suppose. Still, I never leave the Gare du Nord without the feeling of relief that I have walked the gauntlet unscathed, which might not be the case next time. And the fact is that one bad experience weighs more heavily on the mind than ninety-nine good or neutral ones. We may *think* statistically, but we do not *feel* statistically.

The last time my wife and I arrived in Paris, it was at the Gare de Lyon. There was no line for taxis: COVID-19 has not been kind to taxi-drivers. A black woman driver signaled to us, and opened the back of her capacious vehicle to take our luggage. She offered to lift it in for me, but I declined, saying that I was young and could do it myself.

She laughed, and we recognized at once the provenance of that laugh: Haiti. It was exactly the same laugh as that of a Haitian nurse, now retired, who looked after my mother-in-law. It was a laugh that conveyed more than mere amusement at what was said or done, its immediate occasion; it was as if she were laughing at the absurdity of existence itself, as if nothing is to be taken too seriously. The reverse of this coin is a sense of the tragic that of course all Haitians cannot but have, perhaps more strongly than any other people.

We asked the driver whether she was from Haiti, and of course she was. We told her that we had twice been to her country; Haiti is one of those countries that you leave, but which never quite leaves you.

We arrived late at our apartment and I needed a drink. In the circumstances, I decided on rum, Haitian rum, to be exact, or Barbancourt rum to be even more exact. I was going to say that it was the best rum in the world, but that would have been presumptuous, since I know little of rum. Let us just say that it is very good.

The bottle was given us by my mother-in-law's Haitian nurse. She was a short, slightly dumpy woman in her early sixties. She had a collection of wigs as women used to have collections of hats. She was both devoted to her duty and kindly, and took pride in always wearing a housecoat while at work. It so happened that the first time I met her, I had just

been to an exhibition of Haitian art at the Petit Palais. The tragedy of the country means that its art, even when not technically accomplished, escapes the triviality of the products of our own collapsed tradition.

To express an interest in the culture of another country creates a sympathy with its exiles. She, in her turn, said she was grateful to France, which has given her so much; to my surprise, she was very well-read in French literature (more so than many a graduate today) and recited poems that she had learned back in school in Haiti about half a century before.

Thereafter, she made us delicious Haitian stews and gave us bottles of rum, though she could ill afford them. Deeply religious in the best possible way, she continues to send my wife quotations from the Bible appropriate to the situation and which she finds consolatory. Her knowledge of the Bible puts ours to shame.

On this occasion I drank too much rum too quickly and the next morning I felt like a bear who had been stung in the head while trying to extract honey from a hive in a tree. What better way to overcome a hangover than to take a walk in Père Lachaise, the cemetery not a hundred yards from our apartment, the most visited cemetery in the world but never overcrowded?

I went straight to Section (or Division) 85: the section within which Dupré Barbancourt, the founder of the rum distillery, lies buried. I didn't hold my hangover against him, as it was my fault, not his; on the contrary, I wanted to pay my respects to the man who had founded a successful industry in a country not exactly brim-full of industries.

I wish I could find out more about him. He must have been a remarkable character. In 1862, he emigrated from Cognac in France to Haiti, there to start his rum-distilling business, using barrels of French oak. What gave him this remarkable idea? Was it push or pull? The year 1862 was the fateful one in which the United States, previously worried about provoking slave revolts, finally recognized the independence of Haiti. As for France, it had made its recognition of Haitian independence conditional on the payment of an indemnity for

the loss of French property, which Haiti could only do by means of a loan from France which it was still repaying decades later. Thus the descendants of slaves paid for their forefather's temerity in freeing themselves from slavery.

Dupré Barbancourt, who died in Paris in 1907, had been, among other things, the honorary Liberian consul in Haiti, thus the representative of one republic born of slavery in the only other. (Liberia is another country that never quite leaves you once you have been there.) Will no one research this interesting man's life?

Barbancourt shares his last resting place in Section 85 with Marcel Proust (1871–1922), whose plain black marble slab on this occasion was adorned with two withered roses. Normally there is nothing on it. How strange that his tomb should be so neglected by comparison with that not far away of Allan Kardec (the pseudonym of Hippolyte Léon Denizard Rivail, 1804–69), a spiritualist with an immense contemporary following in Brazil, visitors from which ensure that his tomb is never without cascades of fresh flowers. The author of the five books of *The Spiritist Codification* is more celebrated—if flowers are votes—than he of the seven books of *À la recherche du temps perdu*.

Not far from Proust is the simple, unassuming tomb of Paul Souday (1869–1929), who, however, was once the pope of French letters. In 1927 he published a book about Proust, starting with his review of the first volume of *La Recherche* published in 1913:

M. Marcel Proust, well known to admirers of Ruskin for his remarkable translations of *The Bible of Amiens* and *Sesame and Lilies*, gives us the first volume of a large original work . . . which will be of at least three volumes, since two others have been announced and will appear next year. The first alone already has 500 pages of closely-printed text. What, then, is the vast and serious subject which brings forth such effects? Does M. Marcel Proust tackle the history of humanity, or at least that of a century, in his huge work? Not at all. He tells us his memories of childhood. Was his childhood, then, crowded with extraordinary events? In no way: nothing happened to him in particular. Walks on holiday,

games on the *Champs Élysées*, are the fundamentals of his story. It is said that all the interest of a book lies in the art of its writer. Of course. However, we wonder how many folios M. Marcel Proust would pile up, fill how many libraries, were he to tell us the story of his whole life.

Moreover, this very long book is not at all easy to read. It is not only dense but often obscure. This obscurity, to be truthful, is not due to profundity of thought, but to an excess of elocution.

Souday then gives a few examples, and I have to admit that he has a point: by the end of the Proustian sentence, one is not quite sure what the last qualifying clause qualifies. He corrects Proust's grammar, but goes on to praise his great talent. Nevertheless, I cannot imagine that Proust was very pleased by the review, since many of Souday's readers might not have progressed as far as the praise.

Souday was also notable for his opposition to the award of the Prix Goncourt to René Madan, because Madan was black and Souday said that a black man could not have genius.

Père Lachaise is inexhaustibly interesting. I happily spend hours there. Section 85 alone repays repeated visits. I muse over the tomb of an Iranian family, exiled during the times of the Shah. They were members of the *Tudeh*, or Communist, party. There are little plaques with photographs of them on the tomb, which is of flat brown concrete inlaid with white concrete doves. The family is obviously middle class or above, intelligent, educated, serious, idealistic. One of them even manages to smile. Not Masih Rasti Mobarake (1946–2004), however. His inscription is in French as well as in Farsi, fortunately for me:

Communism is the resurrection of humanity.

This sets me thinking: can good people believe in monstrous things, and the clever in idiocies? The answer is yes to both.

My hangover has cleared. I am relieved. Although I inly swore never to touch alcohol again, I think, on leaving the cemetery, that I might manage a small tot of rum, provided it is Barbancourt, this evening.

The ordinary ennobled

by *Algis Valiunas*

“Self-actualization,” which sounds dismal and pretentious, usually deserves well the abuse it commonly gets. Yet it needn’t always be crass, grasping, or stupid. For all the inanity achieved in its name, it continues to represent a high-minded longing for the democratic ideals of variety and freedom that were celebrated by John Stuart Mill and Walt Whitman. And for those many today unburdened by the demands of a soul, to become “one’s best self” might be the worthiest available ambition.

Maybe if one were to call self-actualization by another name, its stigma would be reduced. And if an exemplar more honorable than its typical advocates could be found, that would bolster its reputation. So call it self-perfection instead, and think of Goethe as its finest embodiment. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832) devoted his life to perfecting himself, and the result was many-sided magnificence. He remains Germany’s greatest poet, playwright, and autobiographer. As a novelist he is second in that country only to Thomas Mann. He was an accomplished botanist, geologist, anatomist, physicist, horseman, and fencer. “Voilà un homme!” said Napoleon of Goethe when Europe’s foremost literary master called on the emperor in 1808. Napoleon had plans for his visitor: he would harness Goethe’s poetic and dramatic genius to serve the imperial glory at a Parisian court that would be the artistic and intellectual center of the known world. But Goethe had plans of his own; he knew what he wanted to do and what he did not want to do, and he demurred.

To live as he intended meant rejecting possibilities that, however alluring, would deflect Goethe from his rightful calling. As he wrote in his autobiography, *Poetry and Truth*, renunciation became the leitmotif of his fervent quest to find and follow the true path to self-realization. Sometimes this meant getting lost in the weeds. Goethe’s great *Bildungsroman*, his novel of self-discovery, self-development, and self-fulfillment, *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship* (1796), is the story of a young man who tries out several interesting ways of going wrong before he is directed, by men and women wiser than himself, toward the course he is meant to follow.

As the novel begins, Wilhelm, the son of a proper *hoch bürgerlich* family, is deeply in love with both a beautiful actress named Mariana and his fledgling career as an actor and playwright. He lives his life like the books of chivalric romance that he devours and believes that he knows his destiny (a subject he thinks about continually) and is now “complete.” But as the novel unfolds he confronts crucial self-deceptions and salutary disillusionments. At the end of this all he finds love, friendship, and work suited to his nature and worthy of the best in him. Although no one ever comes out and says so, it becomes clear that what he truly wants is nobility; Goethe composes a theme and variations on the word “noble” (*edel*), as Machiavelli does on “virtue,” Proust on “real,” and Hemingway on “good.”

Wilhelm starts out hoping to discover “all that was good and noble and great” in the theatrical imitation of goodness, greatness, and nobility. Wilhelm, however, is so smitten with the idea of

dramatic nobility that he ignores all the evidence, right in front of his nose, of the unattractive backstage reality of theater life. He plunges into this world, abandoning his profitable family work to lead a troupe of traveling players.

An opportunity to consort with actual noblemen and their ladies comes when the company is invited to lodge and perform in the castle of a count and countess. Conventional nobility, conferred by accident of birth, seems to Wilhelm an unalloyed blessing: “Thrice happy are they to be esteemed, whom their birth of itself exalts above the lower stages of mankind.” Little by little he is disabused in some respects, enlightened and even enchanted in others. A flirtation with the countess goes just beyond the edge of danger, leaving its mark on both participants as well as her husband. This off-stage romance, however, pleases Wilhelm more than the response to his troupe’s best efforts in performance. The drama that is his heart’s blood is but an idle distraction for his noble audience. Some of the spectators jeer. Jarno, a brilliant courtier given to speaking disagreeable truths, roughs up Wilhelm pretty badly: “It is sinful of you to waste your hours in dressing-out these apes to look more human, and teaching dogs to dance.” But Jarno also does Wilhelm the invaluable service of introducing him to Shakespeare: “ere long, as may be easily supposed, the stream of that mighty genius laid hold of him, and led him down to a shoreless ocean, where he soon completely lost and forgot himself.”

Wilhelm’s brief acting career reaches an apex when he assumes the title role in his production of *Hamlet*. Preparing for this heroic undertaking, Wilhelm and his theatrical mentor, Serlo, take up the question of the respective roles played by Chance and Fate in works of literature. They conclude that while Chance may dominate fiction, Fate commands in drama. At this point the reader recalls Wilhelm’s earlier conversations with strangers encountered, apparently by chance, on his travels, in which the callow young man spoke confidently about the destiny that “directs all for our ultimate advantage.” Wilhelm’s interlocutors chastise him for failing to observe that a man’s character is his fate, and that character is shaped by intel-

ligence and will, responding to the combined action of necessity and chance.

Wilhelm has no way of knowing this yet, but his life has been taken on by a cohort of guiding spirits who don’t believe in fate, some of them the very strangers who tested him in those searching exchanges—men of the world concerned with the formation of character in potentially noble neophytes. With helpful cunning, at the last minute they insert as King Hamlet’s ghost an actor whose voice and hooded figure closely resemble those of Wilhelm’s own recently deceased father. The uncanny similarity so shocks Wilhelm that he hardly seems to be acting at all and gives the performance of his life. But his success as Hamlet contrasts with his mediocrity in other roles. When Jarno, one of the shrewd overseers of his destiny, tells him that he is no actor because he can only play himself, Wilhelm agrees. He sees that he has been living the wrong life. It is a bitter admission, but one laced with the hope that he will yet manage to make things right.

For Wilhelm has learned a great deal from this errant life—not only what he isn’t, but also what he is. He has shown himself a loving surrogate father to the teenaged girl Mignon, an acrobat and a dancer of rare gifts, whom he rescued from a brutal master. One of Goethe’s most extraordinary creations, she turns out to have been the child of incest and sacrilege, the unknowing daughter of the harper Augustin, a renegade monk and wandering minstrel who is himself doomed by his sin against God and nature. This man too comes under Wilhelm’s tender-hearted protection.

In Wilhelm’s development, Goethe anticipates Wordsworth’s teaching that “we have all of us one human heart.” Wilhelm learns to love human beings who are not readily lovable and who might easily have passed beneath his notice. This prepares him for fatherhood and helps make him worthy of the romantic love of his life. In the house of the theatrical manager Serlo and his sister Aurelia, Wilhelm comes across the little boy Felix, whom he reckons to be Aurelia’s son. As Wilhelm later discovers—in the way momentous truths are habitually discovered in this novel, by fateful chance—Felix is his own son, by Mariana, who died soon after giving birth to him.

One becomes accustomed to chance operating like fate. The past, in Goethe's hands, is prologue. When Wilhelm is badly wounded in a pitched battle with highwaymen, a resplendent woman comes to his aid but then disappears before he can find out who she is. The beautiful Amazon, as he calls her, seems an incarnation of the imaginary heroine who filled the reveries of his boyhood. It is as though he has been searching for her all his life, and it is only fitting that he finds Natalia when he is at last ready for such exquisite happiness.

Goethe's narrative art is poised between the two opposing ideas. On one side is the splendid fantasy of those same chivalric romances that enthralled Wilhelm in his childhood; on the other is the spiritually straitened reality of emerging egalitarianism that is the native ground of the conventional novel. Wilhelm's salvation really comes through the intervention of the secret quasi-knightly brotherhood modeled on the Illuminati, the Society of the Tower, whose members take him in hand. Untroubled by the prospect of eternity, they dedicate themselves to strictly earthly matters, their byword inscribed on the tomb of one of the Society's founders: *Think of living*. What better aim in a serious life than to learn how to live? To thrive in the life that necessity has given you and that chance has complicated, but to be ever aware, in the choices you make, of what has always been best and most noble: this is the Society's imperative. The *Apprenticeship* is a novel more occupied than most with teaching and the life of reason, and its plot advances by means of the disquisition, the soliloquy, and the intellectual discussion; yet Goethe also works on the reader with the power of enchantment.

In an 1855 essay titled "The Morality of *Wilhelm Meister*," George Eliot finds Goethe's "moral superiority" in his "large tolerance": "Everywhere he brings us into the presence of living, generous humanity—mixed and erring, and self-deluding, but saved from utter corruption by the salt of some noble impulse, some disinterested effort, some beam of good nature, even though grotesque or homely." Despite the archaic wonders and the arcane flourishes, it is very much the modern world that Goethe gives us, along with

the practical wisdom to help one find his way through it. At novel's end one can say of Wilhelm, too, *Voilà un homme*—one's pleasure only enhanced by the awareness that things could well have turned out less happily for him.

Nietzsche declared that Goethe's life was an event without consequences—that he produced no line of descendants. *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* certainly stands apart from the other great *Bildungsromane* of the century to follow. The best of these later novels are French—Stendhal's *The Red and the Black*, Balzac's *Lost Illusions* and its sequel *Splendors and Miseries of Courtesans*, Flaubert's *Sentimental Education*—and they depict the efforts of young men from the provinces to make their name and their fortune in a Parisian society decadent in its predatory materialism, sexual license, corrosive snobbery, and spiritual desolation. All these heroes end badly: Stendhal's beheaded for attempted murder, Balzac's hanging himself in prison, Flaubert's left alive but reduced to the sad metropolitan routine of mental stagnation and atrophy of the heart.

Goethe once said to Johann Peter Eckermann, the German Boswell, that the purpose of high art was "to make man contented with the world and his condition." Unlike the three French masters, and indeed the general run of modern writers, Goethe imagines a world that offers prizes appropriate to a serious man's struggle to attain them. *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* embodies the ardor of democracy in its youth, when the conventional nobility of birth was giving way to the natural nobility of character and talent, and ordinary people turned their eyes upon inviting vistas of heroic possibility. This is the most hopeful and joyous of great novels, showing that an ordinary man's tortuous path through life may turn out a noble triumph. It represents the efflorescence of democratic nobility on the part of Germanic genius in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Along with Mozart's *Magic Flute* and *The Marriage of Figaro*, Friedrich Schiller's plays and poems and essays, and Beethoven's *Fidelio* and Ninth Symphony, it testifies to the original grandeur of the democratic aspiration, and reminds us what merits our most earnest striving.

Reconsiderations

James Laver's eighteenth-century air

by *David Platzner*

The current obscurity of James Laver (1899–1975), an expert on the history of dress and fashion, a biographer of Huysmans and Nostradamus, a master of light verse, and the author of a 1932 picaresque gem of a comic novel, *Nymph Errant*, is something of a crime. The obscurity certainly applies to the novel, popular in its day and still fresh to read but apparently not reprinted in recent years. It was made into a Charles B. Cochran revue in 1933 starring Gertrude Lawrence and with a score by Cole Porter, who penned such classics as “Experiment,” “It’s Bad for Me,” and “The Physician” for the show and later named it the favorite of all his musicals. Laver was delighted with Porter’s genius, observing that the stage had not seen such “ingeniously witty” lyrics since the days of Gilbert & Sullivan. Gertrude Lawrence brought the house down night after night, first in Manchester and then in London, despite her invariably singing off-key. Even so, a reviewer in the *Observer* damned the musical with faint praise as a “pantomime for highbrows,” and it closed in London after only 154 performances, never crossing the Atlantic to Broadway. Nor did Twentieth Century-Fox take up its option to make a film version, perhaps fearful that the administrators of the Hays Code, who had become censorious, would disapprove of *Nymph Errant*’s playfully racy story.

I first became aware of James Laver shortly after his death in 1975 in a fire at his house in Blackheath, London, when I came across an essay of his in the 1968 volume of *The Satur-*

day Book. Soon after, I picked up such books of his—classics in the field of the history of dress—as *Taste and Fashion* (1946), in which he set down his Laver’s Law of Fashion, and *A Concise History of Fashion* (1969), a volume in the Thames & Hudson *World of Art* series. Describing himself as an iconographer, Laver was known for having made the study of costume and taste respectable without ever losing the engaging light touch befitting one whose second life was in the theater. His first life was as a museum man, joining the Victoria & Albert in 1922 and becoming its Keeper of Prints, Drawings, and Illustrations in 1938, a position he held until his retirement in 1958. Married to the actress Veronica Turleigh (praised by Alec Guinness as one of the six nicest women he had ever met), he was vital in developing the museum’s theater collections.

Photographs show a mischievously whimsical twinkle in Laver’s bespectacled eyes. Denis Sutton, one of the leading art journalists of the day and the editor of *Apollo* from 1962 until 1987, remembered first meeting Laver at the V&A in 1938. Laver, perched on top of his desk, introduced himself as “James Laver, by nature a white slaver.” The son of strict Nonconformist parents, Laver had traveled some distance from this austere background. He wrote in his autobiography, *Museum Piece* (1963), that a stern grandmother had burned *Tom Jones* and *Tristram Shandy* on finding them on the family bookshelves. Laver never met a Catholic until he was grown up, which is surprising, considering he spent his early years in the port

city of Liverpool. No surprise, then, that he happily married a Catholic and an actress too.

