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TLS FEBRUARY 2, 2021
Curates, cretins, critics

Saving Beckett from Beckett Studies

M y disenchantment with Beckett Studies was settled at a conference in Antwerp, when a graduate student, a senior male professor at a distinguished university began to throw chairs at a female peer. Indoors, one of his colleagues suggested some motives for this, smoking casually as the graduate students ran out to break it up. Drink had been taken; there was an affair, long ago. She, as it happens, had just been overlooked for a senior post at the same university. Later, those grad students were advised not to work with her on a forthcoming critical book. It’s unclear, connecting all these sentences, where to place the implied “because”. Power is versatile like that. Academic books are about power in at least two obvious ways. They reflect the writer’s need to acquire it, and they embody, or attempt to, the state of having it. They present, in other words, as both submissions for and proofs of success, both of which are performative. When you read one, you’re entering the prism of someone’s power fantasy. Like most of us, academics don’t have much power, but few people have to publish the fact, and never so often as this lot do. In Britain, for instance, the Research Excellence Framework haunts their careers, by giving their “outputs” official scores. Stop publishing, and it’s death by REF. There are limited resources on offer, and the efficient inherit the earth. Scholarly prose — by which I mean the secondary works that students are told to read — is therefore a battery of compromise. It doesn’t encourage the first person, nor a self-revealing mood, nor a variety of styles.

Beckett Studies is a notoriously massive field, so large that nobody has attempted a critical bibliography in the English language for half a century. Students who work on Beckett’s texts — his plays, his prose, his under-read poems — are obliged to care about the bits of that morass that pertain to their own research; this obligation is ironic, because most of the academic “output” doesn’t read as though “caring” was involved. This is no personal slight on the Beckettians I’ve met. They’re often interesting; they’re knowledgeable; they go to bars in Antwerp (and most of them behave). The graduate students in particular, some of whom were given advice on choosing friends, have wiser and richer ideas than one may appear in print. Their writing, however, bears no resemblance to the way they talk or think. It’s astonishing, viewed from outside, that this dis- tance, which would be a failure in almost any interaction premised on personal warmth, is somehow a virtue in literary-critical work. It’s equally astonishing how many people inside academia treat this as both an obvious state of affairs and a strange thing to bring up. And the structures grow rusty as well: a field in which rituals like the REF hold sway won’t lead to a diversity of either power-holders or written idioms. Differences only get in the way.

The situation in the Beckett world may be worse because it’s larger, or it may be more visible because his writing deals in many-mindedness and inconclusiveness, two things at which anxious scholars don’t (and cannot profitably) excel. Watching one of Beckett’s late plays, for instance, we are looking at figures who move in patterns about the stage, or speak enigmatic, fragmentary lines — actions that seem repetitive and odd — and because the best frame of reference we have is the behaviour of normal people, creatures like ourselves, those actions seem at the same time close and far away. They demand explanation at the same time as they resist it. One option, visible in any departmental library, is to assert that the work “represents” a concept, a theory or an idea. Probably it’s nihilism, or something to do with Deleuze. Alternatively, you could take the difficulty as the point, and have a good look at yourself. All ethics is grounded in self-scrutiny, in thinking again on how we form judgments and put them into words. (“Self-perception”, as Beckett once told Vogue magazine, “is the most frightening of all human observations.”) Remembering her work on the late play Footfalls, in which a woman walks back and forth, the actress Billie Whitelaw said that she didn’t need it explained: “I’m not interested in what the plays are about, to be absolutely honest. That’s an academic’s job. I get a bit nervous when people get too reverent about Beckett’s work”. And it’s salutary to remember that none of us is first touched by these plays on the grounds of what they’re “about”. Instead, you encounter something, a visual and auditory spectacle that’s moving, or powerful, or discomfiting — pick your adjective — in a way that is hard to define. With Beckett, you are always veering on errors, and you may not be able to return to your first impressions once you have moulded them into words.

To the extent that Beckett’s work is “about” anything, it is about knowing what not to say. It preserves a critical style that is self-critical, and reins itself from scratch. Certainties are of zero interest; what person lives in certainty about the way they feel? But the dominant projects in Beckett Studies haven’t developed along those lines; the emotion and soul of literary criticism have been professionalized away. Around two or three decades ago, the field took a gradual “turn” in which interpretation, freewheeling or prissy, was superseded as the big-ticket item by archival scholarship. The centre of gravity for this new approach became the Beckett International Foundation at the University of Reading, and the Beckett Archive there; its progeny is the “Beckett Digital Manuscript Project,” based at the University of Antwerp and scheduled to be finished in 2036. The BDMP groups Beckett’s texts into twenty-six “research modules”, and in “All the Variants”, a chapter of Jean-Michel Rabate’s anthology The New Samuel Beckett Studies, Mark Nixon sets out the goal: to publish “all of Beckett’s manuscripts in facsimile and in transcription”, both online and in twenty-six books. The result, Nixon explains, will be an “enriched, creative endeavours”, one that “enables us, forces us, even, to think differently about the entire canon”.

That claim is hardly true. Maybe it is easier to believe such things if you have a vested interest in their success, if (for instance) you co-direct the project to which you attribute such incredible power. Nor are claims like “forcing” made by the BDMP in print, which grasps that individual readers are liable, and free, to think for themselves. For example, in The Making of Fin de partie/Endgame, the seventh volume of the series, Dirk Van Hulme and Shane Weller chastise Giuseppina Restivo, who refers to a bunch of Beckett’s fragments as “different starts” that would lead, by 1957, to the play that is being discussed. Say no to teleology, Van Hulme and Weller cry. “The longer [her] list becomes, the more it can be interpreted as a silent prologue to Beckett: why did it take him so long to write Fin de partie if he already had most of the play’s ingredients in 1950?” They call this “backshadowing”, after Michel André Bernstein, and say they are “sideshadowing”.

© DONALD DONALD/ALAMY

Teresa Garcia-Suro as Nell and Alan Mandell as Nagg: Endgame, the Young Vic, 1980

Cal Revely-Calder writes and edits at the Telegraph. He is working on a book on art and embarrassment.
their “own reflections”. As one of Stanley Cavell’s most elegant lines, in *The Claim of Reason*, runs: “Happiness itself, but he cannot give himself an answer he can care about”.

Self-doubt is hard to market, and yet a market is what we have. In *The New Samuel Beckett*, which surveys the map of scholarship today, Jean-Michel Rabaté says that we are enjoying a “textual revolution”, and “the corpus of Beckett’s works that we read today has little in common with the Beckett canon of just a decade ago”. The enthusiasm is corporat, and the sentences are dire. (Perloff: “Here two letters, both of them often cited but difficult to parse, are germane”.) This is an anthology in which literary texts are used as research, and research is a colourless form of perpetual industry.

Compare, instead, two books that hope to tell you about Beckett, a playwright, but have vestiges of a broader remit. In *Samuel Beckett and the Visual Arts* and *Emilie Morin’s Beckett’s Political Imagination*, the former deals with Beckett’s immersion in visual art, and the latter asks how his literary texts might be linked to the political contexts in which they were born. Morin’s project (an excerpt from which appears in *The New Second World War*), by paying to see Jews wearing the yellow star. In France, Morin points out, this didn’t happen until “shortly before Beckett’s cell was dismantled”. He said something of this to James Knowlson, his biographer. He said that Beckett’s memory might have lost its way amid an outbreak of collective guilt. But she won’t say how collective it has become, or how one has to read the book. One of the best lines from the conference I attended in Antwerp was by John Pilling: “I think Beckett lied a lot to us scholars. He was a difficult man.” (Knowlson himself, in the audience, agreed.) This needs not be a judgement. People are always lying and trying to forget; it helps them to survive.

In politics, it transpires, Beckett was as slippery as his work. He disliked explaining his role in the Resistance, and only donated to one political party: the South African ANC. “It is somewhat bewildering”, Morin says, “that Beckett could consider, with the same ease, dedicating a year to political film-making in Moscow and spending six months wandering around German cities and museums bound by Nazi decrees. Peculiar forms of displacement and subordination are at work in his change of heart.” That love of synecdoche is matched by a series of careful hinges between text and context, which she uses when she knows that she shouldn’t say too much. The play *Rough for Theatre II*, for example, depicting scenes on the site of a Nazi concentration camp, was finished in 1976, and thus was “intimately related to ongoing debates” about what the French spooks had done in Algeria. “The shadow of torture looms over the play”, she writes. “The end is perfect: so much, but no more. Morin is in cautious with the word “absent” in Beckett’s late-1940s prose, at a time when anyone departed from French soil and yet to return was categorized that way. As
So long the sensuous visions
Derek Mahon’s last collection

JUSTIN QUINN
WASHINGTON UP
DEREK MAHON
93pp. Gallery Press. £18.50
(paperback £12.50).