Born in 1899, Laver was just old enough to have been called up in 1918. He never saw the trenches, arriving in Europe two days before the Armistice, but the experience allowed him to discover France, which became a lasting love, and the French language. At Oxford, while studying theology and John Wesley, on whom he wrote a thesis, he also won the Newdigate Prize for his poem *Cervantes*. Laver wrote in his memoirs that he was very much a man of the 1920s with no sympathy for the Scylla and Charybdis, fascism and communism, that dominated the 1930s.

Laver's period was less rigid than ours. Even so, some acquaintances did not know what to make of him. In his memoirs, Laver wrote that the success of his novel and its adaptation on stage, after he had been at the V&A for a decade, made his museum colleagues regard him as "a cigar-smoking, Savoy-sipping, enviable but slightly disreputable character, hobnobbing with chorus girls and hanging round stage doors," while "to Gertrude Lawrence and her friends, I was something in a museum engaged in mysterious and apparently useless activities quite outside their comprehension, a character out of *The Old Curiosity Shop*." Agnes de Mille, the choreographer of *Nymph Errant*, wrote in her memoirs of Laver's "muted, slightly eighteenth-century air" that was underscored by "his raffish moments, this play being one of them." He relished his theatrical colleagues and friends. When Laver went to Paris to work with Cole Porter, he found Porter living exactly the way one would expect Cole Porter to live, "cultivating the exquisite sensation of being broken-hearted at the Ritz" and drinking champagne during every working session, notwithstanding contrary lyrics in "I Get a Kick Out of You" written a few years later. Laver observed that Porter used the Ritz bar as his bank account, depositing and withdrawing money with the barman. Douglas Fairbanks, Jr., Gertrude Lawrence's beau at the time of *Nymph Errant*, got Laver to write a sonnet to Marlene Dietrich, who sent Laver a graceful letter of thanks. Fairbanks also got him work as a historical expert on

the 1936 film *The Amateur Gentleman*, telling Laver that screenwriters were dust beneath the moguls' chariot wheels, but experts were men of power in the film world.

Laver's "slightly eighteenth-century air" was evident in his poetry and fiction, *Nymph Errant* showing a link to the tradition of the eighteenth-century picaresque novel, rich in wit as well as adventure. Laver's rhyming couplets are clearly inspired by Pope. *A Stitch in Time* (1927), featuring a Belinda after *The Rape of the Lock*'s heroine, *Love's Progress* (1929), and *Cupid's Changeling* (1933) were collected in 1933 by the Nonesuch Press as *Ladies' Mistakes*, with nine dazzling illustrations by Thomas Lowinsky. Laver's satires, with their *commedia dell'arte* aspects, resemble not only *Nymph Errant* but also the novels of Huxley, Waugh, and Powell. The difference in Laver's work, whether verse or prose, is that he emphasizes his Columbins—his Consuelo Moan (*Cupid's Changeling*), Belinda (*A Stitch in Time*), Araminta (*Love's Progress*), and Evangeline (*Nymph Errant*)—rather than the Pierrots who dominate Twenties fiction. The only real exception is Young Johnson in *Cupid's Changeling*, whose good looks lead Consuelo Moan to mistake him for the film star Maurice Baltimore.

Nymph Errant leaves no indication as to the setting's date, but the heroine's falling into the 1919–22 Greco-Turkish War and glimpsing Lord Curzon (d. 1925) at the League of Nations indicates that the novel takes place in the early Twenties. Laver's original name for the book was *Finishing School*, until the author decided that the ultimate title, planned for one of his Pope pastiches, better suited the novel. The book opens with Evangeline, a young girl from North Oxford, having cocoa with other girls at an international finishing school for girls in Lausanne: Madeleine, the prototype of the well-born French girl, "astonishingly clear and extremely narrow"; Henrietta Bamberg, with "the hard, machine-made beauty of the American girl"; Joyce Arbuthnot-Palmer, a county girl from a family of generations of horse-worshippers; and Bertha, German and plain, though full of glowing health. The girls laugh when Miss Pratt, the school's headmis-

tress, urges them to “experiment,” advice that will inspire Cole Porter to write an immortal song in the musical based on the book. “Never be afraid to experiment,” the old girl tells them, “and form your own conclusions without prejudice and without fear of the consequences.” The girls are skeptical that Miss Pratt, who seems to them a stick, could have experimented in the way that interests them. Talk of experiments in life makes Evangeline feel restless, and she is easily persuaded when a French theatrical impresario calling himself André de Croissant suggests she make a detour to Deauville in preference to the boat-train to North Oxford and her Aunt Ermytrude.

Evangeline’s trajectory has parallels with that of *Decline and Fall*’s Paul Pennyfeather, who also meets all kinds of doubtful characters in changing guises. A further parallel can be found in another Laver nymph, Araminta, the heroine of *Love’s Progress, or the Education of Araminta*. Araminta, a suburbanite from Kingston, moves through bright young parties, taking up with archetypal Twenties swains: John, a painter based in Chelsea; the aesthete Alastair, who in his Mayfair flat “had gathered everything that’s strange and rare”; and another exquisite, Ferdinand, who has found his “goldmine in the pure Baroque!” Her odyssey ends with her marrying the latter-day mid-Victorian Alfred.

Evangeline’s madcap adventures are more exotic and more dangerous. Her former finishing school companions appear in her travels, revealing themselves in different forms than they affected at school and encountering various suitors along the way. Madeleine turns out at Deauville to come from more modest origins than those she had affected at Lausanne. Ditching a count who has lost his inheritance at the gambling tables, the unsentimental Madeleine snatches the stage stardom that the impresario André has dangled before Evangeline. In Montparnasse with a melancholic Russian violinist, Evangeline meets the nihilist Vladimir, who tells her that Dada is “the hope of humanity, explosion for its own sake,” reminding her of Oxford undergraduates setting off firecrackers on the fifth of November. Joyce

Arbuthnot-Palmer appears at Montparnasse bohemian parties and later meets an ill fate with the now-suicidal Russian violinist who was almost Evangeline’s. “When . . . county families take to Bohemianism they nearly always come to bad ends,” the author observes. In a nudist camp presided over by Professor Kirschwasser, Evangeline finds Bertha, happy among the exhibitionists in a place where nobody notices her ungainly ankles. Back in her clothes, Evangeline finds herself in Venice with a count who deserts her in favor of Henrietta, who in Lausanne said she would only marry a red-blooded American college boy. In Venice, too, is Pedro, whom Evangeline knew in Montparnasse as a Spanish painter. Now he is a gondolier, though he assures Evangeline that he is really an Australian Jew. The count, a self-proclaimed exemplar of civilization, sells Evangeline to a fat Greek businessman who is shot dead while trying to save himself in the Greco-Turkish war. Naturally, Evangeline finds herself in a Turkish pasha’s harem before escaping back to Lausanne where she meets again, this time at the League of Nations, Miss Pratt. When our heroine returns to North Oxford, her aunt wonders why her niece hasn’t had any tea-cakes recently.

Laver wrote in his memoirs that the success of *Nymph Errant* made him consider being a full-time writer, though the hefty sum of his next year’s tax bill made him relieved he had kept his day job. He wrote two more novels, neither one even approaching the success of *Nymph Errant*. He remained active in the theater and continued in the path his friend Douglas Fairbanks, Jr., had started him on, advising on such films as Terence Young’s *Moll Flanders* (1965) starring Kim Novak. A natural skeptic with an unquenchable curiosity, he is said to have read every book in the London Library’s section on the occult, and he visited the sinister Aleister Crowley, an acquaintance from the Twenties. Laver’s “eighteenth-century air” may make him too curious for the dour twenty-first century. Even so, this delightful, eclectic-minded man deserves to be rediscovered.

Jules Olitski in New York

by Karen Wilkin

Once upon a time, around the middle of the previous century, art was not required to address political and sociological ills. Neither was it expected, as Stuart Davis once complained, “to mean all kinds of things” and be “the answer to all kinds of questions that no one can answer,” nor did ambitious art have to resemble anything but itself.

That fairy-tale opening is deliberate. In some sectors of today’s art world, the notion that emotions and intellect could be stirred through purely visual, abstract means, absent words or reference to current events and evils, is regarded as belonging to a remote, possibly unreal past. Yet, at the same time, there seems to be a groundswell of new interest in the abstract painters of that fairy-tale moment—the artists who, loosely grouped under the rubric “Color Field,” challenged the dominance of Abstract Expressionism in the 1950s and 1960s with paintings whose emotional burden and associative power were carried not by anxiety-driven, dragged gestures, but by near-anonymous surfaces and fine-tuned color relationships. These days, despite the primacy of political and socially conscious narratives, we’re seeing more exhibitions of significant works by Color Field painters than we have in the recent past—except at the Museum of Modern Art, despite the museum’s substantial holdings of important examples. But that’s subject for another discussion.

Elsewhere, works by Helen Frankenthaler, Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitski, and Larry Poons have all been showcased in

recent exhibitions, along with others who shared their aesthetic, such as Alma Thomas, Sam Gilliam, and Gene Davis. Take, for example, last year’s “Spilling Over: Painting Color in the 1960s,” at the Whitney Museum of American Art, a notably broad view of the subject that included major works from the collection by Frankenthaler, Louis, Noland, and Gilliam; a vast Noland Stripe, with its long bands of delectable hues, confronted you as soon as you stepped from the elevator. Frankenthaler and Gilliam were featured, too, in “Epic Abstraction,” the rethinking of the installation of the modern collection at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, on view until last February. (Many included works remain on view in the galleries.) Currently, since the beginning of the past year, there is “The Fullness of Color: 1960s Painting” at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, an installation also drawn from the museum’s collection, which places Frankenthaler, Louis, Noland, Olitski, Davis, and Thomas alongside less familiar, sometimes non-American painters similarly concerned with the expressive possibilities of chroma.¹ (More about that later.) Most recently, there’s the exhilarating “Jules Olitski: Color to the Core,” a survey of his first mature, color-driven canvases, at Yares Art, on Fifth Avenue between Fifty-seventh and

1 “The Fullness of Color: 1960s Painting” opened at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, on December 18, 2019, and remains on view through March 14, 2021.

Fifty-eighth Streets, installed in the gallery's two fourth-floor spaces.² (No appointments needed, at the time of this writing.)

“Color to the Core” is a play on the term used to categorize the seminal abstractions on view. Known as the “Core paintings,” they are constructed with over-scaled rings and arcs of saturated color, enclosing or loosely embracing warped ovals and constellations of free-floating, imperfect discs. The series has its origins in a group of canvases with floating organic shapes made with potent, resonant dyes, begun in the spring of 1959—Olitski (1922–2004) was thirty-seven—and exhibited at French & Co., New York, the following year. With their saturated hues, they marked a startling change from the brooding, dramatic paintings that preceded them.

The earlier works, known as the Spackle paintings, were distinguished by a subdued, near-monochrome palette of grays applied with near-sculptural, thick impasto. That the Core paintings, with their suave surfaces and intense chroma, seem to repudiate or at least reinvent everything characteristic of the works that came before them probably owes something, at least in part, to the new “cool” version of abstraction proposed by some of the other, younger painters (such as Kenneth Noland) being shown at French & Co. Like Olitski, they had been selected by Clement Greenberg, who, at the time, was charged with creating a contemporary program for the distinguished gallery. But, as is made clear by the works on view at Yares Art, which allow us to follow Olitski's inventive exploration of the implications of unmoored rings and ovals of radiant colors, it takes nothing away from the originality or potency of the Core paintings to note a connection with Noland's Circle paintings. Quite the contrary. The generous selection not only reveals the Core paintings' connections with the work of Olitski's peers but also underscores their idiosyncrasy and individuality.

² “Jules Olitski: Color to the Core” opened at Yares Art, New York, on November 7, 2020, and remains on view through January 30, 2021.

The Core paintings' sometimes dissonant orchestration of unnameable, often surprising hues is entirely Olitski's own, announcing his gifts as an inventive and expressive colorist. So is the quirky character of the wavering rings, thick arcs, hovering discs, and nested ovoids that sparsely populate the canvases. In contrast to Noland's Apollonian, confrontational Circle paintings, with their concentric rings of subtle colors and declarative, still centers, Olitski's Core paintings are Dionysian and animated, a little wonky in a way that befits an association with the god of wine. Their liveliness results from their refreshingly “imperfect” compositions, constructed with shapes whose wavering edges remind us of the presence of the hand, as they enter into a tense relationship with the crisp vertical and horizontal boundaries of the canvas. In *Necessary Light* (1959), the earliest Core painting in the installation, two vertical ovals—the lower one, pale yellow and even more irregular than the black shape above it—are stacked against a blue-black ground, pushed towards the edge of the canvas, and anchored by a wobbly brown form that surrounds both. Or is that a still more distant layer revealed by a gap in the blue-black, as if the surrounding hue were being repelled by the ovals? A tremulous red disc at the edge of the pale yellow oval further complicates the spatial implications.

The intensity of the Core paintings is partly due to Olitski's having soon abandoned dye for Magna acrylic, known for its luminosity (and, as it turned out, toxicity). Their unexpectedness is bound up with his highly personal color sense, which walks a tightrope between the ravishing and the vaguely disturbing, sometimes in the same painting. In *Fanny D* (1960), for example, a swelling ring of Schiaparelli pink hovers, off-center, against an expanse of purple-gray, enclosing four almost-discs of different sizes and different hues—green, gold, indigo, and black. Some discs press against their confines, suggesting potential motion, but it's the unpredictable, not obviously harmonious assortment of hues that keeps us engaged and keeps the painting from being simply beautiful. And if we look

closely, we discover that despite the assertive quality of the picture, there have been adjustments to the color along the way, testimony to the evolution of the composition: overpainting, for example, revealed by small escapes of green around the black disc. It's reminiscent of the way Henri Matisse allowed the fragmentary evidence of color changes to remain visible in his early canvases—the deep red underlying and warming an expanse of black, say—creating subtle vibrations from a distance and adding complexity from a close viewpoint. In Olitski's expansive *After Five* (1961), the atypically brushy application of the glowing ultramarine field plays a similar role.

At the opposite end of the gallery, *Lucy's Fancy* (1960) stares us down with a pair of oversized discs, acid yellow and tomato red, separated and framed by bands of orange and turquoise against purple-brown. The confrontational image, with its mouth-puckering palette, is at once seductive, slightly threatening, solemn, and vaguely cartoon-like. Part of the impact of *Lucy's Fancy* and many other Core paintings derives from the way the burgeoning, implicitly soft shapes and oversized, aggressively cropped, curvaceous pools of color hint at tactile memories of the female body.

These allusions are sometimes reinforced by Olitski's suggestive titles: *Passion Machine*, *Shakeup Sally*, *Pink Ishtar Belly*, *Dream Lady*, *Fatal Plunge Lady*, or the unequivocal *Queen of Sheba Breast* (a 1963 painting in the collection of the Yale University Art Gallery, not included in the Yares exhibition). This is neither to suggest that the Core paintings are disguised or caricatured evocations of female anatomy reduced to titillating essentials, nor to deny the possible, possibly enriching readings and associations provoked by Olitski's titles. But those associations function as overtones, implying the existence of playful metaphors without compromising abstractness.

As the series progressed, Olitski continuously explored variations on his theme of concentric ovoids, expanding the arcs and rings, setting ample sweeps against unpainted canvas to intensify color, and allowing the ovals and discs to float free. The result was

to suggest more expansive space than in the earlier, denser configurations, such as *Lucy's Fancy*, in which the two discs are tightly framed and conjoined to form a kind of figure eight against a continuous ground. In later Core paintings, such as *Free Spirit* or *Circle Stretch* (both 1963), the “enclosing” ring expands exponentially against an indeterminate white field, sometimes breaking into disjunctive arcs, and becoming so large that it can no longer be contained by the boundaries of the supporting canvas. Within that generous scoop, slightly distorted discs, ovals, and, occasionally, short, blocky strokes, like broken pieces of a ring, drift unconstrained. In the economical *Circle Stretch*, a white oval against unprimed canvas is positioned above a break in the surrounding over-scaled ring, now fusing with the ground, now separating from it, to create a new kind of indeterminate space.

In other Core paintings, such as *Wet Heat Company* (1963), an ovoid, here subtly shading from red-orange to yellow-orange, has grown so enormous that it all but fills the canvas with what we read as only a fraction of the implied shape; a softly defined, purple, rectangular swipe kisses the orange shape in the minimal remaining space, lower right, while below that, a small olive-green disc floats. Conditioned as we are to interpret changes in size as signaling distance, it's impossible not to read the three incidents as describing deep space. Despite the declarative flatness of the paint application, which emphasizes the literal surface of the canvas, we see them as moving away from us; the hierarchy of color—aggressive hot orange in the largest shape and recessive cool green in smallest—reinforces this involuntary but irresistible interpretation. It's as if, like Gulliver, we had entered the world of the Brobdingnagians and were able to take in only fragments of gigantic bodies; the rest expands beyond our field of vision.

What makes the implied infinite space of these paintings all the more surprising, in relation to the full trajectory of Olitski's work, is his later insistence on acknowledging the boundaries of the canvas, from the edge drawing in his spray paintings, which asserts the

dimensions of his sheets of diaphanous color and states where the world of the painting ends and actuality begins, to the bold internal framing drawing of his last series. We have a glimpse of the origins of this conception in the second section of the show, in the informative but not entirely convincing *Big Diagonal* (1964); here, the disjunctive enclosing arcs of a late Core painting have hardened into broad (mostly) orange strokes at the periphery of the canvas, parallel to the vertical and horizontal edges of the picture, loosely enclosing a rectangle divided diagonally into pink and green.

We've been prepared for such a radical rethinking of structure by a group of intimate oil pastel drawings, sometimes on colored paper, made in 1963 and 1964. They offer entry into Olitski's thinking, as he played with compositional and chromatic variations. In the drawings, the Core paintings' solid shapes are indicated by scribbled, fraying zones and scrawled dots of color. These loose, roughly stroked areas are perhaps early manifestations of his avowed desire, stated in 1965, to suspend color in the air and have it remain there—an idea that led to his using sprayers to apply paint to his canvases, creating the pulsing, luminous paintings that initially established his reputation. Some transitional works, including the red-orange *Color Flow* (1965), a seamless shift from dark to light, anchored by two small discs that might have floated in from a Core painting, record Olitski's early experiments with spraying and point to the future, when he would concentrate on sheets of pulsating color and seamless color shifts instead of the lively shapes of the Core paintings.

To see what happened next and to locate Olitski among some of his peers, we can visit the Guggenheim's "The Fullness of Color: 1960s," where his *Lysander I* (1970), a lush golden-rose spray, is installed with *Trans Shift* (1964), a bold Noland Chevron, with athletic blue and green bands plunging down the unprimed expanse. We also find *Sarabande* (1959), an opulent Louis somewhere between

a mysterious Veil and an alluring Floral, along with a lush Frankenthaler and fresh, optically vibrating works by Alma Thomas and Gene Davis. We look in vain for one of Frank Stella's flashy Protractor paintings of the 1960s, for one of Larry Poons's vibrating Dot paintings, for something by Friedel Dzubas or Sam Gilliam, all of whom were investigating related ideas about the significance of color at the time, in notably different ways. Instead, we get a blurred version of a Noland Circle by the Polish painter, Wojciech Fangor, best known for his posters, and a tightly woven geometric "tapestry" of color by the Japanese painter Toshinobu Onosato. None of these works has been on view in recent years, so we must be grateful for all of it, although without returning to the museum to check the label, I'm not altogether certain that the Fangor belongs to the Guggenheim—he doesn't appear in the online catalogue. While one might quibble with certain inclusions and absences, generally "The Fullness of Color" provides a capsule context for the Olitski show, so we must be even more grateful.

"Jules Olitski: Color to the Core" is a splendid introduction to one of the most radical and innovative abstract painters of the recent past. The show is accompanied by a gorgeously illustrated catalogue reproducing even more key works than are represented in the gallery, along with an informative chronology and essays by David Ebony, Patricia L. Lewy, and Alexander Nemerov. Let's hope that Yares Art will organize future exhibitions tracking the rest of Olitski's long working life. That would further emphasize the importance of the Core paintings since, as an accomplished octogenarian who had explored many different possibilities of what an expressive abstract painting could be, responding to new materials and new conceptions over the years, Olitski returned to the cast of characters and the intense color of the Core paintings in his last works, but even more so. That makes the exuberant, engaging works in "Color to the Core" not only exciting and compelling in their own right, but also prescient.

Gallery chronicle

by James Panero

The experience of art is never more vital than in times of crisis. During the Blitz, Kenneth Clark's "picture of the month" restored one masterpiece at a time to the walls of the National Gallery. Myra Hess's lunchtime concerts returned live music to bombed-out London. So far, our best response to World War C has been outdoor dining. We could have been a little more spirited and inventive in our emergency initiatives. Yes, it is true that in today's New York we can eat our meals in boxes built above the gutter. What we should be seeing are concerts in every park and theater on every corner.

The city's commercial art galleries have been the exception to this rule. They too could have remained dark, all covered in the finest grades of low-knot plywood. Instead the galleries have returned to become the city's great free cultural resource at a time when there are far too few alternatives. With timed tickets available in advance or, in most cases, simply when you walk in, the vitality of art remains a barcode-scan away. As the galleries have restored their cycles of new exhibitions, the experience of gallery-going has become salutary. In these times of clandestine gatherings, the shared encounters even feel revolutionary. Just imagine, actually seeing something with someone outside of Zoom. I just hope it lasts until the time of publication.

This season, in Chelsea, the interest of New York's blue-chip galleries has coalesced around a selection of what we might now call black-chip art. In particular, this has meant the exhibition of several simultaneous shows by a

generation of black male abstractionists who have each reached new levels of veneration and value. The contemporary art market can be notoriously ill-calibrated, of course, and one could attribute this latest trend to just another passing interest. In this case, however, the attention is well deserved. Before the mega-galleries ever got involved, long before the upheavals of last summer, certain galleries and dealers had been exploring the loose affinities of these artists who use the language of abstraction in new and profound ways.

At the age of eighty-seven Sam Gilliam showed, through last month, his latest work for the first time at Pace.¹ Over half a century ago, Gilliam emerged out of the Washington Color School to bring a new spirit of alchemy to paint on canvas. He experimented with stained canvases and unusual media. Resisting agents, metallic powders, fluorescent pigments, and just about anything that could make colors swirl and sizzle went into his mix. He folded his loose, wet canvases to develop Rorschach-like effects. He then hung them out to dry in startling new ways. In some cases he stretched his canvases over beveled stretchers to create relief-like works. In others he suspended them as garland-like buntings in catenary curves. In all he tested the boundaries between painting and sculpture. He also merged the personal with the universal. The son of a seamstress,

1 "Sam Gilliam: Existed Existing" was on view at Pace, New York, from November 6 through December 19, 2020.

born in Tupelo, Mississippi, Gilliam draws on childhood visions mixed with the archaic, classical, and Renaissance influences of art history. Memories of clothes drying on the line flutter together with the colors of Titian and the forms of Dürer.

For anyone familiar only with Gilliam's youthful work of the 1960s and '70s, it remained to be seen what the 2020s would bring for this mature artist. The answer, at Pace, should have put octogenarians and just about everyone else on notice. At least one of us had an astonishingly creative pandemic year.

The term "gallery" does not quite give mega-operations such as Pace their full due. This juggernaut of an enterprise is spread across two buildings on West Twenty-fifth Street and includes a new museum-worthy tower. Gilliam needed every square inch of Pace's two ground-floor spaces to display the full range of his recent achievements. Of the two, the better venue to start with was the one down the block, towards Eleventh Avenue. Here Gilliam revisited the beveled canvases that first brought him to international attention. (In 1972, in a group invitational exhibition organized by Walter Hopps, Gilliam became the first black artist to represent the United States at the Venice Biennale; Hilton Kramer singled out Gilliam for his "strong showing.")

Gilliam's new beveled work may be similar in form to the old. What differs is the relative humidity of this latest series. Unlike the wet-on-wet soakings of earlier work, today Gilliam's canvases can seem extra dry. With titles such as *The Mississippi "Shake Rag"* (2020), these canvases are each at least eight feet in one dimension. Two of them maxed out at twenty feet. A mottled, complex, sand-like encrustation covered every square inch and invited closer viewing. Where things got messy, as in some of the darker compositions, the materials never quite reacted to alchemical effect. In the better examples, surface scratches gently agitated the canvases into radiant lines. Substrates of reds and yellows seemed to come up from beneath the light, sandy sprinkling. Further hidden in the mix, tile-like circles, squares, and rectangles shook their way up to the surface. The beveled stretchers all gave extra depth to these hanging

works. These intricate compositions felt like a constellation buried in a sandbox.

Up the street, the second part of this exhibition revealed in the full permutations and combinations of Gilliam's penetrating sense for form and function. Pyramid-shaped sculptures on caster wheels were rolled about in one room. Circular forms of similar make hung in another. In a side gallery, a range of solid colors was soaked into large square works on paper. At first, it was not at all clear what to make of the assembly. Online images of these works looked silly. In person, the primary forms seemed to tease out Sphinx-like riddles. As you walked around them, the pyramid shapes flattened in optical effects. By the entrance, Gilliam even included two small, wondrous wall sculptures—*Color Abacus* and *White Abacus*—seemingly there to calculate the solutions.

The revelation of this display was how it connected to Gilliam's canvases down the street and his full, bound-together body of work. Constructed of wood, aluminum, die-stain, and lacquer, the intimately crafted pyramids were divided into strata and sub-strata. Taken one way, they were those beveled canvases laid flat. Or they were the accumulation of those stained papers stacked one on top of the other. The circles on the wall reflected the caster wheels beneath. Or something like it. The connections were dream-like, suggestions rather than conclusions meant to be sensed rather than thought out. Thank goodness they were there for us to conjure with through our confounding times.

When Martin Puryear represented the United States in the 2019 Venice Biennale, the form and facture of his enigmatic, surrealistic sculptures first appeared as reliquaries for some forgotten feast day. Look closer and it turned out the pageantry of this meticulous work was rooted in the lives of our own saints and sinners. Now at Matthew Marks, a selection of six of these sculptures is on display stateside for the first time.² Just what Puryear creates is part

2 "Martin Puryear" opened at Matthew Marks Gallery, New York, on November 12, 2020, and remains on view through January 30, 2021.

dream, part nightmare, all made real through the obsessive craftsmanship of his constructions. In Venice, deposited in the neoclassical American pavilion, the works seemed like the floats of some parade gone by. In the white cube of a Chelsea gallery, the individual forms appear in greater relief. *Tabernacle* (2019) recalls the hat of a Union soldier made extra large. Peer inside this strange work—of red cedar, American cypress, pine, makore veneer, canvas, printed cotton fabric, glass, and steel—and you see a decorated space complete with cannon and silver ball.

A Column for Sally Hemings (2019) is similarly freighted with signs and symbols. A shackle of rusted iron rises from a finely finished, white wooden base in the shape of a classical column. The lower form could be the architecture of Monticello, or perhaps the ribbings of a skirt. The upper can take on human form, or maybe it is a flower sprouting out of the hard earth. Repeated forms come to haunt Puryear's oeuvre, as the rusted shackle here recalls the golden hardware of his monumental sculpture *Big Bling*, on display in Madison Square Park in 2015.

There is an impurity in such abstraction, one that, done right, creates an expressive alloy able to convey the personal and the political bonded to the pictorial. The durability of such art relies on the particular mix of reflection and reference. For art to be about something else, of course it first must be about itself. Now at Hauser & Wirth, an exhibition of the work of the late Jack Whitten reveals where this chemistry can come up short.³

Over a large tableau, especially in his later work, Whitten could piece together dried paint fragments, which he called tesserae, into a profound whole. Such compositions convey both surface form and deep excavation. At Hauser & Wirth, a preponderance of smaller mosaic work from the 1990s, meant as totems for famous figures, largely fails to find the same map and territory. Of archival inter-

3 "Jack Whitten: I Am the Object" opened at Hauser & Wirth, New York, on November 5, 2020, and remains on view through January 23, 2021.

est, the selection mainly serves to reveal the development of Whitten's unusual process. In one, *Mask III* (1991), early fragmentary components begin as cracked eggshells and hair. In larger compositions such as *Natural Selection* and *Memory Sites*, both from 1995, we can see haunting figures emerging from the tessellated assembly—it will just take some work to get there.

At Miles McEnery Gallery, a captivating exhibition by Rico Gatson revealed the power of pure abstraction to impure effect.⁴ A generation younger than the black abstractionists on view elsewhere in Chelsea, Gatson has been even more forthright in exploring the confluences of color in his work. In "Icons," a series on paper that he began in 2007, Gatson uses radiating lines to depict the power of black figures, images of whom he has affixed to the work. The series has a sonic quality that is all horn, a tone well represented in a recent retrospective at The Studio Museum in Harlem. In the latest exhibition, Miles McEnery Gallery presented a selection of them. More are now on permanent display as art-in-transit mosaics in the 167th Street subway station.

In his abstractions, Gatson has tended to work with pan-African patterns and colors. The merging of modernism and Africanism is one that groundbreaking artists such as Aaron Douglas pioneered a century ago. Of course, one may even say that modernism itself represents a confluence of African and European artistic traditions.

Through his new abstractions at Miles McEnery, Gatson seemed freer than before in going his own way, unencumbered by particular references to time and place. His geometric arrangements of circles, lines, and triangles were like radiant peaks atop mystical mountains. The graphic excitement of his earlier work is still here, just now made personal. After fifteen years of depicting famous icons, this time the iconography is his own.

4 "Rico Gatson: Ghosts" was on view at Miles McEnery Gallery, New York, from November 19 through December 19, 2020.

Exhibition note

“Frank Auerbach:
Selected Works, 1978–2016”
Luhring Augustine Chelsea, New York.
October 31, 2020–February 20, 2021

I’ll begin with my only complaint: the protective glass covering each picture. Frank Auerbach’s palpably tactile paintings make you want to reach out and feel their surface, but the intervening (and reflective) panes obstruct the eye and mind as well as the finger. Maybe that’s why they’re there in the first place—a COVID-19 prophylactic, surely? But polished New York gallery-goers, even those brazenly venturing out “in the midst of a global pandemic,” know how to Please Don’t Touch, right?

Insurance premiums are probably the real culprit. It’s *the paintings* they’re looking out for—not regular Joes like you and me. (No offense.) Well, for good reason, it turns out: Luhring Augustine’s presentation of nineteen paintings and six drawings by Auerbach includes several exceptional and significant loans from private collections, and even one from the Museum of Modern Art. It’s a rare treat to find Auerbach presented at this scale in the United States. Though the eighty-nine-year-old exhibits regularly in London and is perhaps the most accomplished painter working in Britain today (the Tate held a landmark retrospective in 2015), to the American art scene Auerbach remains, well, foreign. The only museum show he’s had in the United States was in 1990, held at the Saint Louis Art Museum and the Yale Center for British Art, and the gallery bills this exhibition as the largest seen in New York since 2006. On this side of the Atlantic, probably the only place you’ll find him on regular public display is Yale, where a few of his paintings usually hang alongside works by his famous (and now dead) British friends and colleagues—Lucian Freud, Francis Bacon, Leon Kossof, and others—in the YCBA twentieth-century galleries.

The chance now to see Auerbach on his own, and to consider so many of his mature portraits and London streetscapes—with their wild impastos that duck, dip, and dive into sculptural relief—in a single setting, is thus enormously

instructive and welcome. On first impact, they feel like repeated strikes of lightning. Despite the risk-prone nature of Auerbach’s liberated paint handling, there’s a remarkable fixity to his overall vision. Spanning 1978 to 2016, the selected paintings are similarly scaled (the heads tending towards life-size) and can look quite a lot alike from a distance. Whatever differences in color between and among paintings, there’s little discernible change in Auerbach’s general palette over the years, save perhaps for a more recent tendency towards slightly brighter pastels. Without the help of a checklist or identifying labels, I was hard-pressed to differentiate pictures made in 1978 from those finished just four years ago.

Get your nose in the paintings, however, and it’s clear that “repeated” is not a word with which one may fairly describe Auerbach. The pictures refuse to be understood as items in a series. Each work retains a surprisingly firm sense of autonomy, demanding that we consider it for itself, ensnaring us in its internal logics and illogics.

In *Head of J. Y. M.* (1978), the earliest work in the exhibition as well as the smallest, swipes of cadmium yellow and pale lime green congeal and cohere to suggest a slightly upturned head against a dark field of chromatic grays. The painting is densely worked, with active, sculptural impastos that build up into tactile relief against the background. But as thick and painty as the picture is, it’s no match, in sheer weight and material density, for the savagely overwrought paintings that Auerbach made years before in the 1950s and ’60s. These earlier works would build up over the course of hundreds of sittings into inches-thick accretions of slowly caked-on layers, irrefutable evidence of an intense, even maniacal inner drive. This earlier method sometimes resulted in paintings of extraordinary depth and power, pictures that “awaken a sense of physicality,” which the artist once claimed was his goal in painting. More often, Auerbach’s toil and trouble devolved into mere rhetoric, an assertion of effort and angst against what ultimately turned out to be rather conventional images.

By the late 1970s, however, Auerbach was scraping his work down at the end of each day. Doing so kept the surface fresh as he continued to struggle through hundreds of sittings, work-

ing through ideas and gathering up courage for that eventual moment of spontaneous epiphany. This more open-ended approach forced Auerbach to merge his paintings' tortured surfaces with their pictorial structures, the result being that the images became more precarious and complex than anything he had done before.

Back to the 1978 *Head of J. Y. M.* Out of a cacophony of seemingly arbitrary gestures, Auerbach renders an eye, a nostril, a cheek or jowl with single, decisive strokes of loaded pigment. In moments like these, we're impressed first by the energy and verve of Auerbach's marks—they have all the radical reduction and muscular plasticity of an African mask—then stand in awe of his ability to carve out these features with a scalpel-like precision that yet harmonizes with the riotous energy of everything surrounding it. Here and elsewhere the British painter recalls Matisse's *découpage*, which succeeds, Auerbach once remarked, "because it's a shape made from a sense of mass, rather than a shape made from a sense of shape."

Auerbach's understanding, through Matisse, of the crucial importance of drawing with a sense of tactile mass and physical touch has sustained his slow-burning project through the years and decades. In *Head of David Landau* (2004–05), a mysterious concoction of burnt oranges, rust reds, dirty greens, mustard yellows, and prismatic whites, Auerbach sets this tangle of wobbling incisions against a straight, vertical slash of muted green along the right-hand edge. Though at first indistinct, the mark alters our understanding of the entire picture. Overlapping the edge of Landau's white shirt in the bottom corner, the line surfaces almost to the picture plane, pushing other, ostensibly louder forms back. At the same time, it brokers an otherwise untenable relationship between the trembling head and its rectangular frame. Other exemplary works, such as *Head of Jake* (2006) and *Portrait of William Feaver* (2007), see Auerbach sharply limiting the range of his palette, allowing subtly modulated grays and browns to sing freely against the tremolo structure of his drawing.

Compared to these portraits' contained focus and bottled-up energies, Auerbach's pictures of the neighborhood surrounding his

studio of sixty-six years explode into all-over environments of vibrant color. In 2007's *Another Tree in Mornington Crescent II*, the painter whips us around the street with yellows, blues, oranges, and greens somewhat reminiscent of Sérusier's 1888 *Talisman*. Soutine in Céret also comes to mind—those free-flung landscapes with lumpy mountains sprouting into the sky, trees flailing about in gale-force winds, and buildings sagging under the unrelenting stress of gravity. But with Soutine, an uneasy sense of growth and decay predominates, whereas Auerbach's London street scenes bring classical stasis to the general chaos—a formal order in which wild sweeps of the brush push up against stout, straight lines, and everything retains an intuitive awareness of the inert edges of the rectangle. (One way to understand the difference: flip a Soutine upside down, and it's incomprehensible; do the same with an Auerbach, and you still have a sturdy abstract painting.) If Auerbach's landscapes lack the human intensity he achieves in his portraits, they are nonetheless sparkling demonstrations of his ability to evoke the unstable flux of outdoor life through the inborn structures of painting.

Auerbach is a devoted student of art history. He keeps reproductions and copies of works from London's National Gallery in his studio and has made abstracted interpretations of works in the collection by Titian, Rembrandt, Rubens, Constable, Turner, and others. Even his portraits, ostensibly hermetic, contain a world of art historical knowledge. But for some reason it was Matisse who kept coming back as I continued to look. Listen to what the French modern master once said about his own work in portraiture, and consider how it might relate, however improbably, to Auerbach's long-minded project:

Expression, for me, does not reside in the passions glowing in a human face or manifested by violent movement. The entire arrangement of my picture is expressive: the place occupied by the figures, the empty spaces around them, the proportions. . . . A work of art must be harmonious in its entirety.

—Andrew L. Shea

Music

On recordings

by Jay Nordlinger

Do we need another recording of the Beethoven Violin Concerto? “Need” is an interesting word. I suppose we could make do with Heifetz, Oistrakh, and Perlman—and their conductors. But the more the merrier, when it comes to recordings, and many other things in life. Plus, each performer will feel a need to make his statement. Each violinist, for example, will want to leave a mark in the Beethoven concerto: “This was my Beethoven. This *is* my Beethoven, in perpetuity.”

Midori has recorded the concerto for Warner Classics. Her orchestra is the Lucerne Festival Strings—supplemented by woodwinds, brass, and timpani, to be sure. Indeed, the timpani begin the piece. And who is the conductor? Well, the orchestra has a “leader,” a violinist, who sits in the concertmaster’s chair. He is Daniel Dodds, a Chinese-Australian musician. Does the Beethoven Violin Concerto need a proper conductor, standing on a podium? That is an extended discussion. Suffice it to say for now that Dodds and this chamber orchestra do just fine.

The soloist was born Midori Goto in 1971. She is the most famous one-named performer since Solomon, the British pianist born Solomon Cutner in 1902. (The most famous in *classical* music, that is. We are not counting Cher.) I will make some general remarks about the Midori-Lucerne Beethoven concerto.

It is crisp, smart, and tidy. One can imagine lush, grander playing. The middle movement, *Larghetto*, is a little dry. But it is also honest, without pretension. The Rondo, I think, could

use a little more *élan*. It is a touch sober for me. But, again, it is good and honest.

Besides which, you are really listening to the Beethoven Violin Concerto, as you listen to a recording such as this. After a while, you forget the performance—and are simply with Beethoven.

The album is filled out by those customary fillers-out of Beethoven Violin Concerto recordings: the composer’s two Romances, in G and F.