Derek Mahon died on October 1, 2020. Washing Up, which was published a few weeks later, is his final book of poems.

When I began reading Mahon’s work in the early 1990s, he was already said to be “washed up”. Little of his work had been published since The Hunt by Night (1982). Soon, however, came The Hudson Letter (1995) and The Yellow Book (1997), long poems in heroic couplets that extended the range of the verse-letters which had appeared in previous collections. There is a lot of this work and opinion is divided as to its quality. Hugh Haughton has written well about it, but John Redmond, in an article on those earlier epistolary poems, remarked that “when he is writing his verse-letters Mahon is writing against the best part of his poetic nature”. These are works in which he does not successfully deal with “the struggle between low-key observa-
tion and visionary grandeur”.

Redmond’s article, “Wilful Inconsistency: Derek Mahon’s Verse-Letters” (1994), anticipated the flaws that would dog Mahon’s work in his later years. In Life on Earth (2008) and An Autumn Wind (2010), the poet vamps intermittently, recycling turns of phrase and image that had once made thousands of readers catch their breath. Much here is modish ideology: high finance is bad, we have to get back to nature, and as for the internet . . . it’s all true, of course, but that truth, while it spurred him on, strained his instincts and caught.

These flaws mar Washing Up, too. Again Mahon writes about his withdrawal from the modern world to a small town on the south coast of Ireland (although it is unclear how Kinlack is any less plugged-in than Williamsburg or Kreuzberg). For the most part, he employs the rhymed stanzas that served him well throughout his career, and in which he created verse with ironic wit. When he adds words to his work, however, is imaginative fatigue – a kind of leadenness of thought. Often, he strains for the playfulness we find in W. H. Auden, James Merrill and A. E. Stallings, setting the scene with admirable versatility only to fall back into one of his default positions: See that block of apartments? Dust. Manhole cover. Equity and Trust? Dust; and to dust all these return.

It’s from the dust that we were born.

Here in my quiet inglenook
I have or read a serious book
ignoring, in reflective slowness
[ sic],
the world of economic growth.

Yet in poems he calls “Self-Por
trait in Tyvek” (Windbreaker”), has fun: the poem shuffles and riffs so happily with happenstance that the reader has little idea where it will go. Washing Up has none of the ravages of Beckettian pessimism. If Beckett’s vision is coloured by professional need, they are so remote from the strangeness and charm of the subject they apparently chose. If you doubt this, and you are not paid to read Beckett’s work, try to remember when you last wanted to pick up a secondary source. This is a world in dialogue with itself.

And it isn’t because the researchers want it that way; certainly not the younger ones, who have more interesting minds, who might want a different state of affairs, and do not benefit from the one that exists. Instead, it is because their industry is parasitic on their intellectual life. If graduate students and junior academics were sure of their salaries and career paths, and didn’t feel bound to conform to intellectual trends that are set by a coterie, a field like Beckett Studies might slow or crawl. That would be more critical work, meaning thinking – meaning imagination, experiments, fun – and less “output” to show for it. But today, as Fredric Jameson puts it, knowledge is there to be capitalized on “The second part of the life of the successful entre-
preneur”, he writes in An American Utopia, “is that of the businessman, the exploiter of the invention.” He points at Edison, Ford and Disney, capitalists supreme, then adds: “One might want to extrapolate that into other lines of work as well, such as academic specialisation”. Deadpan, sad and true. This is how it works. Take a dead man’s work, create a niche – then get out there and sell yourself.

JUSTIN QUINN’s most recent collection of poems is Shallow Seas, 2020. He works at the University of West Bohemia.

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FEBRUARY 12, 2021

TLS

5
Ernest Bevin and Israel
I had not previously come across Michael Holzman’s phrase “Israeli war of independence”, by which I assume he refers to the Zionist “Plan D” invasion of Palestine in 1948 (Letters, February 5). The UK was on the verge of leaving by the time the invasion occurred. The state of Israel did not exist before the invasion, unless you accept the rather fragile idea that the Jewish Agency was already the state of Israel. In that case, the Arab Higher Committee could – on as strong a basis – also claim to be a state, representing the interests of the Arabs in Palestine. Both organizations had been recognized by the League of Nations, but few people would have called them states in 1948.

The invasion was bloody and cruel. The Zionist army (Haganah) was assisted by two terror gangs, Irgun and Lehi, one of which, inter alia, shelled Palestinian civilian areas, while both participated in the massacre at Deir Yassin. Such acts, along with many others, contributed to the Zionists aim of getting as many Arabs out of the bounds of the proposed Israeli state as possible: around three-quarters of a million Arabs had to flee their traditional homes and land, and were subject to cruel handling in doing so.

The Zionist goal of taking over a large part of Palestine, conceived when the population was more than 90 per cent Arab, was described by the early Zionist leader Theodor Herzl, in a letter to Cecil Rhodes, as “something colonial”. He had approached the British because he thought the colonial idea would be easily and quickly understood in England. The Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry of 1946 described the Jewish Agency as “one of the most successful colonizing instruments in history”.

As for Ernest Bevin, what he certainly resisted was acceding to the Jewish Agency’s pressure to be allowed to take the whole of Palestine to the west of the Jordan. Given the circumstances and the respective populations, one might argue that that was a reasonable position rather than an antisemitic one.

John Tippler
Spalding, Lincs

SOE in France
Patrick Marshall claims (Letters, January 22) that the collapse of the Prosper circuit “led to the death of hundreds” is incorrect. In fact, some 170 people were arrested as a direct result of the collapse, of whom half died, and I give the name and fate of each one of them in my book as he knows.

Francis Suttill
Bishopwood Leigh, Ross-on-Wye

Borges and Parini
In the spring of 1971, I was undertaking a bicycle trip through Scottish Highlands and stood over for a while in Inverness. While I was there, I met an odd couple in a pub – a young American student and a Spanish-speaking older man. Through a bizarre combination of events, after Jay Parini’s Borges and Me came out (January 29), I realized that the young American was Parini and the older man no less a figure than Jorge Luis Borges. An odd couple indeed.

John Hanson Mitchell
Littleton, MA

Vaccination strategy
Dr Burch’s certainty is impressive (January 29), but he must know something the rest of us aren’t being told when he says, “The challenge should not chiefly be to identify vaccine recipients in order of vulnerability and importance; it should be to jab as many people as quickly as possible. If you stop the robust from transmitting the disease then you protect the vulnerable”. Do you, though, “stop the robust from transmitting the disease”? Until this week, what we laymen and women have been given to understand is that the currently available vaccines offer considerable protection against developing a severe and potentially fatal illness after infection by the coronavirus: not against infection tout court. As I write, a small but encouraging study by Oxford/AstraZeneca suggests that its vaccine can also reduce transmission (of the currently dominant variants in the UK) anyway by more than 60 per cent. There is some optimism that the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine may have a similar effect. But this still doesn’t rule out the possibility that one of Dr Burch’s “robust” could be jabbed, go out, get infected, and pass on the infection to any passing pensioner, without themselves ever suffering as much as a headache. For the pensioner, the outcome might be very different. In other words, you only protect the vulnerable by jabbing as many of them as quickly as possible, in the hope that while you’re doing so the robust will be able to call on their stronger natural immune response to fight off the worst effects of the virus. Hence, I take, current government policy and the order of priority decided by the JCVI.

Dr Burch writes, “It took three months for it to sink in that spreading out the first doses was a laudable improvement on not doing so”. Presumably he means spreading out the first doses among the greatest possible number in those earliest groups “in order of vulnerability and importance” – the over-seventies, the clinically vulnerable, carers and NHS staff, etc. Laudable indeed. But with supplies at their current rate it is impossible without simultaneously spreading out the time between the two doses of both the Pfizer and AZ vaccines that, every medical and scientific authority agrees, are needed before maximum, longer-term protection is assured. Certainly, the balance of risk seems to favour vaccinating more people in more of these groups, more quickly, with one dose, rather than making sure everyone, say, over seventy-five has received both doses before moving on to doctors and nurses and those under seventy-five with underlying health problems. But unless Dr Burch, again, knows something we don’t, that doesn’t mean the strategy carries no risk at all. Both vaccines offer a good-to-high level of immunity (depending on whose figures you look at) three weeks after the first dose. For the AZ vaccine, it seems a longer delay before the second might even be an advantage. For the Pfizer, while it seems unlikely to become ineffective after the three-week interval between doses recommended by Pfizer-BioNTech itself (and supported by both the FDA and the CDC in the United States; six weeks maximum, for the EMA and WHO), there isn’t any hard evidence as to what happens when that interval is extended to twelve, as per current policy here. This is what is to be believed, anyway, from my attempts to grapple with daily news developments, and it was backed up by the doctor who administered my own first dose of the Pfizer vac. He left me in no doubt (not that I’d really needed persuading) that one dose, now, was a lot better than none (I’m “only” sixty-five, but not as robust as I once was), however long it is before I get a second. But following the science, it’s not. One virologist in the US is in her recording with his view that “if you wanted to create a vaccine resistant strain, what you would do is build a cohort of partially immunized individuals in the teeth of a highly prevalent viral infection. Dr Burch worries about豇豆 Robust. As if Dr Burch’s call for greater urgency in getting “needles into arms”, and I’m astonished and grateful to have had one in mine. Given the appallingly numbers we all read every day, you would want to wash hands. It’s a sort of numbers weren’t fated to happen: a lot of dropped catches and bungled decisions went to their making, that had nothing to do with the shortcomings Dr Burch experiences in the NHS. By the time I got a poke at The last few weeks, I’m quietly aware of being part of a large-scale experiment – or, as some chancers in the cabinet no doubt prefer to see it, in a high-stakes gamble.