Midori et al. made their recording in March, just as the world was shutting down. In program notes, Midori speaks movingly about Beethoven as companion: as consoler and uplifter. Lorin Maazel, the late conductor, used to say much the same thing. Beethoven is the best friend you’ll ever have, he said. He’ll be with you through good times and bad. He’ll sympathize with you when you’re down and celebrate with you when you’re up.

Warner Classics has also released fourteen CDs of George Szell, the great conductor, in a box set. The first performance is of the Beethoven Violin Concerto, with Bronislaw Huberman and the Vienna Philharmonic. They recorded it in the Konzerthaus (Vienna) in 1934. Before long, Vienna would not be safe for the likes of Szell and Huberman.

Allow me a memory of Huberman, who was born in Poland in 1882 and went on to found the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra, or the PSO, as it was first known: the Palestine Symphony Orchestra. George Sgalitzer was an Austrian-American doctor, and the senior patron of the Salzburg Festival. He attended

the very first performance on August 22, 1920, when he was seven years old. He died in 2006. In an interview, I asked him about his favorites: favorite conductor, favorite pianist, favorite violinist, and so on. His violinist? Huberman. He said this unhesitatingly. (His favorite conductor, by the way, was Toscanini. And his pianist: Richter.)

Indulge a memory of another interview. Some years ago, I was talking to Christopher Parkening, the American guitarist. He was saying, “I love all the great composers, of course, but, for me, there’s one who towers above all the others. And that composer is, of course”—and I broke in to say “Rodrigo.” Parkening laughed heartily.

He was going to say Bach. But my little joke was based on the fact that the most prominent guitar concerto, by far, is the *Concierto de Aranjuez*, which Joaquín Rodrigo wrote in 1939. It is more important to a guitarist than the Dvořák Cello Concerto is to a cellist, or than the Haydn Trumpet Concerto is to a trumpeter.

Do we “need” another recording of the *Concierto de Aranjuez*? Ha, arguably. The latest one comes courtesy of Thibaut Garcia, on the Erato label. He has an interesting name, this fellow: the first name French, the last one Spanish. “Thibaut” may put you in mind of Jacques Thibaud, the French violinist of old, or even of Jean-Yves Thibaudet, the French pianist. Thibaut Garcia is, in fact, French, with origins in Spain. He was born in Toulouse in 1994. He studied at the Paris Conservatory. And he plays, on his new album, with the Orchestre National du Capitole de Toulouse, conducted by a Brit, Ben Glassberg.

Their recording of the Rodrigo is splendid. Seldom has the concerto sounded less hackneyed. It is fresh, precise, joyful, and poignant. The players obviously take great pleasure in playing it, as why should they not? They play with a steady musical intelligence, too.

There is another work for guitar and orchestra on this album: the *Musique de cour* (court music) by Alexandre Tansman, writing in 1960. He was writing *après* Robert de Visée, a Frenchman of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Tansman was another of those storm-

tossed musicians, another Polish Jew. He became a French citizen. He wrote several pieces for Andrés Segovia, the guitar legend, including *Musique de cour*.

It is courtly indeed. But it is not necessarily stuffy. To the Gigue, you want to get up and dance. Young Maestro Garcia does not neglect to play some Robert de Visée—I mean, music by that Baroque composer himself, un-gussied-up by Tansman. The other composer on this album is Regino Sainz de la Maza, a Spaniard (1896–1981).

Thibaut Garcia may have “Spanish blood,” but all “foreign” guitarists are honorary Spaniards. This is true of Christopher Parkening, who comes from Los Angeles. It is true of Xuefei Yang, who comes from Beijing. We are talking about a glorious tradition, both Spanish and universal.

From Naxos, there is the first-ever recording of the Requiem by Alexander Kastalsky. The work’s formal title is a bit longer: *Requiem for Fallen Brothers*. It honors the dead—the Allied dead—of World War I. Kastalsky was born in Moscow in 1856. He died seventy years later, in 1926. He composed his Requiem throughout the war. It was banned in his country when the Bolsheviks rose to power, however, as all sacred music was.

Kastalsky’s Requiem was performed and recorded in the National Cathedral, Washington, D.C., in October 2018, a few weeks before Armistice Day—indeed, the centenary of the Armistice. The performers comprised four choirs (including the Cathedral Choral Society), two vocal soloists, and the Orchestra of St. Luke’s. The conductor was Leonard Slatkin, the veteran American.

The Requiem has seventeen sections, and is sometimes as operatic as it is liturgical. (You could say the same of Verdi’s Requiem.) It is a pastiche, or a collage. It incorporates the music of many countries, honoring the Allies. You hear various languages. Is there any other piece like this? While listening, I thought of *Inno delle nazioni* (*Hymn of the Nations*), by Verdi. Also of the *War Requiem*, which Britten wrote in the early 1960s. But those are really different from the Kastalsky.

I have said that this Requiem incorporates many musical traditions and the relevant languages, which is true. Still, the work as a whole is unmistakably Russian. At times, I thought of two works by Rachmaninoff: the *Vespers* and *The Bells*. They were composed in essentially the same years as this Requiem.

In the Requiem, there is good and inspired music. Also bombastic or insipid music. The work is a mixed bag in more ways than one. Section No. 8 is *Beati mortui*, employing a Romanian melody. It is beautiful. Section No. 13 could be a bass aria in a Russian opera. The next section is a dystopian rendering of “Rock of Ages” (seriously). Two sections on, you have Interludium: Hymn to Indra. It is a little hokey. Bizet did Indian-ish music better in his opera *The Pearl Fishers*, and so did Rimsky-Korsakov, in his opera *Sadko* (which features the “Song of India,” or the “Song of the Indian Guest”). But Kastalsky’s hymn is undoubtedly well-meaning.

As is the whole Requiem. I don’t want to knock it, or even judge it, because the effort is so sincere, and the horror of the war so great. I have a question: Did Kastalsky consider including the enemy dead? Or would that have been too much to ask? At any rate, it’s good that this work is on vinyl—or the modern equivalent—and Leonard Slatkin makes a yeoman case for it. He presides over his sprawling forces, in this sprawling work, with intelligence and heart.

Erato has an album called *Death and the Maiden*. Naturally, the major work is Schubert’s String Quartet No. 14 in D minor, known as “the ‘Death and the Maiden.’” This is because Schubert’s song of that title shows up in the second movement. The album also has Schubert’s famous *Quartettsatz* (*Quartet Movement*) in C minor, which was the opening movement of a string quartet never completed. There is a third Schubert work here: the String Quartet No. 4 in C major, D. 46. *Whoa*. Where has that been all my life?

The players are the Arod Quartet, based in Paris. The four members are still in their twenties. “Arod”? I will quote from PR materials: “The group takes its name from Legolas’s horse in J. R. R. Tolkien’s epic *Lord of the Rings* trilogy;

in Tolkien’s mythic Rohirric language, Arod means ‘swift.’”

Schubert wrote his String Quartet No. 4 in 1813, when he was seventeen years old (more than halfway through his life, I’m afraid). It is seldom programmed, and the Arod decided to record it for this reason. The players also wanted to trace the composer’s musical development.

The first movement, they play with poise, musicality, and bite. This is not drawing-room playing. The music has ardor and drama. Also, the players are unified, giving a lesson in coherence. Schubert’s second movement is a song—a simple, profound song. He had an endless number of them. Has any composer ever had a greater melodic gift? The Arod players do the song the favor of leaving it free of sentimentalism.

To the third movement, a minuet, they apply great vigor and incisiveness. The final movement is pulsing with sheer Schubertian joy (a less common quality than Schubertian melancholy, but equally impressive).

The String Quartet No. 4 is a discovery for me, as is the Arod. These guys play the work as though it were a masterpiece, which it may be.

Hélène Grimaud’s new album is *The Messenger* (Deutsche Grammophon). The title will make sense in a moment. Grimaud is a veteran French pianist—how odd it is to write that phrase, because La Belle Hélène seems forever young!—and her album includes both solo music and music with orchestra. Her orchestra is the Camerata Salzburg. There are two composers on the album: Mozart and Silvestrov.

Valentyn Silvestrov is a Ukrainian, born in 1937. His wife, Larissa Bondarenko, a musicologist, died in 1996. Silvestrov then wrote a ten-minute work for piano and strings, *The Messenger*. Hélène Grimaud plays it twice. What I mean is, she plays the version for piano and strings, with the Camerata Salzburg, and also a solo-piano version. Silvestrov quotes Mozart extensively in *The Messenger*. Here is a statement that Silvestrov has made about his music at large: “It is a response to and an echo of what already exists.”

The list of pieces that Silvestrov wrote after his wife died makes for rather painful reading.

It began with *The Messenger*. Then: *Requiem for Larissa*. *Epitaph*. *Epitaph L. B.* *Autumn Serenade*. *Requiem*. Then a hymn and a symphony. Then: *Lacrimosa*.

In *The Messenger*, Silvestrov quotes Mozart as if in a dream. The music is far away, in thought. The piece in general is spare, unadorned, “white.” It proceeds in a stately, dream-like way. I thought of *Spiegel im Spiegel*, the famous piece (1978) by Arvo Pärt. The solo-piano version of *The Messenger* is even more personal than the piano-and-orchestra one, I think—perhaps because there is just one person playing (and remembering?). The more I listened to *The Messenger*, in either version, the more I liked it. One must be patient with it and accept it on its own terms. It is a slow-builder, and Silvestrov is his own man, composing not so much for you and me as for himself, and Larissa.

There is another piece by Silvestrov on this album—another piece for piano and orchestra. It, too, responds to and echoes other composers: Schubert and Wagner. The work is called *Two Dialogues with Postscript*. The three components are “Wedding Waltz,” “Postludium,” and “Morning Serenade.” Is the second piece—not the third—the “postscript”? I imagine so, but don’t really know. This work is much like *The Messenger*. The music seems so personal—and so sad—you almost wish it were private, not released out onto the world.

The latest from Diana Damrau is *Tudor Queens* (Erato). The title refers to Donizetti’s Three Queens, as they are commonly known: Anne Boleyn (the title character in *Anna Bolena*); Mary, Queen of Scots (*Maria Stuarda*); and Elizabeth I (who appears in *Roberto Devereux*). Damrau is a German soprano and one of the leading singers of our time. She has triumphed in Donizetti before, notably in *Lucia di Lammermoor*. As she approaches fifty, it is natural for her to want to turn to the Three Queens—the territory of Callas, Sutherland, Sills, Caballé, and others.

Does Damrau, a beautiful lyric, have enough voice for these roles? That is a subject for debate. In any case, she has made a studio recording, and she has recorded excerpts, not complete operas. Along with her is the Santa

Cecilia orchestra of Rome, conducted by Sir Antonio Pappano.

The fabulous Damrau instrument has taken on some wear and tear. Vibrato is wider. Top notes are thinner. On the interpretative front, I’m not sure I believe her when she scalds, imperiously. It is not merely a matter of vocal quality, including heft. Damrau is such a warm, lovable, good human being, I’m not sure I buy her as an imperious scald. She is better, I believe, in tenderer, more songful stretches of Donizetti.

You or I may have doubts about Damrau’s suitability to these roles, but there is no doubt that she brings many outstanding qualities to them. Among these qualities are technical agility, musical instincts, and sympathy. Midori wanted to memorialize her Beethoven concerto. Thibaut Garcia wanted to display his *Concierto de Aranjuez*. I can certainly understand Diana Damrau’s desire to have a go at the Three Queens.

A new soprano, Fatma Said, has made an album called *El Nour* (Warner Classics). As suggested by that “El”—as opposed to “Al”—Said is Egyptian. “Nour” means “light.” A native of Cairo, Said went to Berlin, to study at the Hanns Eisler School of Music. Then she went to Milan, to study at La Scala’s academy. On her new album, she sings French songs and Spanish songs—and Arab songs.

One of the composers is Dawood Hosni, an Egyptian who lived from 1870 to 1937. He was born David Haim Levi. His story is interesting, as most people’s stories tend to be.

The Arabic language is beautiful out of Fatma Said’s mouth. And she sings these songs with the occasional hint of a wail, which is lovely.

A soprano from an earlier generation, Victoria de los Angeles, introduced many of us to Spanish songs—not just art songs but folk songs, too. Leontyne Price used to call herself an “American troubadour.” Wherever she was in the world, she put spirituals at the end of her recital program. As she explained it, her attitude was, “I have sung *your* songs. Now you will listen to mine.” From Fatma Said, I have learned some songs I never knew. This sharing of songs is one of the nicest parts of the whole enterprise.

The media

Truth or dare

by James Bowman

Judging by the frequency with which they are—or rather used to be—quoted, the most famous words in Robert Bolt’s play *A Man for All Seasons* (1960) come in response to the contention by William Roper that he would “cut down every law in England” to get at the Devil. Roper’s father-in-law, Sir (later Saint) Thomas More, replies:

Oh? And when the last law was down, and the Devil turned round on you, where would you hide, Roper, the laws all being flat? This country is planted thick with laws, from coast to coast, Man’s laws, not God’s! And if you cut them down, and you’re just the man to do it, do you really think you could stand upright in the winds that would blow then? Yes, I’d give the Devil benefit of law, for my own safety’s sake.

Back in 2008, the British columnist Daniel Finkelstein quoted this passage and proceeded to ask: “Are there wiser words in literature? . . . Perhaps there are more exquisite phrases to be found on the nature of love or more descriptive passages on the horror of war. But when it comes to politics and statesmanship, surely there are none finer.”

The occasion of this observation was the inquest then being held into the death of Princess Diana a decade earlier, at the insistence of Mohamed Al-Fayed, the billionaire father of Dodi Fayed, her lover who died in the Parisian car crash along with her. “Was there ever anything more preposterous, more manipulative, more laughably deranged than Mohamed

Al-Fayed’s allegation that the Duke of Edinburgh had Princess Diana murdered?” wrote Mr. Finkelstein in *The Times* of London. “Yet still we have pressed on. Still, we have insisted that every man—even this man—must have his day in court. Still, even under this intense provocation, we have shown that we know that we cannot navigate right and wrong but [like Bolt’s More] merely be foresters in the thickets of the law.”

I wonder if, twelve years later, he would feel the same way about Donald Trump’s slightly less laughably deranged allegations of election fraud? So far as I am aware, no mainstream American journalist or elected Democrat has said that Mr. Trump must have his day in court, if only for the honor of American justice. If More’s principle of giving the devil his due by giving him the protection of the law were still revered in 2008, at least in this one corner of the media, it apparently is so no more. A year later Hilary Mantel’s novel *Wolf Hall* was published and, judging by its immense popularity and that of its sequels, the hero for our times is not More, whom she portrays as a small-minded religious bigot, but his chief persecutor, Thomas Cromwell, a man who has no respect for the law except as it can be used on behalf of the king’s political purposes or against the king’s political opponents—or his own.

Certainly the Democrats in the age of Trump appear to have taken Cromwell as their model, rather than More. “The rule of law” is frequently in their mouths, but in practice, so far as

“the Resistance” in government and out of it is concerned, it only applies when convenient for Democratic political purposes—especially the overriding purpose of driving the President from office or, failing that, fatally crippling his ability to govern. It is now clear that this contempt for legal niceties dates back to the Obama administration and its attempts through the national security apparatus to damage the Trump candidacy. It is also all of a piece with the Democrats’ refusal to enforce immigration law or, more recently, laws against riot and affray.

Does anyone doubt that, given such open contempt for the law and their undisguised hatred for the president, the anti-Trumpers would have stolen the election if they could have done so without detection? And does anyone doubt that, with the media and local Democratic-run governments on their side, they could have done so? These are, to me, powerful reasons for regarding Mr. Trump’s allegations of fraud worthy, at a minimum, of a thorough investigation. Equally powerful, therefore, must be the repeated insistence by the Democrats and the univocal media that they are *not* worthy of investigation, instead being called, monotonously and reflexively, “baseless,” “groundless,” “false,” etc.—presumably also “preposterous,” “manipulative,” and “laughably deranged.”

Yet where do we find the principled left-wing progressive—where do we even find the Never Trump Republican—who is willing to stand up, like Daniel Finkelstein, for the rights of the laughably deranged to have their day in court? “Yes, of course the idea that the election was stolen was preposterous,” such a person might say, “but for that very reason, and for the honor of our system of justice, do we not owe the millions who, unfortunately, believe in such a thing a thorough and impartial examination of the claim before we pronounce it ‘unfounded’? How else can we avoid such a widespread breakdown of trust in our basic institutions as this represents?”

But if there is anyone among Mr. Trump’s many detractors who has said this, or something like it, I have not heard about it. How are we not to think, as the behavior of the

Democrats and the media over the past four years would incline us to think in any case, that they consider such a breakdown of trust to be worth it if it means getting rid of the hated Orange Man? After all, the media have long since sacrificed trust for partisanship, and they don’t appear to miss it. On the contrary, they have never been more successful than they have been since they abandoned any pretense of fairness or objectivity to tell dedicated partisans like themselves only what they want to hear.

I’m afraid we have to conclude that there is no longer any Democratic constituency for a Kantian, universally applied moral principle or for blind justice and equality under the law. The lesson of the 2020 election will turn out to be that the merely tribal politics, which has been struggling to be born since at least the end of the Cold War, has finally triumphed. But this makes for a certain cognitive dissonance when measured against the media and Democratic insistence that a Biden presidency represents a return to decency and morality. “The Decency Agenda” recommended by *The New York Times’s* editorial board to Joe Biden includes “accountability” for an ex-President Trump but not for those who so often disregarded the law and traditional ethical standards in opposing him. “Not a truth commission mounted out of spite,” insists the editorialist, “or justice sought in the spirit of vengeance. But some way to get answers about what happened during the Trump administration, coupled with an attempt to restore some guardrails that proved insufficient to restrain Mr. Trump’s worst impulses.”

These laughable claims to purity of motive in an implied pursuit of Mr. Trump into private life can hardly be expected to reassure the half of the country that voted for him that he will be treated fairly, out of office, by those whose spite and spirit of vengeance were so much in evidence when he was the elected President. In a democracy, the “accountability” of elected officials lies in the hands of the voters, not their political opponents, wielding the law as a weapon. But the pretense of such reassurance is only for show anyway. The real “decency agenda” is the effort by the *Times*, and the

media culture which it leads, to do for decency what it has already done for truth: namely, to redefine the word so that it can no longer be applied to anyone not, broadly speaking, of the *Times's* own political persuasion.

Already we have seen again and again that “truth,” as it is now used in the media, means nothing more or less than “conforming to the media’s dominant narrative.” That’s how they have been able to dismiss out of hand all the claims of fraud by the president and others as false without submitting them to anything more than a cursory examination. They simply don’t fit the predetermined Trump narrative cemented in place by the media over the last four years. What does fit the narrative, on the other hand, is the assumption that all such claims are racist by definition. “Republicans Rewrite an Old Playbook on Disenfranchising Black Americans,” wrote Jim Rutenberg and Nick Corasaniti for the *Times*:

In Pennsylvania, President Trump and Republicans loyal to him have sought to overturn his defeat by making false claims about widespread voting fraud in Philadelphia. In Georgia, they have sought to reverse his loss by leveling similar accusations against Atlanta. In Michigan, Republicans have zeroed in on Detroit, whose elections system the president has falsely portrayed as so flawed that its entire vote should be thrown out. Lost on no one in those cities is what they have in common: large populations of Black voters.