Alan Jenkins
London W14

unemployment. Students will have to be compensated financially by the government for the extra year of fees and living expenses.

The repeated school year will mean that pre-schoolers will need to be kept in nursery education for an extra year, or at home for an extra year, necessitating a shift to the continental system of starting school later. Extra free nursery provision could be set up in empty buildings, and currently unem-
ployed creatives, etc trained up to teach.

The short-term cost to the government is far less than the long-term consequences of a whole gener-
ation of children and uni-

versity students losing more than a year of education and then ending up on benefits.

James Hall
London SW12

Comic le Carré
In Sam Leith’s review of Mick How-
ren’s novels (January 29), he states that no one would call John le Carré a comic writer. Well, not only. Le Carré’s novels are surely shot through with dark, cautious comedy at every level, from titles (Our Kind of Traitor), through absurd characters (Jester Westbery, Percy Alleline), to single sardonic sentences and whole ghastly plots. At the same time, of course, his novels remain deadly, horribly seri-
ous.

Alex Faulkner
Lewes, East Sussex

Research criteria
In my review of Boys and Sex by Peggy Orenstein (In Brief, January 29), I mistakenly described her research as “quantitative” rather than “qualitative”. Sex and measure-
ment should, of course, be kept apart, and I apologize to both Ms Orenstein and your readers.

Josh Raymond
London SW2

Wild bulls
There is no such animal as an auroch (Brian Morton, In Brief, January 29). The extinct wild bull of Europe was an aurochs, and the plural, if you can have a plural of something that isn’t there any more, is aurochsen, as in English tax.

Jeremy Harte
Bourne Hall, Ewell

Correction
The picture chosen to illustrate David Coward’s review of The King of Naples about the war crime of Henri Lafont (January 29) was of Henry Lafont, French veteran of the Battle of Britain.

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TSL
FEBRUARY 12, 2021
The new Rome’s window on the West

Ravenna, a mosaic of peoples and cultures

MICHAEL KULIKOWSKI

RAVENNA
Capital of Empire, crucible of Europe
JUDITH HERRIN

VENICE HAS ITS SINKING BUILDINGS and tourist mobs, Rimini the Ponte di Tiberio and an excellent garage rock scene. And Ravenna - Ravenna has mosaics, so very many mosaics. Once seen, never forgotten, their luminous golden backgrounds wring new meaning from more familiar blues and purples. Not even overfamiliarity from a thousand book jackets can reduce the impact of the emperor Justinian and his wife Theodora in the sixth-century church of San Vitale, the Three Wise Men in the roughly contemporary Sant’Apollinare Nuovo, or the serene frontality of St Lawrence’s martyrdom in the slightly earlier Mausoleum of Galla Placidia. With a figural naturalism not anchored in perspective space, they are both artistically timeless and the epitome of what we think of as Byzantine art. Ravenna’s artworks had the good fortune to escape the iconoclasm that swept away many such works across the eastern Mediterranean. It was their further good fortune that Ravenna itself, increasingly landlocked by the siting of the Po delta, lacked the kind of medieval and modern importance that might have erased its late antique glories. Judith Herrin’s Ravenna, which was last week awarded the Pol Roger Duft Cooper Prize for non-fiction, aims to set these mosaics, the buildings they enombled, into an imperial landscape they inhabit back within a meaningful historical context. It’s a worthy project that surprisingly has not really been attempted before.