In other words, the “false claims” are being pronounced false not because they are untrue, but because they are racist and therefore *cannot* be true. It’s the “old playbook” of so-called “voter suppression” that has been trotted out for years in response to any attempt to tighten election security by, for example, requiring a photo ID to vote at the polls. It’s not as if this is the first time the media and the Democrats have told us that “Black” people (the capital letter is now *Times* style, though it is not given to white people) can never be guilty of electoral fraud because it is racist even to suggest such a thing.

In the same way, Mr. Trump’s pre-election warnings of the potential for fraud in voting by mail were dismissed—even by some who had themselves given such warnings in the past—because they were deemed to be unfeeling towards people who wished to keep to their homes for fear of the coronavirus. Once you assume the bad faith of a man, as the media and the Democrats have assumed the bad faith of Donald Trump over the last four years, then everything he says can be pronounced false merely on the grounds that he has said it. It’s a corollary of the media’s arrogation to themselves over all other persons or tribunals the right to judge of truth and falsity, and thus to claim as definitively true anything they themselves believe to be true.

Now, having established their proprietorship of Truth, they are moving on to do the same with Decency in conjunction with Mr. Biden (or his handlers) by making frequent claims for the prospective return of decency to the Oval Office with his election. He has become, in spite of considerable evidence of corruption and incompetence in his past, the definition of decent solely because Mr. Trump was first established by the media as the definition of indecent. Thus, too, anyone not alleging fraud but only wishing to establish the factual truth or falsity of such allegations can be deemed to be automatically on the side of indecency. For the media, the factual truth is irrelevant beside this overarching moral truth.

This must be the reason why even fair-minded Democrats have apparently been intimidated into silence, if not automatic rejection of the president’s claims. A. B. Stoddard of RealClearPolitics writes of “The GOP’s Shameful Embrace of Trump’s Fake Election Fraud”—the “embrace” being not just mistaken, that is, but *shameful*. Indecent. A Democratic member of Congress has called for Rudy Giuliani and other attorneys representing the President in court to be disbarred, and, in an op-ed for *The Washington Post*, twenty-five former presidents of the District of Columbia Bar have cautioned their members that they “should not be complicit in Trump’s attack on democracy.” Decency is thus invoked as if

to deny the claims of fraud from even having a hearing.

So, no protection of the law for old devil Trump, it seems. But how could such an outrage against our system of justice be possible unless the media had been largely successful in persuading even those who dislike and distrust them that no decent, or decently sane person could possibly believe in a stolen election? The media can't refute the evidence of fraud, but they can keep telling everyone that only a kook or a conspiracy theorist would believe it. When all but a tiny number of fringe media voices are saying such things, it becomes extremely difficult for even the strong-minded to hold out against the chorus of disapproval.

In retrospect, it may begin to appear that the so-called Cancel Culture—which has raged through the media in the last year or so the same way the coronavirus has raged through the population—has been used, like the virus itself, to prepare the way for this post-election campaign of intimidation. Knowing that you can be canceled, ostracized, boycotted, or otherwise relegated to the margins of society for a whole range of heterodox opinions has, just in the past year, brought countless public institutions and corporations to the progressive heel, all eager to show themselves to be in conformity with the new ideas of public decency, now widely understood to exclude as indecent moral and political views that were considered mainstream and uncontroversial only a few years ago. How could this have happened without the media's

putting us on notice that dissent from the progressive consensus is no longer to be tolerated without punishment and exclusion from decent society—as such a society has lately been reimagined by them?

The media campaigns for the new Truth and the new Decency are really one and the same campaign, it appears, since both have evolved out of the effort to revoke and destroy the Trump presidency—and both rely on the same intimidatory tactics to enforce belief in what, under the old ideas of truth and decency, would be considered transparent falsehood. I beg leave to doubt that this campaign will be moderated in the direction of old-fashioned truth and decency when someone who has been as much a part of it as Joe Biden is sitting in the Oval Office.

Like the “Cancel Culture” (whose existence the Left routinely denies), the election of Mr. Biden heralds the arrival of a soft-totalitarianism that is likely to be with us—and very likely to harden—for some time to come. Biden voters can hardly have been unaware that this intellectual straitjacket imposed on our public discourse, mainly through promiscuous allegations of racism, would be one of the consequences of pulling the lever (or sending in a postal vote) for him. Another is the probable continuation of the breakdown of public order in so many Democrat-run cities over the last six months. Could these be the best reasons of all for believing that the election must have been stolen? Only, of course, one must not say so.

Books

The Spartan way of war

by *Victor Davis Hanson*

Sparta's check of imperial Athens in the inconclusive so-called First Peloponnesian War (460–445 B.C.) foreshadowed a remarkable subsequent twenty-eight-year growth in Lacedaemonian power and influence. At the war's end, Sparta had established itself as the only impediment left to an increasingly Athenian Greece.

Fourteen years later, a second, and far deadlier, Peloponnesian War broke out. The continuing, hard-fought Spartan upswing was capped off by her dramatic victory at the Battle of Mantinea (418 B.C.), which saw Sparta prevail over Athens—Sparta's chief Peloponnesian rival—and surrogate Athenian allies. That battle mostly ensured that Sparta would not lose in any renewal of the stalemated Second Peloponnesian War.

The Spartan surge between 446 and 418 B.C. is the theme of Paul A. Rahe's fourth volume on Sparta's history, its culture, and its rivalries with democratic Athens, entitled *Sparta's Second Attic War*.¹ His envisioned hexalogy will eventually cover three centuries of Spartan growth, dominance, and gradual decline. The final two books will presumably be devoted to the last fourteen brutal years of the Peloponnesian War (a proposed volume 5, 418–404/3 B.C.) and the post-war decades of Sparta's unilateral but shaky dominance, and her eventual decline (volume 6, 403–362 B.C.).

Rahe's ambitious project is by any measure a remarkable feat—even if at its origins the his-

tory was likely never envisioned as a systematic multi-century account of Sparta. In its original two volumes, the exact chronology and scope of the eventual effort were unclear. After all, rarely do scholars in their mid-sixties, after a lifetime of prodigious publication in fields as diverse as Athenian history, the French and British Enlightenments, and the 2,500-year history of constitutional republicanism, embark on what will likely become a three-thousand-page, six-volume project—part narrative history, part densely argued political analysis, part carefully sourced and heavily footnoted model of classical scholarship—while maintaining a demanding undergraduate teaching load.

But then again, Rahe was a Ph.D. student under Donald Kagan. Kagan's own monumental four-volume history of the Peloponnesian War (1969–87) remains a landmark of narrative history, common sense, and astute political insight—and was often at odds with the contemporary determinist historiography of the time.

In Rahe's four volumes thus far, a number of themes emerge. In their emphases on political and military history, volumes 1 through 4 are likewise often contrarian and antithetical to the current direction of historiography in general, and in particular the more recent cultural focuses of classical studies.

Rahe does not believe that states are just equal players in a game of strategic chess, whose foreign policies hinge on pursuing their self-interest through balances of power, alliances, and preemptive wars. Instead, Greek

¹ *Sparta's Second Attic War: The Grand Strategy of Classical Sparta, 446–418 B.C.*, by Paul A. Rahe; Yale University Press, 408 pages, \$40.

poleis, like modern nations, are also reflections of all sorts of idiosyncratic internal tensions and competing political, cultural, social, and economic interests. These constant rivalries and gyrations often expressed themselves in volatile foreign policies and help to explain national conduct. In Sparta's case, its age-class systems delayed marriage and childbearing, resulting in the crisis of *ὀλιγανθρωπία*, or chronic military manpower shortages and population shrinkage, accentuated by ritual infanticide of the supposedly "unfit" and occasional natural disasters. Sparta was insular in part because it feared the effects of any massive battle loss on its already fragile demographic makeup. That reality in turn explained a contemporary reputation for slowness in projecting force beyond the vale of Laconia. One of the many Spartan enigmas—the reluctance to deploy an otherwise superior military—was not really an enigma at all.

Rahe has noted throughout his volumes that Sparta's signature helot question was also dual-edged. The late eighth-century B.C. need to form an internal police state to ensure that the conquered helots ("those taken") of Laconia and Messenia stayed on their plots to produce food, and supply the Spartan military state, explains much later Spartan military deterrence. Sparta's original paramilitary force, with time and sustenance to train and drill constantly against internal enemies, eventually evolved, by the early fifth century, into a crack expeditionary army, one even deadlier against Greek rivals than against Sparta's restive serfs. And yet the very need for domestic vigilance against an enemy to the rear also contributed to the well-known Spartan risk-avoidance abroad.

Rahe in this additional regard is reminiscent of his advisor Kagan, who had argued that the decisions of the Corinthians, Spartans, Athenians, and others in the Peloponnesian War reflected their own intramural rivalries between war and peace parties. This focus on political parties seems obvious today, and had been generally accepted until the 1960s, when the gifted historian Moses Finley argued more for Greek "primitivism" and only loosely formed "factions." From anthropologically based

models, he posited that sophisticated political awareness and organized political parties were unlikely in premodern societies, where there was allegedly neither much technological innovation nor economic rationalism. Instead, shame, honor, and factional tribalism explained both strife and decision-making.

From the other side, the Marxist historian G. E. M. De Ste. Croix's rival 1972 treatment of the Peloponnesian War (*The Origins of the Peloponnesian War*) saw instead a polis binary between victims and victimizers. His pro-Athenian account was defined by class struggle, pitting, in Manichaean fashion, radical democracies of have-nots under Athens against reactionary oligarchical haves that looked to Spartan leadership. In this larger context, Rahe reminds us that Kagan's approach was neither falsely modernist nor determinist, but empirically reflective of the views of Greek historians, orators, and playwrights, and also epigraphical evidence of strikingly sophisticated political calculations behind foreign policy choices. Inside some fifteen hundred city-states were constant tensions between what we would now call right-wing, left-wing, and compromise parties that helped explain often volatile changes in foreign policies and alliances.

Rahe's multivolume history is also characterized by a second theme, one of "grand strategy," the subtitle of two of his volumes. Here, Rahe means all the forces—economic, cultural, social—within a society whose interests are advanced by foreign policy and in turn allow a state to project power. Strategy, in contrast, is the narrower focus on how to envision wartime tactical successes within a more holistic matrix of defeating enemies by military force or isolating them in peace.

Successful grand strategists are excellent military planners, but they additionally properly calibrate national means and ends by assessing economic resources, internal political stability, class interests, and an array of known unknowns from the financial to the psychological. In this regard, Rahe shows that purportedly blinkered Spartan foreign policies gradually proved more astute than those of sophisticated Athens. The Athenians proved

cautious when daring was needed at Mantinea, and were reckless in pursuit of the unlikely, if not impossible, on Sicily. And it was Athens that rarely thought through, in a cost-benefit analysis, whether the ends of its grand projects had sufficient means to ensure their success or were even worth the costly investments—a weakness attributed by Thucydides to the volatility of the Athenian *dêmos*.

If, in a reductionist sense, the eventual winner of the Elephant/Whale standoff in the Peloponnesian War would be determined by which power mastered the forte of the other, then land-power Sparta's new navy between 413 and 404 B.C. proved far more determinative, with Persian money and allied help, than did the hoplite ground forces of the sea-focused Athens.

A third implicit premise is Rahe's attempt to resuscitate the reputation of ancient Sparta. For much of the twentieth century, the Spartan mystique was hijacked by fascists and Nazis as the ideal barracks nation, in which institutionalized militarism ensured discipline, patriotism, and authoritarianism—and superiority over purportedly decadent democracies. The Spartan victory in the Peloponnesian War was offered as proof of that alleged predominance. Hermann Göring, in unhinged fashion, assured the German people that the trapped Sixth Army at Stalingrad was making a courageous last stand in the manner of the three hundred Spartans at Thermopylae—as if Nazi invaders were Greek defenders, as if waging genocidal aggression were analogous to the defensive fight for constitutional freedom.

Meanwhile, Soviet and radical Trotskyite “Spartacus” leagues had adopted Sparta for its fondness for forced, institutionalized equality, egalitarian monotonies of common dress, landholding, sustenance, and housing, and the absence of minted coinage. All were seen by the nineteenth- and twentieth-century Left as the moral forebears of an empowered Western commune of the proletariat.

Rahe's empathy for Sparta is, of course, quite different. Sparta, along with Crete, originated the idea of tripartite consensual government with legislative, judicial, and executive checks and balances. The Spartan Constitution

was later often acknowledged as the basis for subsequent Western constitutional monarchy and republicanism. Its inherent political stability made Sparta mostly free of the coups and revolutions found elsewhere in the Greek world. And while Sparta operated on a brutal suppression of the helots, a more insidious chattel slavery was for the most part absent from the classical Spartan state, as were the bugbears of massive overseas colonization and maritime empire. Moreover, its unmatched hoplite army was often put to Panhellenic use, most famously by the three hundred at Thermopylae and as the “Dorian Spear” that crushed the Persians at Plataea.

Rahe emphasizes the underappreciated dynamism of the Spartan constitutional system through its century-long deadly encounters with two powers greater than itself in terms of manpower, material wealth, and empire—Achaemenid Persia and imperial Athens. But the successful war against Xerxes (480–479 B.C.) and Sparta's role in the cold war that followed (479–454 B.C.), together with some forty-five years of fighting against Athens in the successful First (460–444 B.C.) and Second (431–404/3 B.C.) Peloponnesian Wars, cannot be understood alone by traditional measurements of polis dynamism. Sparta's population was relatively small (it could usually field only about ten thousand hoplite soldiers). It had few if any natural resources other than the fertility of Laconia and Messenia. Sparta was not monetized to any great degree. It had no easily exchangeable currency or reserves of gold and silver bullion.

Further, Sparta was an inland state, with only a rudimentary port at Gythium, some twenty-seven miles distant. While it eventually built a large fleet with Persian subsidies, for most of its history it either had little need of triremes or relied upon naval support from allies. Unwalled Sparta had few forts to speak of, and certainly nothing comparable to the vast Long Walls of Athens or Corinth.

That Sparta was located deep in the southern Peloponnese offered natural defense—as the Persians learned in 480 B.C. But as the city-state turned expeditionary, such remoteness ensured that Spartan hoplites faced formidable logistical

and tactical problems in marching northward through the narrow Corinthian Isthmus to the distant “dancing floor of war” in Boeotia, or in detouring southeastward into Attica, or in continuing northward into Thessaly and Macedon.

Herodotus relates a curious scene, from the Ionian Revolt (499–493 B.C.) in Asia Minor, of Ionian Greek heralds under Aristagoras (the Ionian leader of Miletus) failing to enlist Spartan help—in part because the parochial Spartans had little concept of Asian–Aegean geography, and thus no inkling of the vast size of the Persian Empire. So Spartan leaders were shocked to learn from their Greek brethren that Susa was a three-months’ journey from the Aegean coast—and thus hardly worth the cost of a proposed Panhellenic march into such a vast interior.

In other words, what made Sparta powerful were its institutions, its traditions, its ethos, and its stable and pragmatic constitution. In a society stereotyped as parochial and unimaginative, it is not surprising to learn that the most innovative, daring, and often successful generals on any side of the war were sons of helot mothers, renegades, and connivers in constant rivalries with stodgy Spartan kings and ephors. Brasidas, Gylippus, and Lysander, almost alone in the Peloponnesian War, mastered grand Spartan strategy, fathomed the intrinsic vulnerabilities of Athens, and understood the need for alliances with those with money and ships. All three were subversive iconoclasts, and not surprisingly all suffered violent deaths in battle or disappeared amid scandal.

Rahe’s current volume covers the end of the First Peloponnesian War down to about halfway through the Second Peloponnesian War. He focuses mostly on the so-called Archidamian War (431–422 B.C.) and the first years of the Peace of Nicias (421–414 B.C.), known to Greeks of the time ironically as the aborted “Fifty-Year Peace.”

Concerning the first years of the war, Pericles’ decision not to contest the soil of Attica, but to retreat inside the city walls before an invincible Lacedaemonian invading army, proved catastrophic. Rahe rightly notes that the ossified Spartan strategy of agricultural devastation

could neither prompt the Athenians to come out to contest their occupied farmland (and thus be defeated) nor do enough damage in brief invasions to starve the city out. Yet no one counted on the great plague of 430–429 B.C., which ran rampant in the crowded and fetid city and destroyed a quarter of the Attic population.

With the epidemic came the death of the hexagenarian Pericles, the shrewd architect of three decades of Athenian imperialism. Athenian seaborne raids around the Peloponnese had accomplished little. Athenian tributary allies such as the large island of Lesbos had begun to waver that Athenians could no longer collect their tribute, and so they revolted. An ill-fated Athenian invasion of Boeotia ended up in a decisive defeat by Thebes at Delium.

Sparta was winning. But, as Rahe notes, it gained traction largely by remaining cautious and reactive. In this regard Bismarck’s purported quip about the United States—“God has a special providence for fools, drunkards, and the United States”—applies well to Sparta. During the Archidamian War, it was the beneficiary of Athens’s blunders and bad luck, rather than its own insight and daring. Sparta’s unimaginative invasions of Athens ceased once Athens finally, in 425 B.C., stumbled upon an innovative strategy of sending an expeditionary force deep inside the Peloponnese to encourage helot insurrections at Pylos, while defeating a small and hapless Spartan force on the nearby island of Sphacteria.

The unthinkable then happened when 292 Spartan survivors of the battle surrendered and were brought to Athens. The democracy threatened Sparta with their executions, should they ever invade Attica again. Up to this point, as Rahe points out, Sparta’s conservatism had played well. But after Sphacteria, the pace of the war by needs accelerated. A humbled and shocked Sparta now took risks, as the general Brasidas sought to break apart the Athenian empire far to the north. When the proverbial “mortar and pestle” of the war, Brasidas and the Athenian Cleon, were killed at Amphipolis, the two exhausted belligerents settled for a breather in 421 B.C.

During this cold war, the brilliant Athenian schemer Alcibiades persuaded the Argives and

other anti-Spartan forces in the Peloponnese to prompt war with Sparta at Mantinea (418 B.C.), the battle which the historian Thucydides considered the greatest of his age.

Rahe sees the ensuing Spartan close-run victory during the “peace” as the “turning point” of the entire war. Sparta’s Peloponnesian alliance was now secure. Its military superiority was restored after the disgrace of Sphacteria. Athens was stymied. And in desperation, the democracy soon restarted the war and shortly suffered its greatest catastrophe, as it sent forty thousand men of its empire into oblivion on distant Sicily—ironically seeking to destroy the Greek world’s other large democracy, Syracuse.

So Rahe ends his engaging volume not with the Peace of Nicias, as one might have expected, but with Mantinea. After that win, a new generation of Spartans, most notably Gylippus and Lysander, soon crafted a grand alliance of victory comprising Boeotians, Sicilians, defecting Athenian subjects, and Persian money—beating the Athenian navy, and thus at last ending the twenty-seven-year-long war. We await the final two volumes of Rahe’s remarkable history to learn how Sparta won the final phase of the Peloponnesian War, but then eventually proved as inept a hegemon as it had been preeminent in war.

Finally, we must ask whether Athens could have won the Peloponnesian War. As the conflict ended, a youth in Thebes must have studied the Athenian strategic lessons of their respective successes and failures at Sphacteria and Mantinea. And thereby he learned to appreciate the utility of urban fortifications, the popular resonance of democracy, the Achilles’ heel of Sparta (the helot), and the need for strategic focus. So, thirty-three years after the defeat of Athens, the great Theban liberator Epaminondas defeated and humiliated Spartan invaders at Leuctra. And then, the following winter, he mustered a massive Panhellenic hoplite army, staged a preemptive invasion into the heart of the Peloponnese to destroy the Spartan alliance, encircled Sparta with the armies of the fortified democratic cities of Mantinea, Megalopolis, and Messene, and freed the Messenian helots—ending the

legendary dominance of Sparta for good and doing what Athens dreamed of but had never possessed the vision, discipline, and leadership to accomplish.

Steinbeck’s biology class

William Souder

Mad at the World:

A Life of John Steinbeck.

W. W. Norton & Company,

464 pages, \$32

reviewed by Kyle Smith

John Steinbeck had a paternal stance toward labor, toward migrant workers, toward the poor and desperate and meek—but not toward his own sons. Like other adamantly humanitarian novelists—Dickens, Tolstoy, and Salinger come to mind—he was far kinder to Humanity than the humans in his family. Despite ordering his second wife, Gwyn Conger (who had changed her name from Gwen), to undergo many abortions, she managed to give birth to two boys. She’d be putting the kids to bed upstairs in their Manhattan townhouse when Steinbeck would interrupt, telling her he needed her urgently downstairs to discuss something. Once he had pried her away, he’d prepare a cocktail for each of them and sit drinking in silence while he read the newspaper. When Gwyn politely reminded him he’d supposedly had something to discuss, he’d make two more drinks and remain mute. The boys’ mere existence seemed to chafe and irritate the novelist. Later he left the poor woman and married a third time. She believed the boys were the reason. “My only mistake,” she once said, “was in having children.”

The boys, Thom and John IV (called *Catbird*), had few illusions about their father’s nature. Other dads might rub a dog’s nose in his mess on the floor; Steinbeck did that *to Catbird* when the family sheepdog had an accident in the apartment. At this point the lad was three. He recalled later that his father once invented a game in which he’d encourage the boy to leap from his high chair and be caught by his father, giggling, in midair. John III and

John IV joyfully repeated this exercise several times until the father suddenly drew his arms away and allowed the kid to plunge to the floor. This, Steinbeck informed his son, was to be understood as a lesson that the old man would not always be there for him. John IV “would later say,” writes William Souder in his new biography *Mad at the World: A Life of John Steinbeck*, “that the great epiphany of his childhood was realizing that his father was an asshole.”

That last noun would have made a perfectly adequate title for this book: *Asshole: A Life of John Steinbeck*. The book isn’t a hatchet job because it doesn’t have to be; a dispassionate review of the known facts is bad enough. Steinbeck (1902–68) did maintain several close male friendships down the decades, especially with Ed Ricketts, a dealer in marine biological samples who popped up in various forms in Steinbeck’s fiction, most notably (and virtually undisguised) in the person of “Doc” in *Cannery Row* (1945) and its sequel, *Sweet Thursday* (1954). Apart from those male friendships, Steinbeck was a miserable, humorless loner who left a trail of wrecked personalities in his wake. Steinbeck was built to tell stories, a man who couldn’t stop writing and never did. Year after year, decade after decade, he was a workaholic, typically producing a thousand to four thousand words a day. By the time he died at sixty-six, he’d left a shelf full of books, several plays (*Of Mice and Men*, published in 1937 to huge sales that made Steinbeck a celebrity after many years of thankless toil, also won Steinbeck the New York Drama Critics Circle award when he adapted it for Broadway the following year), and the screenplays for the classic movies *Lifeboat* (directed by Alfred Hitchcock) and *Viva Zapata!* (Elia Kazan). He was only the fifth American novelist to win the Nobel Prize, in 1962.

In his lifetime Steinbeck was both a popular and literary novelist, roughly the peer of Ernest Hemingway, whom he acknowledged as a powerful influence. Another valid comparison is George Orwell, who, like Steinbeck, started out by turning away from the gentility of his background and a posh education, became a

sort of working-class tourist, found success by building his books around advocacy for the plight of the forgotten classes, but then turned anti-communist in maturity. Unlike Hemingway and Orwell, though, Steinbeck today seems to stand on the brink of cultural irrelevance; it’s possible that, despite his inclusion on contemporary school reading lists, he’ll simply fade out of common memory, the way such predecessors as Booth Tarkington and Sinclair Lewis did. In another twenty years, perhaps specialists will be the only ones even familiar with his work.

Souder makes only a half-hearted case for why we should still care about Steinbeck. *Mad at the World* isn’t really a literary biography (Souder is sparing with his analysis of the major books and barely mentions several of them), and it isn’t rich with telling biographical anecdote either, glossing matter of factly over such eyebrow-raising incidents as the one meeting between Steinbeck and Hemingway, when the latter broke a walking stick over his own head. Closing this strangely terse book, I was unable to supply an answer for why Souder wrote it; the author doesn’t demonstrate much passion either for or against his subject.

Souder does add one important new angle to understanding Steinbeck: basing his ideas on a decade or so of reporting about the widespread incidence of the brain disorder chronic traumatic encephalopathy, or CTE, Souder hypothesizes that Steinbeck, too, suffered from this condition. Prominent athletes who endured repeated blows to the head in sports such as football or boxing have been found post-mortem to have been afflicted by the disorder, which frequently drives its victims to mental illness and suicide. As a war correspondent for the *New York Herald Tribune* (he specifically wanted to write for “a big reactionary paper,” he told a friend), Steinbeck joined the invading force in Salerno, Italy, in September of 1943. He suffered two burst eardrums and a concussion during the attack, and his symptoms after the war were consistent with what we know now about CTE. Steinbeck endured sleeplessness and panic attacks, but like many other men who endured invisible injuries, seemed embarrassed to ac-

knowledge the extent of the damage in a world in which others had endured far worse, or been killed. He never went into detail about the extent of his injuries, as far as we know. Souder offers a theory that Hemingway also suffered from CTE, which is indeed plausible given Hemingway's fondness for boxing and other head-trauma-inducing activities such as breaking walking sticks over his own head. It would explain the unbearable pain that led to his suicide by shotgun.

But maybe Steinbeck was just consistently an asshole, before as well as after the war. In the spring of 1938 he started *The Grapes of Wrath*, writing at such a torrid pace—two thousand words a day—that he was done with the first draft by the end of October, churning out 200,000 words in five months. As for the second draft, his first wife Carol (née Henning) engineered it. Steinbeck wrote in longhand, his scrawl almost completely covering densely packed pages. Carol not only typed the pages, but, as she typed, also edited, shaping and improving the manuscript. “It’s her book and she wants it right,” Steinbeck told his editor Pascal Covici at Viking. Carol was evidently so inflamed by the book’s themes that she joined the Communist Party, though Steinbeck himself never did. As Viking launched the book to mass acclaim and huge sales in the summer of 1939, Steinbeck was being dubbed a subversive, and he muttered darkly about plots to kill him by farming interests who objected to his portrayal of them as greedy and exploitative. (Souder tells us that Okies also hated the book, though he doesn’t go into detail.) Steinbeck didn’t revel in his success—he hated being recognized in public, disliked getting fan mail, and couldn’t bring himself to read his own books when finished—but as the book became the toast of the publishing world, he left the Monterey, California, home he shared with Carol, went down to Los Angeles to check in on his Hollywood career, and immediately began an affair with a nineteen-year-old lounge singer, the aforementioned Gwen Conger. Steinbeck was thirty-seven and captivated by her beauty, which was indeed startling and stood in obvious contrast to Carol’s stevedore

looks. One friend marveled of Conger, “she was made for the bedroom.”

Steinbeck started writing doggerel for Gwen but kept Carol hanging on for some years and even took her on a boat trip to Mexican waters with his bio-entrepreneur friend Ricketts and other pals to collect marine samples, drink beer, and enjoy long bull sessions under the stars (“proto-existential gibberish,” in Souder’s words) as an escape from the news about the war spreading across Europe. The excursion resulted in the book *Sea of Cortez* (1941), which discusses all who were aboard except Carol, who goes unmentioned. When the adventurers finally ended their voyage in Monterey in April, Carol noted the presence among the welcoming party of a pretty strawberry blonde—Conger. When things came to a head, Steinbeck instructed the two women to work things out themselves: “I know you both love me, but . . . I think we need to have a confrontation. Whichever of you ladies needs me the most—that’s the woman I’m going to have.” Steinbeck then excused himself and repaired to a nearby bar. Gwen later recalled, “I was not ready for that kind of shit.” After things cooled off (Steinbeck decided to stay with Carol, then the pair separated ten days later), Steinbeck guiltily settled \$100,000 on Carol, which left him all but broke for the moment, before he married Gwen and made another fortune.

Steinbeck still sells well, but as time goes on the merely popular artists tend to disappear. It’s usually the critics, boffins, and other writers who keep a work alive down the generations. The academy has long since discarded Steinbeck, and his works no longer seem congruent with critical taste. As the late NYU professor James Tuttleton noted in these pages, “So completely has John Steinbeck . . . disappeared from academic courses in the twentieth-century American novel that it comes as something of a shock to be reminded that he was one of the most popular and beloved novelists of his time.”

That was twenty-five years ago. Could there be a resurgence in interest in Steinbeck? Souder’s book is unlikely to spark it; he is aware that much of Steinbeck’s writing consisted of

cornball fables, such as *Of Mice and Men* (1937) and *The Pearl* (1947). *East of Eden* (1952) is well executed, but it's also a high-toned soap, despite its Biblical reach. *Travels with Charley* (1962), Steinbeck's beloved book about a lengthy road trip he took with a poodle, was initially hailed as an authentic slice of Americana built on vigorous reporting and sharp observation, but is today understood as a work of fiction. "Thom and I are convinced that he never talked to any of those people," Catbird later said. "He just sat in his camper and wrote all that shit. He was too shy. He was really frightened of people who saw through him. He couldn't have handled that amount of interaction."

The Grapes of Wrath seems to be the Steinbeck book that stands the best chance of enduring into the next generation, given that it's so angry and *engagé*, but its class-based outrage is now outmoded, having been displaced by identity politics. Today's "oppressed" are the sexual and racial minorities who frequently enjoy lofty positions in the culture, whereas the descendants of Steinbeck's Okies may be poor, but they're also deplorable Trump voters and Fox News watchers, hence unworthy of our sympathy. Good luck finding much concern for Dust Bowl refugees on today's campus, even if you could find anyone at State U who was willing or able to plow through a five-hundred-page novel set in the 1930s.

Souder dips into Steinbeck's intellectual development only now and again, but it bears emphasis that in the second half of his creative life the novelist repudiated the animating principle of the first half. According to Steinbeck's theory of the "phalanx," living beings were mere particles in a "group unit," a mega-organism such as coral. Steinbeck's reporting on migrant camps in the San Joaquin Valley for *The San Francisco News* in 1936 introduced him to irresistible living evidence of his theory—the New Deal collectivist innovation of Weedpatch, a sanitary campground built by the Farm Resettlement Administration (later renamed the Farm Security Administration) in Bakersfield. Steinbeck described Weedpatch in holy tones in the novel he wrote two years later and so deeply admired Weedpatch's ad-

ministrator Tom Collins (barely fictionalized as Jim Rawley in *The Grapes of Wrath*) that he dedicated the book to him. The Communist overtones seemed evident—Weedpatch is a commune, after all—but Steinbeck was at best ambivalent about the party and was nearly as harsh on its field organizers as he was on the capitalist farmers in his 1936 strike novel *In Dubious Battle*. But like other New Dealers, such as Ronald Reagan, the novelist became a fierce anti-communist after the war, then a vocal supporter of the war in Vietnam, which he covered as a correspondent for *Newsday* in his final years. In *East of Eden* (1952), Steinbeck explicitly disavowed his favorite Thirties theme with this interjection in his own voice:

I believe this: that the free, exploring mind of the individual human is the most valuable thing in the world. . . . this I must fight against: any idea, religion or government which limits or destroys the individual. This is what I am and what I am about. I can understand why a system built on a pattern must try to destroy the free mind.

Alas, in his best years, being in thrall to a defective theory weakened his writing; only a handful of critics noticed this at the time, but his characters are essentially animals—sentimentalized and innocent playthings, victims, beasts of burden whose freight is Steinbeck's social message. They are emblems rather than living, breathing, complicated people. Much of Steinbeck's most impassioned writing places actual animals in the foreground, and what is Lennie in *Of Mice and Men* but a large, ignorant animal (as well as a cartoonish archetype of noble, suffering labor) that cannot be held responsible for the murder he commits any more than an ox that crushes a man under its hooves? Lennie's death at the hands of George amounts to being put down like any other wayward beast.

The liberal imagination overlooked Steinbeck's flaws because he shared and expertly played on the Left's preoccupation with backing the apparent underdog of any situation, which necessarily leads to pretending that people are not responsible for their actions—

that every vagrant or laborer or criminal is just like Lennie, the hapless idiot. “What is constant in Mr. Steinbeck is his preoccupation with biology,” wrote Edmund Wilson in 1941, pinpointing “Mr. Steinbeck’s tendency to present human life in animal terms.” Steinbeck compares the slow progress of the Joad family to that of a turtle, for instance, and its journey is “accompanied and parodied all the way by animals, insects, and birds.” Steinbeck was oblivious to the way human motivation actually works, in all of its funky and funny and very often unlovely fullness, preferring to reduce man to primitive aspects suited to simplistic just-so stories targeted for what is today a high-school or even middle-school sensibility. Steinbeck anticipated an entire category of immensely profitable writing that is today referred to as “YA”—“young adult”—literature, young adults being not yet attuned to mawkishness and cliché. Though Steinbeck was fueled by the same angry urge to smite injustice as Orwell (born a year later), he left us with nothing as informed or sophisticated as *Animal Farm* or *Nineteen Eighty-four*. Instead Steinbeck was content to ladle out folk wisdom and tear-jerking parables based on a superficially biological view of a species that didn’t much interest him—*Homo sapiens*.

The playing fields of Eton

Robert Colls

This Sporting Life: Sport and Liberty in England, 1760–1960.

Oxford University Press, 416 pages, \$32.95

reviewed by Simon Heffer

On the first page of his absorbing, original, and entertaining account of the place of sport in England between 1760 and 1960, *This Sporting Life*, Professor Robert Colls writes that one of the aims of his book is to dwell upon what another English academic, Ross McKibbin, meant when he called sport “one of the most powerful of England’s civil cultures.” McKibbin was right, not least because sport cuts across England’s noted—or, to some, notorious—

class system in a way that other civil cultures (which find themselves deemed either excessively proletarian or elitist) do not.

That does not mean, as Colls points out, that there are not sports, or aspects of sport, that find themselves rooted in class. For example, it was the landowning, or old upper, class who controlled (and insofar as a version of it still exists, continues to control) foxhunting; the middle class tagged along and often did not pay their subscriptions or other fees; and the working men of a foxhunting district (Colls concentrates on the center of the English sport, Leicestershire, in which happily his university also exists) came too, as foot followers. This is sport as an example of social unification; it is outside the timescale of Colls’s book to dwell on why this particular sport, foxhunting, was banned—up to a point—by the Blair administration in 2003. It had nothing to do with one class’s resentment of another—all those braying toffs on their fine horses, sailing over hedgerows in the English midlands while pursuing “Charlie” and, in some cases, seeing him ripped to shreds by a pack of hounds. It was that urban dwellers, who now form the great majority of the English population and have less idea of the ecology of the countryside than most people do about brain surgery, allowed themselves to be manipulated by a tiny group of fanatics—mostly hard leftists—into believing that the instantaneous killing of vermin was some sort of affront to civilization.

Colls’s other aim, which he achieves as completely as he does the first, is “to try and say something about England’s sporting life as it was lived and played.” This takes us very much back into class territory, for, until the nineteenth century, and well into it, it was predominantly the leisured classes who had the time to engage in sports seriously. Having found, in the Leicestershire County Record Office, the prized document that was Mrs. Minna Burnaby’s Hunting Diary for 1909–10, Colls is able to tell us that during that autumn and winter she rode to hounds on eighty-two days and took just eight falls. Given what challenging country the Quorn’s—her hunt’s—was, she must have been a fabulous horsewoman;

she records on one outing jumping “at least 100 fences,” all while riding sidesaddle. Look no further for the sport’s impact on English culture: these are the activities of Surtees’s Mr. Sponge and Jorrocks, of any number of gentry in Trollope, and of Siegfried Sassoon in *Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man*. Melton Mowbray was the center of this universe, the Master of Fox Hounds its God. Colls reminds us that when Churchill was preferred to Lord Halifax in 1940 for the prime ministership in Britain’s darkest hour, Halifax observed that he would rather be an MFH. In another cultural respect, the Hunt Ball was a crucial place either for a well-born young woman to seal a relationship with a well-born young man, or for the seasoned adulterers who populated hunts to add some more trophies to the vulpine ones they had accumulated that season. As another novelist of the chase, George Whyte-Melville, noted in *Market Harborough*, his character Cecilia Dove “would have passed muster as good-looking in London . . . therefore . . . she ought to have been placarded ‘dangerous’ in Leicestershire.”

With chases that lasted for miles and miles, hunts required the cooperation not just of local landowners—who, in return for having damage repaired by hunt servants almost instantaneously, were expected to play the game—but also by the tenantry, who might become obstructive and make things difficult. Their “deference” was invaluable. As Colls observes, “a country of stropky peasants would have made it impossible. In February 1915 the British army stopped fox hunting in France after complaints from *les paysans*.” Sometimes, it was not just the lower orders who could become difficult. When one Leicestershire squire was accused of allowing his gamekeeper to shoot a fox, he received a letter of terrifying rebuke from a man described as “the greatest sportsman the world ever knew since the days of the Assyrian Nimrod,” one Mr. George Osbaldeston, “expelled from Eton, recipient of a good 4th at Oxford, and one day to be thrown out of the MCC but for the time being Master of the Quorn,” who threatened to “call upon them at the earliest opportunity.” There appears to have been no further trouble. “Masters of Fox Hounds usu-

ally put themselves near the upper reaches of a county hierarchy that started with the lord lieutenancy at the top and ended with a seat on the magistrates’ bench near the bottom,” Colls writes. In Warwickshire, the MFH was second only to the Lord Lieutenant, “higher than all the big landowners and clergy, and way higher than MPs.” He was “an idealisation of the independent propertied Englishman.”

Such landowners regarded “flagrant humiliation in their own territory” as “intolerable.” When it came to their shooting rights, they were protected by the Game Laws, which meant that the grouse, pheasant, partridge, and hare on their land were for them, their families, and their guests alone to shoot. The rest was poaching, and until the mid-nineteenth century poachers could be flogged, imprisoned, or even transported to Australia. Sometimes, as at Weardale in northeast England in 1818, the local people turned on the gentry when they feared an overreaction against the poachers. Colls makes the point that a tiny percentage of people in England in the nineteenth century owned almost all the land, and if the tenantry didn’t like it they could emigrate, which many of them did. But poaching too has secured its place in English literature, art, and folk song: like hunting, it was “wrapped in territorial control, in military analogy, symbolic mastery, personal identity, courage, skill and sensation.”

But this is a book about far more than hunting and shooting, rich though Colls’s treatment of those sports is. Moving his focus down the social scale, he looks at boxing, or prizefighting, before it was codified by the Queensberry Rules later in the nineteenth century. Special trains would leave London well before dawn to transport huge crowds, attracted by the idea that plenty of “ruby” would be spilled, to the usually unpoliced rural parts where the bouts would take place. Men died, and the men who killed them often ended up before a court charged with manslaughter. The authorities—many of whom, with the aristocracy, were on those trains, and had the best seats at the ringside—took a lenient view of these misfortunes. “Of the thirty men tried at

the Old Bailey for prize-fighting manslaughter charges between 1856 and 1875,” Colls writes, “thirteen were acquitted and of the seventeen who were convicted, no one got more than six months.”