The narrative around which she sets Ravenna’s townscape is almost paradoxically conventional, full of shifty Germanic foreigners barbarizing the Roman army, threatening an imperial system too weak to resist its distant provinces, and therefore forcing the ‘germs of an early medieval culture that emerges in western Europe personified by Charlemagne, with its combined Latin, Christian and Germanic tributaries, transalpine enclaves welded to those of Rome’. These are the terms of analysis that many of us learnt as students, not a world away from Thomas Hodgkin’s Italy and Her Invaders, the eight-volume Victorian masterpiece that covers the same time frame as Does Herrin. Yet that strange anachronism doesn’t really matter. As others have demonstrated, it is possible to make a handsome living recycling this same narrative with varying doses of melodrama and bombast, but it takes a scholar of Herrin’s brilliance to bring events to life with a meaningful evocation of a time and a place. That skill, and a wonderfully lucid prose style, ensures that even readers frustrated by the arcade narrative will find a great deal to admire and indeed learn from.

There is one very good reason why so many historians have kept away from Ravenna. For the past fifty years, the five imposing volumes of Friedrich Deichmann’s Ravenna, Hauptstadt des spätantiken Abendlands has loomed over every student of the city. This is the kind of uniquely German monument that is more easily admired than read, and its very monumentality overshadows rather than illuminates the subject. For the most part, Ravenna functions as a kind of absent structure in early medieval history, omnipresent yet somehow still terra incognita. Herrin opens a path into this historical space. There is, for example, a superb chapter on the church of San Vitale, most famous for its mosaics of the imperial couple. In these images, Bishop Maximinian stands at Justinian’s left hand, although it was his predecessor, Victor, who commissioned and sponsored the building and its iconography. After a careful description of this, and a lucid explanation of the chronology, Herrin shows us Maximinian, an imperial appointee, arriving from Patras at Ravenna in 546 and being refused entry by the city’s inhabitants. A native of Pola, now Pula in Croatia, he was mistrusted as a foreigner, even though under sail in good weather it was less than a day’s journey from Ravenna’s port of Classe (Herrin re-enacts that trip, just to be sure). Maximinian had no choice but to wait, residing in the palace outside the walls that had previously belonged to the city’s Arian bishops. Only after some time, hosting banquets, giving gifts and otherwise convincing the Ravennites of his good will, was he invited into the city, taking up residence in the orthodox bishops’ palace and replacing Victor’s image with his own in the San Vitale mosaics.

It is vignettes like this, and there are many, that make the book rewarding and there are two main sets of evidence that allow Herrin to engage readers on this sort of human scale. First and most important is the survival of Andreas Agnellus’s Liber Pontificalis Ecclesiae Ravennatis. This is a history of Ravenna written in the ninth century, consisting of a series of biographies of the city’s bishops, going right back to the legendary Apollinaris, founder of Ravenna’s episcopal and supposed companion of St Peter. It is particularly useful because Agnellus recorded the texts of now lost inscriptions and commented as an eyewitness on buildings and monuments that no longer stand. While - as was typical of his era - his explanations and etymologies can be fanciful, he was more scrupulous in collecting his evidence than most were at the time, and much of the human spark in Ravenna comes from him.

The city also has a papal archive that few western cities can match, in part because the fragile material rarely survives well outside the sands of Egypt; in part because its urban institutions survived longer and better than they did in most of the West; and in part because in late antiquity the culture of written law and administration survived in Italy, southern France and parts of Spain, while other regions became increasingly governed by customary law. Written law generated masses of documentation. Local councils’ activities and decisions were registered in gesta municipalia, or “minute books”, and municipal functionaries of various sorts provided people with fair copies of the legal instruments they needed to sell property, manumit slaves, leave an enforceable will (few traces of any of this remain in regions with customary law). Ravenna’s papyrus archive, which like all such archives is predominantly made up of relatively mundane legal transactions, is unusual not just for the quantity that has survived, but for a fine documentary script and sustained legal quality absent in contemporary texts elsewhere. Many of these documents are wills, and they teach us a lot about the daily lives of the inhabitants - for instance George the silk merchant who gives all his possessions to the church of Ravenna, or the young Stefanus whose inheritance is described at length, as are the parts of his family property that had previously been given to the freed slaves Gudert and Ranhilda.