Colls shows how much sport originates in custom (which he cleverly defines as “the way in which the poor physically constituted and reconstituted themselves in order to remind their betters—and themselves—that they were there, that they had a history, that it was their country too”), such as the bull-running through the streets of Stamford in Lincolnshire that persisted until well into the nineteenth century. Attempts to stop it by the do-gooders of the recently formed National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals were, as with poaching, boxing, and other sports popular among the proletariat, foiled by a mass conspiracy to prevent the authorities from winning the day. When huge rewards were offered for information about those who organized the bull run, mouths were kept shut. Colls is a formidable historian of England and English identity, and he correctly identifies the nineteenth-century determination to maintain ancient practices, however barbaric, as a reaction to the industrialization of the country in the preceding decades. To him, it is an act designed to stop custom from “draining away.” This was a special cause of intellectuals later in the nineteenth and early in the twentieth centuries, typified by Ralph Vaughan Williams scouting the English countryside, looking for elderly people to sing him folk songs that otherwise would disappear and die with their singers.

The author devotes, quite rightly, a large section of the book to the link between education and the growth of sport. The public schools led the way in this in the nineteenth century. Their most famous symbol, Dr. Arnold of Rugby, had no known connection with sport, but his regime produced men who became the “muscular Christians” of the next generation and the one after it, for whom sport carried a moral message not merely about playing on a team and by the rules, but of the importance of giving of one’s best and seek-

ing to win—for then there was no shame in defeat. Colls perhaps understates the way this informed and underpinned British culture in the nineteenth century, at a time when cricket was a metaphor for life. The cult spread from boys to girls, as girls’ schools took off: it was meant to divert adolescent minds from sex but seldom did.

Colls does not dwell on the painful fact that scores of thousands of young men who learned to “play the game” in the late-Victorian and Edwardian public schools were part of the unreturning army of 1918. The theme of sport as an expression of liberty runs through the book, and the fact that many sportsmen died to defend freedom during the twentieth century ought not to be lost on any of us; nor that sport flourished because of the constant search for heroes, of which two ghastly wars provided the English with more than enough. He concludes, instead, on the ascent of association football (“soccer” in America) as England’s most popular game, and of the days just over half a century ago when a top-flight professional footballer was paid little more than a skilled laborer, rather than the millions a year they now rake in. But perhaps his most powerful point comes in his conclusion: “Patriotism in the English tradition is more a belief in each other than in greatness.” Team spirit is everything.

Easy being green

Bjorn Lomborg

False Alarm: How Climate Change Panic Costs Us Trillions, Hurts the Poor, and Fails to Fix the Planet.
Basic Books, 320 pages, \$30

reviewed by William Happer

For many years, the Danish economist Bjorn Lomborg has bravely contested the lie that a “climate apocalypse” is the greatest threat to humanity. He correctly points out that humanity faces much more serious problems than climate change. Much of the world’s population is trying to cope with real problems

such as hunger, disease, a lack of economic opportunity, and a lack of access to clean water or electricity. The world could solve these real problems for a fraction of the cost of “fighting climate change,” which probably is not a problem at all. We can be thankful for Lomborg’s recent book, *False Alarm*, an excellent summary of the madness, hypocrisy, and cynicism of the climate-alarm establishment.

Lomborg is right that hysteria over climate change is a “false alarm,” a “singular obsession” that

means that we are now going from wasting billions of dollars on ineffective policies to wasting trillions. At the same time, we’re ignoring ever more of the world’s more urgent and much more tractable challenges. And we’re scaring kids and adults witless, which is not just factually wrong but morally reprehensible.

But he is wrong to insist that “climate change” generally, and increasing levels of atmospheric carbon dioxide specifically, are problems that need solving. To cite a few examples of this peculiar delusion, on page 37 we read, “Yes, global warming is real, and it needs our serious attention.” Section 4 is entitled “How to Fix Climate Change.” On page 171, we find “Yet if we can innovate the price of green energy down below that of fossil fuels, we will be on the pathway to fixing climate change.” In the closing remarks on page 221, we get this sop to conventional wisdom, “We definitely need to address global warming—it’s a real problem.” But these are assertions of religious dogma, not scientific facts. Lomborg makes no serious attempt to explain why “it’s a real problem.”

It is puzzling that an intelligent person like Lomborg has signed on to the dogma that the climate needs fixing. In reality, climate alarmism is the latest version of Plato’s “noble lie,” promoted in our generation to protect and extend the privileges of the Davos elite and elite wannabes. Perhaps his fellow Dane, Hans Christian Andersen, put his finger on the reason in his classic tale of the emperor’s new clothes. As the purveyors of these imaginary

clothes explained to the vain emperor: “Not only were their colors and patterns uncommonly fine, but clothes made of this cloth had a wonderful way of becoming invisible to anyone who was unfit for his office, or who was unusually stupid.” Who wants to be perceived as unfit for office or unusually stupid? But this is only part of the price you must pay if you express public skepticism about the alleged threat of climate change.

The climate-alarm enterprise has been remarkably successful in persuading scientifically illiterate people, many well-meaning, that there is a climate crisis. A global elite, with members ranging from preening billionaires to narcissistic academics who should know better, wring their hands over the supposed threat of global warming. They bemoan the fact that evil “deniers” are unwilling to surrender their freedom to save the planet. Some have suggested that “deniers” should be tried, jailed, or even executed.

If challenged to back up their hysteria, most alarmists will say something like “I am not a scientist, but 99 percent of scientists agree that we are all going to die from climate change.” How should we respond to this alleged scientific consensus? General McAuliffe provided the right answer: “Nuts.”

In his farewell address to fellow Americans in 1961, President Eisenhower warned:

The prospect of domination of the nation’s scholars by Federal employment, project allocation, and the power of money is ever present and is gravely to be regarded.

Yet in holding scientific discovery in respect, as we should, we must also be alert to the equal and opposite danger that public policy could itself become the captive of a scientific-technological elite.

Eisenhower was prescient. Climate alarmism is promoted by a well-paid “scientific-technological elite.” They get lots of help from many others, who benefit from government actions taken to “combat climate change” but who have no scientific knowledge. The real problem is not climate change, but stupidity, groupthink, greed for money, greed for power,

and so on. Age-old flaws of the human character are disguised as concern for the planet.

There is little evidence that the climate needs fixing, even if that were something humans could do. To teach fawning courtiers a lesson on the limits of elite power, another Dane, the tough old Viking King Canute, commanded the tides to stop. The tides did as they pleased, much to the embarrassment of the courtiers. The climate will continue to change, as it has throughout all of geological history. But in Chapter 14, “Geoengineering, a Backup Plan,” Lomborg approvingly discusses schemes to stop climate change by artificially loading our blues skies with real pollutants—like sulfur dioxide of acid-rain notoriety. Talk about a cure that is worse than a non-existent disease!

Increasing levels of carbon dioxide have already led to a substantial greening of the Earth, and have contributed, along with good farming practices, to the spectacular increase of agricultural yields around the world. Much of the modest warming over the past century is likely a continuation of the natural rebound of temperatures from their lows in the Little Ice Age (*ca.* 1300–1870) that caused so much misery around the world and which helped to drive Norse farmers from once-clement southern Greenland.

Changes of CO₂ concentration make little difference to the energy Earth radiates to space. If you could suddenly double the concentration of CO₂ you would decrease the average thermal radiation to space—around 250 watts per square meter)—by about 1%. A huge change of CO₂ concentrations, doubling, would cause a very tiny change of flux. And the small flux change would cause an even smaller change of temperature, about 1 °C. This modest temperature increase would almost certainly be beneficial to life on Earth. The local warming will be greater near the poles than near the equator, and greater at night than during the day. Observations strongly suggest that alleged positive feedbacks to the direct warming effects of CO₂ are much smaller than claimed. The feedbacks may well be negative. An old joke about scientific theories is all too true for climate science: “Getting the sign right is the hardest thing!”

Sea levels are rising at the same rate as a century ago; extreme weather is not increasing; none of the lurid predictions of a climate apocalypse have shown any sign of happening. And yet the media gulls us with incessant climate gloom.

Lomborg has a misplaced faith that governments, spending money extorted from taxpayers, can solve every problem, including the non-problem of greenhouse gases. On page 170 he states “The technology of fracking has been around since at least 1947, but it took public resources to the tune of hundreds of millions of dollars from the U.S. Department of Energy and perhaps \$10 billion in tax credits for private enterprise to innovate procedures to frack gas profitably.” In fact, the United States government, and big oil companies, had almost nothing to do with the development of fracking. Much of the credit belongs to George Phydias Mitchell, the Texan son of Greek immigrants. In the face of many obstacles and dry holes, Mitchell’s independent oil company stubbornly refused to give up and finally made fracking a success.

One of the most disgusting tactics of the climate-alarm establishment has been to terrify credulous children. From time to time I get anguished emails from young people who don’t expect to reach adulthood because of impending climate doom. It does not help to point out the complete lack of scientific support for alarm. Children have been brain-washed to believe that greenhouse gases will soon destroy life on Earth. They have not been taught how to think for themselves. In his introduction, Lomborg cites the sign held by a young girl:

YOU’LL DIE OF OLD AGE
I WILL DIE OF CLIMATE CHANGE.

The book has a good bibliography, including internet links that work. Despite mistaking increases of beneficial carbon dioxide as a problem that he and other global elites must solve, Lomborg has done an excellent job pointing out that climate fears are indeed a “false alarm,” misdirecting time and resources away from real, and soluble, problems.

The fogey king

Jeremy Black

George III: Madness and Majesty.

Allen Lane, 144 pages, £14.99

reviewed by George William Rutler

Backstage after a performance of Alan Bennett's play *The Madness of George III*, Princess Margaret asked Nigel Hawthorne, who played the lead, what caused her ancestor's sad derangement. The Queen's sister, not usually taciturn, received in silence the reply: "It is hereditary, Ma'am." The common diagnosis of porphyria has more recently been disputed by a study of the Royal College of Surgeons, which attributes the king's alleged madness to a bipolar disorder and dementia due to the neurotoxicity of recurring mania.

Howbeit, the king who reigned for six decades, and who was anything but the tyrant the Declaration of Independence portrayed him to be, is known less for his majesty and more for his madness, even to the absurd extent of the ridiculous caricature in the musical *Hamilton*. Jeremy Black, the astonishingly prolific author of a lengthy biography of "America's Last King," corrects many misperceptions in this small volume, a worthy part of the Penguin Monarchs series, which Black rightly calls "superb."

From an American perspective, it is worth remembering that the king told his Philadelphia court painter, Benjamin West, at the end of the Revolution, that if Washington returned to his farm rather than taking a crown, he would be "the greatest man in the world." (The king had first contradicted his advisors in wanting to keep fighting after Yorktown.) Nonetheless, Washington desired to be something like the "Patriot King" that the Hanoverian king really was, although at times this was compromised, as when the monarch peremptorily dismissed William Pitt in 1801, who by way of justification was little less than a megalomaniac. Washington referred to himself in a regal third person and at first favored the title "His High Mightiness, the President of the United States and Protector of Their Liberties." Although Black does not mention

the 2008 television miniseries *John Adams*, he does record the conversation between the king and the new ambassador, which the script by Kirk Ellis quotes verbatim, and which gives a good sense of the monarch's courtesy and wit. Nor was he lacking in aplomb and even bravery when he kept his calm during assassination attempts in 1795 and 1800.

Of the Hanoverian line, George III was the first who could claim birth on British soil, and at the age of ten recited from Joseph Addison's play *Cato*: "What, tho' a boy! It may with truth be said, A boy in *England* born, in *England* bred." But the culture of the German principalities where he sent his sons to study was an abiding influence. After all, he took seriously his office as Elector of Hanover and was married to Sophia Charlotte of Mecklenburg-Strelitz, the mother of his fifteen children in a union far more congenial than that of George II with Caroline of Brandenburg-Ansbach and George IV with the lamentable Caroline of Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel. Their marital bliss anticipated that of George's granddaughter Victoria and her husband, Albert, but without their mawkishness. Through an exotic descent from Alfonso III of Portugal and his African mistress, Queen Charlotte may have been a mulatto, or so some said. The king died in 1820, blind and deaf, unaware that his queen had died two years earlier.

George's obedience to his coronation oath made him a stalwart steward of the Church of England, his commitment one of genuine piety, making him nearly a "clerical monarch," although his abolition of slavery fifty years before Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation was purely pragmatic, lacking the moral zeal of many evangelical Christians. Catholic Emancipation, about which he harbored great reservations, was more difficult for him than what to do about the slave trade, although he not infrequently socialized with leading Catholic recusants and provided a huge annuity for the younger son of James III, who as Henry IX was both a Stuart claimant and a cardinal. Some of the American Founding Fathers scorned him as a "Papist" for granting toleration to Catholics in Quebec. His Irish policy was much more myopic, while a statue

of him in the national Catholic seminary which he founded at Maynooth is a memorial to his calculation rather than his charity. Thousands of Catholic clergy and laity fleeing the French Terror were given a welcome refuge in Britain, and later George had the sympathy of the Holy See in the Napoleonic Wars. In Windsor Castle hangs a portrait of the Papal Secretary of State, Cardinal Consalvi, who was a close friend of the king's prime minister Lord Castlereagh. Professor Black is as incisive about the king's attitudes in many more such matters, as he was in his scholarly studies of Walpole and Pitt the Elder.

Born two months prematurely, and baptized immediately for fear that he would not live, George achieved survival before modern obstetrics—a remarkable feat—and he attributed his life to his wet nurse. Long before age took its toll, his demeanor and conservative censoriousness of louche aristocrats made him what might be called a “young fogey.” But this was mitigated by his instinctive kindness to all classes and his humor, which made his presence on travels around England so popular even through political upheavals. The Earl of Bute, for all purposes his surrogate father, fashioned his appreciation of the arts and sciences beyond the level of a mere dilettante, and as an expert bibliophile and horologist George III funded the Royal Academy, knighted Sir Joshua Reynolds, and entertained Samuel Johnson. He financed Captain Cook's first voyage to the Pacific and established the botanical gardens at Kew, Calcutta, and in the Antilles. William Herschel, alluding to Virgil's *Georgics*, named the newly discovered planet Uranus “Georgium Sidus,” and that bestowal of immortality was not mere court flattery. One wishes that Black would have used his literary skill to describe the audience that His Majesty gave to the first ordained Native American minister, Samson Ocom, a Mohegan, which inspired the king to charter Dartmouth College in the wilds of New Hampshire.

Of two earlier biographers, John Plumb was less sympathetic than John Brooke, whose book has a foreword by Prince Charles, but Jeremy Black is perhaps more balanced than

both, with a use of archival sources that supports his degree of respect and, may it be said, admiration, for the stately “Farmer George” who seemed happiest when raising pigs.

While interest in the majestic and eventually mad monarch ebbs and flows according to the spirit of the times, this contribution to the Penguin Monarchs series pays well-tempered tribute to the man whose influence touched Cape Town, Java, Australia, Nepal, India, Canada, and Africa, and who still is a name to be reckoned with today.

Urban apes

Greg Woolf

The Life and Death of Ancient Cities: A Natural History.

Oxford University Press, 528 pages, \$34.95

reviewed by Paul Cartledge

It's hard to escape cities these days, both in reality (by 2100—COVID-19 or other pandemics permitting—maybe as much as 75 percent of humanity will be living or existing in one) and in a ferocious multiplicity of imagined projections. “Sin,” “ancient,” “epic,” “world,” “imperial,” “consumer,” “pre-industrial,” “shadow,” “globalized,” “drifting,” “invisible,” “migrant,” not to mention “imaginary”—these are just some of the epithets I've recently seen bestowed on monographs, novels, movies, and comic-strip cartoons of which the second term in the title is “city” or “cities.” As the co-editor of an academic monograph series in which Arjan Zuiderhoek's *The Ancient City* recently appeared, and as the author of a forthcoming article on “urbicide” (the killing of cities and citizens) in the ancient Greek world, I have some considerable skin in this particular game. But my expertise, my learning, are nothing compared to those of the author of the work or, rather, the massive tome under review here, *The Life and Death of Ancient Cities*.

Professor Greg Woolf is, as we Brits say, “Oxbridge-educated,” with a first degree from Oxford and a doctorate from Cambridge. He is a former professor of ancient history at St

Andrews, currently the Director of the Institute of Classical Studies at the University of London, and will soon relocate to the United States to take up a post at UCLA. He is a historian, as opposed to a mere ancient historian, of a very broadly comparativist bent, but with a special expertise in Rome and the Roman Empire, and possessed of an extreme degree of theoretical sophistication. He was therefore just the sort of scholar and writer to conceive and take on the formidable task of writing a species of biographical history of cities as they have existed in the “old” (Asiatic, Eurasian, European, north African) world or worlds between 4000 B.C. and the present, but more restrictedly about 600 A.D.

It is very difficult to summarize the book adequately, but certain themes emerge repeatedly and forcefully. Against Aristotle (who is, I feel, rather underplayed and completely un-indexed), Professor Woolf argues that mankind as a species is not unusually well suited to city life, though Aristotle’s Greek *polis* (whence his definitional “a living creature designed by nature to find fullest development within the framework of the *polis*”) was of course just one rather peculiar and historically overdetermined variety or mode of city association. A city for Woolf, however, as for Aristotle, is not just a place but more a matter of personal identity or self-identification. That mankind did choose to fashion and inhabit cities—as early as about 4000 B.C. in what is southern Iraq today—was not, however, due to any grand planning or prior organization but, rather, to pre-adaptation and, significantly, to “blind” chance. The most relevant and universal historical variables are defensibility, habitable environment/ecology, and availability of water and food—in a word, security.

Woolf evaluates ancient mankind’s urban experience and especially the “spectacular story of the growth and withering away of ancient Mediterranean urbanism” along two main axes—size and location. Size is not, of course, everything, but it strikes him, comparatively, how few really big cities—what he calls “megapolises” of over one hundred thousand permanent inhabitants with a density of ten to twenty thousand people per square kilometer—there ever were in the ancient Greco-Roman

world, perhaps only a dozen or so in all. And that out of a maximum total of perhaps two thousand worldwide. It also strikes him how relatively small most Mediterranean-basin or near-Mediterranean cities were, numbering only some four to five thousand perhaps. He is also keen that we should not over-emphasize the importance of cities from the point of view of the “ordinary” ancient person’s lived experience: in the peak ancient urban apogee of the second century A.D., for example, he suggests that some 75 percent lived not in cities but in villages, hamlets, or scattered farms. Indeed, he goes so far as to claim that “the Mediterranean world was always better suited to life in villages than in great conurbations,” better suited in a sustainable, material, ecological-environmental sense to cope resiliently with the “regular catastrophes” of Mediterranean life.

If, however, what is of interest or importance is civilization (derived from the Latin *civilitas*, itself a derivation of *civis* or citizen) or high culture, then the role of cities as vectors, as cultural transformers, is undeniable. With the earliest cities (the “Uruk phenomenon”) came a form of state (centralized political structure), metallurgy, and—not least—writing. Urbanism thereby conferred some competitive cultural advantage—or was perceived to do so. Hence in response to different selective pressures there arose urban civilizations—a phenomenon which, Woolf is keen to emphasize, has happened again and again on numerous occasions across the globe: in the Amazon basin, in the Indus valley, or in China no less, sometimes much more, than in the Mediterranean.