As those Gothic names suggest, Ravenna was if not a melting pot then a mosaic of different ethnic and linguistic backgrounds. One fascinating thing about the papyri, which Herrin could have drawn out more extensively, is the degree to which influences of the

Michael Kulikowski is the author of Imperial Triumph, 2016, and Imperial Tragedy, 2019. He teaches at Pennsylvania State University.

Flash Fiction Prize
1st: £1,000, 2nd: £300, 3rd: Writing Course (online) + 10 flash stories will be published in the FISH ANTHOLOGY 2021
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Details: www.fishpublishing.com
Fish Publishing, Durrus, Co. Cork, Ireland
Sovereign virtues

Michelangelo's betrayal of Renaissance humanism

Jeffrey Collins is an Associate Professor of History at Queen's University in Canada

logically or geographically. Within these parameters, however, he excavates the intersections of thought and action, similar in its physiognomy if not in its content to the movement of the philosophes of the Enlightenment.” That sort of change has been unfaithful ever since the great Paul Oskar Kristeller (Hankins’s mentor) defined humanism as a set of methods and philological practices, rather than a positive philosophy celebrating heroic individualism in a secular universe. Hankins has no interest in resuscitating these latterBurckhardtian reveries, and he has an insider’s understanding of the scholarly agenda of the humanists. Nevertheless, he ascribes to them a common cultural-political project: “to rebuild Europe’s depleted reserves of good character, true piety, and practical wisdom” in the face of the late medieval crisis of Christendom. The stadia humanisci was their means to this end. “The humanism of the Italian Renaissance,” writes Hankins, “was born from a profound sense of loss and longing. It arose from a new kind of historical awareness shared by literary men – men newly conscious of past glories and present humiliations.” Borrowing from ethnography, Hankins describes Renaissance humanism as a new paideia (which expressed a “genius” or “temple of the imago mundi”):

Jeffrey Collins: VIRTUE POLITICS: Soulcraft and statecraft in Renaissance Italy. LUP, 2014. 368 pp. £36.95 (US $45).

VIRTUE POLITICS is perhaps the greatest study ever written of Renaissance political thought. The breadth of James Hankins’s book surpasses that of the reigning incumbents, Hans Baron’s Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance and the first volume of Quentin Skinner’s classic Foundations of Modern Political Thought. It is also a book of bold argument and relevance. Hankins concentrates on the classic Italian Renaissance - Petrarch to Machiavelli - and dispenses with fashionable efforts to diversify his subject chronologically or geographically. Within these parameters, however, he excavates the intersections of thought and action, similar in its physiognomy if not in its content to the movement of the philosophes of the Enlightenment.” That sort of change has been unfaithful ever since the great Paul Oskar Kristeller (Hankins’s mentor) defined humanism as a set of methods and philological practices, rather than a positive philosophy celebrating heroic individualism in a secular universe. Hankins has no interest in resuscitating these latterBurckhardtian reveries, and he has an insider’s understanding of the scholarly agenda of the humanists. Nevertheless, he ascribes to them a common cultural-political project: “to rebuild Europe’s depleted reserves of good character, true piety, and practical wisdom” in the face of the late medieval crisis of Christendom. The stadia humanisci was their means to this end. “The humanism of the Italian Renaissance,” writes Hankins, “was born from a profound sense of loss and longing. It arose from a new kind of historical awareness shared by literary men – men newly conscious of past glories and present humiliations.” Borrowing from ethnography, Hankins describes Renaissance humanism as a new paideia (which expressed a “genius” or “temple of the imago mundi”):

Hankins concludes his book with a disappointing rereading of Machiavelli in this context. Current scholarship tends to assimilate Machiavelli into the culture of humanism, often in an effort to cut him down to size (as a diplomat or a hired professional). Hankins instead acknowledges Machiavelli’s rare brilliance, but presents him as the betrayer, rather than the exemplar, of the humanist movement. The Florentine’s “demoralizing” redefinition of virtue as a merely capable to master fortune was directly aimed at the humanist tradition that Hankins has reconstructed.

Reading Virtue Politics from our present political situation suggests, paradoxically, both the incomensurability of the Renaissance project and its relevance. The Italian humanists shared a common social outlook (elitist but meritocratic) and the ethical foundations provided by Christianity. We live in an era of mass politics, venal social distrust and ferocious moral disagreement. The suggestion that our culture, or our universities, should insist on character, virtue and civic pride would currently achieve more than ritualistic evocations of elitist Eurocentrism. And yet any humane reader will find it difficult to evade some embarrassment when measuring the humanists’ political aspirations against the transactional, interest-driven, “neutral” spirit of modern liberalism. Perhaps a politics of private rights and public utility is the best that we can do. But Virtue Politics, at the least, forces the question.
Vanishing act
How snobbery and fashion put paid to magic
AUDREY BOROWSKI
THE DECLINE OF MAGICK
Britain in the Enlightenment
MICHAEL HUNTER
288pp. Yale University Press. £35 ($40).