This book, despite its impressive breadth, is not, however, without its flaws, some of which are more easily corrigible (numerous typos, excess of repetition, inadequate index) than others (general avoidance of the word “town” as a middle term between “village” and “city”; no clear definition given of “city”; too few descriptions of actual ancient urban environments; too loose use of the word “natural,” both explicitly in the subtitle of the book as a whole and implicitly in quasi- or pseudo-evolutionary arguments deployed in individual chapters). Although Professor

Woolf's reading is omnivorous, it is not quite all-encompassing, at least as exhibited in his forty-one-page bibliography, of which no fewer than 136 items have "city" or "state" or some variant in their title: I missed citation of, for instance, Aidan Southall's *The City in Time and Space* (1998), Charles Gates's *Ancient Cities: The Archaeology of Urban Life in the Ancient Near East and Egypt, Greece and Rome* (2003), and John Reader's *Cities* (2004). But these flaws are worth getting over: the writing is thick-textured so as to incite re-reading, and the whole is appreciably more than the sum of its parts—of which there are four: "An Urban Animal," "An Urban Mediterranean," "Imperial Urbanisms," and "De-Urbanization" articulated into twenty chapters.

Some of the repetition (resumption, recapitulation), probably, is due to a concern for readers who—unlike conscientious reviewers—do not read from cover to cover but dip in and out of particular chapters or sections that interest them. But that does lead to a certain choppy—and to the occasional sense that a discussion (or digression) would have been better placed elsewhere or, if already placed elsewhere, better cut altogether or simply cross-referenced. Much of the first part, too, operates at a rather high level of transcultural, certainly transhistorical generality, though it is also studded with many flashes of insight. The first Mediterranean cities are not firmly addressed as such until over a hundred pages in, which tells two things mainly: first, that Professor Woolf is extremely interested in and well up to date on the latest ethological and social-psychological as well as anthropological and economic research into *Homo sapiens* as "urban ape," a species or sub-species of animal; and, second, that Mediterranean cities of the "ancient" (Greek, Hellenistic, Roman, late Antique) eras or worlds can, in his view, be properly understood only against that far larger frame of reference—which occasionally is extended as far west as the Americas and as far east as the very far east of Asia.

But this worthy book contains multitudes, and as interesting and certainly as instructive as Professor Woolf's studies of urbanization

are the not-few cases of de-urbanization that he is able to explore, most conspicuously the (possible causes of the) decline or rather transformation of the late Roman antique world. *Sic transiit antiqua gloria mundi urbani.*

He lived for uncertainties

John Campbell

Haldane: The Forgotten Statesman
Who Shaped Britain and Canada.
McGill-Queen's University Press,
616 pages, \$49.95

reviewed by John P. Rossi

Of the quartet of political giants who created Britain's welfare state—Lloyd George, Winston Churchill, Henry Asquith, and Richard Haldane—only the latter has been neglected by historians. The last major study of his career appeared over fifty years ago, and yet a case can be made that Haldane was a major architect of the changes that began the transformation of Britain into a modern state.

John Campbell, a student of economic history and the co-founder of Campbell-Lutyens, an international equity fund, sets out to do justice to Haldane's role in the history of modern Britain. His book is an exhaustive study of various aspects of Haldane's career: his interest in philosophy; his contributions to the modernization of the British educational system; his role in the constitutional history of Canada; and, most importantly, the military reforms he carried out at the War Office in the years before World War I. The book is long, backed by a close study of Haldane's papers, and fortified with seventy-one pages of notes. And yet it is not a fully satisfying work.

Instead of a formal biography, Campbell has opted for an organizational structure that at times is frustrating and often repetitive. The author constantly uses the phrase "we will explore this topic further in a later chapter," which is never a good idea, especially in a biography. Rather than treat Haldane's life chronologically, Campbell opts for a thematic approach, with long chapters on Haldane's philosophical

investigations, his interest in law reform (he twice was Lord Chancellor, the highest judicial position in Great Britain), his role in creating a modern university system, and his efforts in creating a staff system for the British army. All this placed Haldane at the center of every major controversy in Britain between 1890 and 1925. The man would have been better served by a traditional biography—something along the lines of Andrew Roberts’s recent life of Churchill—allowing the reader to watch as Haldane’s amazing career unfolds.

Richard Burdon Haldane was born to an upper-middle-class Scottish family in 1856. A bright young boy, he was sent at seventeen to the University of Göttingen, where he developed an appreciation for all things German, especially the philosophical ideas of Hegel. Germany would remain his spiritual home, an affinity that eventually cost him his political career during World War I. In the 1880s he became a highly successful lawyer and entered politics as an admirer of the Liberal statesman William Ewart Gladstone. But, unlike his mentor, Haldane believed that traditional laissez-faire liberalism was dead. He was one of the architects of what was called the New Liberalism, an attempt to replace the traditional Liberal themes of “Peace, Retrenchment, and Reform” by embracing the idea that individual liberty was compatible with state intervention.

At the same time, he fell under the influence of Lord Rosebery, the enigmatic Scot who fascinated and frustrated three generations of English politicians. Rosebery preached a doctrine of liberal imperialism, the belief that a flourishing empire was necessary for England’s prosperity to continue. Haldane sought to combine these approaches and, in the process, preserve the Liberal Party as a progressive force in English politics, against the threat of the emerging Labour Party that sought to become a new force on the left.

Haldane was appointed Secretary of State for War in the Liberal government that swept to power in 1906. His record there made his reputation. The British Army had performed miserably during the Boer War and was desperately in need of modernization. It was just the kind of problem that suited Haldane’s tem-

perament and what Campbell calls his “almost inhuman capacity for work.” In less than five years he set up an Imperial General Staff to compensate for the lack of planning during the South African war, created a Territorial force to reinforce the Army, instituted an Officer Training Corps to provide a steady supply of young officers, and became instrumental in establishing England’s first air force, the Royal Flying Corps. His work would bear fruit in 1914, when Britain was able to send troops to France in the opening stages of the war, a crucial development in the French defeat of Germany at the Battle of the Marne. Douglas Haig, the commander of the British forces in World War I, described Haldane as “the greatest Secretary of State for War England ever had,” a view now shared by most British military historians.

Despite his success at the War Office, Haldane’s reputation as a Germanophile led to the end of his career. The British press, led by Lord Northcliffe’s *Times* and the *Daily Mail*, assailed him as pro-German and conducted a campaign that blamed him for England’s setbacks in the early stages of the war. Here especially Campbell’s thematic approach hurts Haldane’s story. Campbell covers this incident in some detail, but it would have been better told in the context of the events that doomed the last Liberal government in 1915 and 1916, the shell shortage on the Western Front and the disastrous Dardanelles campaign. It is not fully clear why Haldane’s closest friends—figures like Asquith and Sir Edward Grey—didn’t fight harder to save him. This would have been clearer in a traditional biography, where the interplay of political forces would unfold against the chronology of events. Asquith’s biographer, Roy Jenkins, wrote that Asquith “capitulated sadly and self-critically, but relatively easily.” Haldane rebounded, though his career as a prominent Liberal fell victim to what the historian George Dangerfield has called the “Strange Death of Liberal England,” the disappearance of the Liberal Party as a major political force in English politics in the years following World War I.

In the last years of his life Haldane was an active supporter of expanding democracy. He

supported the women's suffrage movement that in 1918 gained the vote for women over thirty, while also endorsing universal manhood suffrage. These reforms tripled the electorate, the biggest addition of new voters in British history, and Haldane's involvement in their enactment eventually led him to draw closer to the growing Labour Party. In 1924, when the first Labour government was formed, he joined as Lord Chancellor. He was the first Liberal to join a Labour government, a sign of the drift of progressive forces that would eventually reduce the Liberals to a minor factor in English politics.

Haldane was an unusual figure among British politicians—a genuine philosopher as well as statesman. He was as at home in educational circles as he was in parliament. In fact, he once wrote that “he lived for universities. They have been more to me than anything else.” When Oscar Wilde was imprisoned, Haldane sent him books and intervened to see that his living conditions were made more bearable. After the

war, he brought Albert Einstein to England to introduce him to English scholarly circles.

Haldane had a gift for life. He was even-tempered and collected a wide range of friends that spanned British society. Both Kaiser Wilhelm II and King Edward VII admired him. He also had a sense of humor. When Winston Churchill once tapped Haldane's ample stomach and asked, “What is in there, Haldane?” “If it is a boy,” Haldane replied, “I shall call him Jack. If I is a girl, I shall call her Mary. But if it is only wind, I shall call it Winston.”

Campbell's study places Lord Haldane at the center of British politics during the early years of the twentieth century. A more traditional biography would have served Haldane better, but Campbell has done a first-class job of bringing to life a many-faceted man, heretofore neglected by history, who is deserving of his place among the greats of English political history.

Forthcoming in *The New Criterion*:

Patricia Highsmith's wickedness *by Brooke Allen*

Miraculous Mozart *by John Check*

One hundred fifty years of “Demons” *by Jacob Howland*

Mario Bois' bureau de musique *by Charles Cronin*

The long shadow of Baudelaire *by Dana Gioia*

Prize time in Paris

by James F. Penrose

By late autumn, France's literary season is in full swing. Each year, various societies announce their awards for the best French fiction and nonfiction, works translated into French, specialized scholarly subjects, and first novels. Other prizes recognize that very French specialty, the graphic novel, and writers who have never previously won a literary award. There are also awards, like the Prix Sade (named after you-know-who), that celebrate more recondite subjects.

Some prizes are awarded earlier in the year. The Prix Cazes and the Prix des Deux Magots are announced in January, while the Fauve d'or is awarded in June. But the most prestigious prizes are announced just before the gift-giving season, generally after a bibulous lunch. On the second Tuesday in November, for example, the Académie Goncourt convenes at Restaurant Drouant in the Second Arrondissement and announces from a first-floor window, *ad urbi et orbi*, that year's winner. A few minutes later, the Prix Renaudot jury emerges from its adjoining salon at Drouant to proclaim its choice from the famous staircase. Around the same time, juries for the Prix Femina, Prix Medicis, Prix Interallié, Prix Décembre, and the Prix Académie Française get together at their favored watering holes to wine, dine, and recognize their prizewinners.

Some restaurants are more than just venues: the Prix des Deux Magots, Prix Flore, and Prix Wepler are named after their sponsoring cafés, while the Prix Cazes is named for the Brasserie Lipp's long-gone owner. While the prizes' on-

the-day value tends to be low (the Prix Goncourt presents a check—seldom cashed—for just €10), the real value lies in royalties that the red band on a prizewinning book brings. One journalist estimated that the Prix Goncourt can yield royalties not far short of a Nobel's. There are other benefits, too—the winner of the Prix Flore gets a personalized wine glass with free refills of Pouilly at the restaurant over the next year.

Another feature of *les prix*—apart from their celebration of literature—was, most notably in earlier times but still around today, their bitchiness, often expressed at the jury level. The Prix Femina, with its all-female jury, was created in 1904 after the (all-male) Académie Goncourt ignored Myriam Herry's *La Conquête de Jérusalem*. In the Twenties, the Prix Renaudot was founded by annoyed journalists waiting outside Drouant for the Goncourt call. A few years after that, the Prix Interallié was created by equally annoyed journalists waiting for news about the Prix Femina. The Prix des Deux Magots was born from a conviction that the Prix Goncourt singled out boring books, while Marcellin Cazes, the owner of the Brasserie Lipp (just across from Les Deux Magots), wasn't about to let his competition steal a march.

Apart from the war years, 2020 was about the only time that the prizes were thrown off schedule. In early November, the government closed restaurants, *librairies*, and other small businesses. To help protect France's independent booksellers (whose sales depend on prize custom), many juries delayed their announce-

ments until bookstores were permitted to reopen. Happily, that happened quickly, and most of the remaining prizes have been announced.

Getting to a final selection takes a lot of reading. The better-known prizes use a winnowing process where, a few months before the prize is announced, the jury publishes its *première sélection* of a dozen or more books. The *deuxième sélection* three weeks later halves that, and the *ultime sélection* some two weeks later results in *la dernière shortlist* of about four books from which the winner is drawn. In the early stages, books are often found in several juries' selections. *L'anomalie*, which took the Goncourt this year, was initially selected by four juries, as was Irène Frain's moving and infuriating *Un crime sans importance* (Seuil). Several other books appeared on three lists, including Maël Renouard's *L'historiographe du royaume* (Grasset), Miguel Bonnefoy's *Héritage* (Payot et Rivages), and Diane Mazloum's *Une piscine dans le désert* (J.-C. Lattès), all excellent books that have not yet won.

This year's Prix Cazes went to Alexandre Postel's *Un automne de Flaubert* (Flammarion). Postel's novel shows a Flaubert beset by personal and financial problems and fearful that his best writing is behind him. Escaping to Concarneau in Brittany, he meets up with two friends: one a museum director, the other a marine biologist called Georges Pouchet. Slowly, Flaubert's mood improves through the traditional seaside tonics: beach walks, swimming, sea air, gorging on enormous amounts of lobster (the staple at his pension), and his friends' equable company. One day, Pouchet draws Flaubert's attention to an aquarium where a lobster is undergoing the exhausting process of molting. Until the new carapace is formed, Pouchet says, the lobster "will be soft, weak and vulnerable. But once the molt is complete, it will be bigger, stronger, and better armed for life." What worked for the lobster will work for Flaubert. Back in his room a few days later, unable to sleep and fidgety, he suddenly finds himself able to work again and starts sketching *The Legend of Saint Julien the Hospitalier*, one of the *Trois Contes*, perhaps his greatest work. *Un automne de Flaubert* is a

story of loss and rebirth, of the germination of ideas, and the pain and satisfaction of writing.

Gérard Philippe, one of France's great post-war actors, died young in 1959. Sixty years later, his son-in-law, the author Jérôme Garcin, won the Prix des Deux Magots for his description of Philippe's last months in *Le dernier hiver du Cid* (Gallimard), the "Cid" being the hero of Corneille's love-and-duty tragicomedy and one of Philippe's great roles. Garcin takes us from Philippe's haunted sense that he was unwell ("when he came downstairs after a restless night . . . he was already exhausted . . . [with] those strange stabbing pains that no painkiller could still") through his death and burial. His wife concealed the diagnosis until almost the end, allowing Philippe happily to plan his future triumphs. Garcin repeats the touching eulogies for the ever-young Philippe, even those from his surgeon, who never missed a performance by his patient. "We will try to be elegant," his wife remembered Philippe saying, "if one day we are unhappy?"

The Prix Flore—and its supply of Pouilly—went to *La grâce* by Thibault de Montaignu (Plon). Out of nowhere, this trendy and successful author is struck by depression. "There was no event," he says. "No drama or warning. Even the smallest task seemed to require an insurmountable effort and I spent my days crucified in bed, hoping only for sleep." But miraculously, and to the incredulity of family and friends, he is touched by grace during Mass and his depression lifts. Wishing to share his astonishment, he contacts his expiring uncle Christian, a rake-turned-Franciscan who dies before telling his own story of redemption. The death impels the author to discover how Christian's encounter with God's grace changed his life. "The miracle of hope," writes de Montaignu, "is to accept what is going to come, no matter what. . . . [T]here is something in there for us, that we do not see at first glance, but it is for the best."

Utterly different was the choice for the Prix Wepler. In the absurdist *De parcourir le monde et d'y rôder* by Grégory le Floch (Bourgeois), the author finds a thing on the ground, "some kind of coin, soft and irregular, or rather a soft organ of a mouse, like a stomach or spleen," and

takes it on his travels to see what people think. The libertine *Ce qui plaisait à Blanche* by Jean-Paul Enthoven (Grasset), winner of the Prix Interallié, was different in its own way; though fluently written, when we eventually find “what Blanche likes,” the will to continue through all sixty-six chapters somewhat diminishes. Meanwhile, the Angoulême Festival’s Fauve d’or went in June to the beautifully drawn *Révolution*, the first part of a three-volume graphic novel by Florent Grouazel and Younn Locard (Actes Sud) illustrating the convulsive events of 1789. Marat and Robespierre, among others, make their first appearances—we will undoubtedly see more of them in later volumes.

Nature humaine by Serge Joncour (Flammarion), the winner of the Prix Femina, quietly celebrates resistance to change. Set between 1976, the last year when the Fabrier farm could afford to grow saffron, and the windstorms of 1999, when it survives by battery farming, *Nature humaine* describes how modernity is destroying rural life. Alexandre Fabrier, the family’s gentle son, succeeds his parents as his three sisters quit the farm for Paris and Toulouse. Over the years Alexandre’s gentleness changes as shopping centers expand, villages die, and rural life all but disappears. We meet Alexandre’s neighbor, Crayssac, railing about ammoniated telephone poles and polluting highways while his sister’s friend, the beautiful Constanze, slowly turns Alexandre to violence. The book evokes the disappearing beauty of rural life, warns of worse things to come, and offers a novel’s perspective on issues affecting France today.

A different but depressingly familiar form of radicalization is found in Etienne de Montety’s gripping *La grande épreuve* (Stock), the winner of the Académie Française’s Grand Prix du roman. Influenced by the murder of a priest in Rouen in 2015, the book weaves the stories of seven people: Hicham, the disaffected son of Moroccan immigrants (“my little Frenchman,” his adoring mother calls him); Frédéric, a policeman of Vietnamese extraction; Sister Agnès, a missionary nun who works in the Muslim-settled areas of town; Laure and

François, a prosperous, self-absorbed couple; their adopted son, David, who, under Hicham’s baleful influence changes his name to Daoud; and Father Georges Tellier, the local curé. One interpretation of the title is Father Tellier’s struggle to be a good priest in a land estranged from its Catholic past, another is his martyrdom at the hands of Hicham and Daoud. The book’s opening description of morning Mass artfully sets up its murderous denouement and poignant aftermath. More than once, memories of Georges Bernanos’ novels come to mind.

At the end of November, the Académie Goncourt announced (by video) its prize for the sci-fi-ish *L’anomalie* by Hervé Le Tellier (Gallimard), while the Prix Renaudot followed with its award for *Histoire du fils* by Marie-Hélène Lafon (Buchen-Castell). The two books could not be more different.

The “anomaly” refers to a June 2021 flight from Paris to New York, which, after a horrific storm and emergency landing, is found, to universal astonishment, to be the same that landed months previously. Then the military gets involved, and the plot takes a highly inventive turn. The first third of the book engagingly introduces the characters: a French hitman, a struggling author, a film editor, an architect, a Nigerian singer, and a pilot named Markle, all of whom will be affected by the anomaly. It is an oddly engaging story, and Le Tellier’s stylish writing keeps us going through the craziness of the plot.

Histoire du fils tells the story of a family from Cantal over four generations. Its narrative leanness is balanced by beautifully colored character descriptions. André, the eponymous son, is the result of a fling by Gabrielle, a school nurse, with Paul, a much younger boy. After Paul goes to study in Paris, the relationship slowly cools, and Gabrielle leaves André to be raised by her kindly sister, Hélène. The story is the fruit of André’s long search for his family identity, through wars and upheavals. While strict chronology is not one of the book’s characteristics, André’s intuitive joining of the pieces of his life is a true pleasure, even though the fit is never precise—just as in real life.