In 1735 the Witchcraft Act redefined all claims to magical powers as criminally fraudulent, rather than evidence of demonic possession, and by 1749 the radical clergyman Conyers Middleton had declared belief in witches in Britain “utterly extinct.” In his fascinating study The Decline of Magic: Britain in the Enlightenment, Michael Hunter delves deeper into the reasons behind the retreat, and ultimately the discrediting, of magical beliefs in England. Fifty years after the publication of Keith Thomas’s landmark study Religion and the Decline of Magic, Hunter seeks not to overturn Thomas’s thesis but to qualify it. Hunter focuses less on the endurance of popular beliefs in the face of Protestant hostility to Catholic “superstition” than on the actual process of decline of those beliefs. In doing so, he immerses us in a world which took for granted the absolute existence of evil spirits and good. Of ghosts, apparitions and poltergeists, and in which challenging this orthodoxy could be construed as tantamount to denying the existence of God himself – something very few were willing to risk, adding further to the specter John Wagstaffe in his tract The Question of Witchcraft Debated (1669).

Contrary to a widely held view, the occult did not suddenly give way to science as we now understand it, but often coexisted with it. Hunter presents us with a nuanced and marvellously ambiguous picture, showing how a gradual change in educated attitudes towards magical beliefs occurred over a period from 1650 and 1750 through a kind of “cultural osmosis,” that is, intellectual exchange primarily through an “elusive oral dimension.” In fact, far from displacing magic science, and the newly acquired scientific ethos of empirical investigation were often enlisted in the defence of the occult. While some scientists such as Robert Hooke and Henry Oldenburg were certainly hardcore sceptics, most displayed a much more ambivalent attitude towards the supernatural realm. As a corporate body, the Royal Society in London carefully sidelined the topic altogether.

Joseph Glanvill, the Royal Society apologist, led a painstaking investigation in the 1660s into proving the existence of the alleged poltergeist known as “the Drummer of Tedworth.” Robert Boyle, the eminent natural philosopher, became particularly fascinated by accounts of mysterious events in the second half of the century, the strange ability of certain individuals to foresee future events, and he set out to verify these claims by meticulously collecting empirical examples of such occurrences. This interest in the supernatural was motivated by the desire to understand nature itself better, an understanding that Boyle and his contemporaries concluded was far from complete: “And if we know so little of some Causes, how much less can we pretend to things that are supernatural?” For Boyle, it was simply “a violation of the Law of Nature, to reject all these Relations as fabulous, merely upon a self presuming Conceit, unless a Man can fairly shew the things to be Impossible, or wherein those Persons were imposed on”.

Hunter paints a picture of two resolutely opposed attitudes, on the one hand the “heroic open-mindedness” and intellectual humility of the scientific seekers of the causes of as-yet unexplained phenomena, and on the other hand the “intellectual arrogance” of the “Newtonians,” who summarily rejected supernatural phenomena for being incompatible with their particular scientific framework. Ironically, then, it could be argued that in this case dogmatism prevailed over the spirit of inquiry. “People just made up their minds”, Hunter comments, “and then grasped at arguments to substantiate their preconceived ideas.” In fact, if the sceptical viewpoint eventually triumphed and belief in the supernatural was defeated, it was not on the battle-field of rational argumentation, or in the face of proof, but on account of intellectual fashion, and especially the popular culture of sarcasm and wit which had burgeoned in London coffee houses. As Hunter puts it succinctly, “contrary to popular belief, the Enlightenment did not reject magic for good reasons but for bad ones”. Once a tipping point had been reached, belief in magic was simply marginalized – rather than positively disproven – and reframed as a source of self-deception, later relegated to the realm of fiction and fantasy.

Hunter’s book is particularly praised for its reflection on the nature of intellectual change, and especially in showing how the limits and even impotence of rational argumentation in accounting for that change – although as a consequence, admittedly, the reasons for change become more difficult to establish. This is his book and some of its broad brushstrokes are bound to be contested, Hunter’s audacity in taking up this challenge, one that should be extended beyond Britain, is admirable. He provides us with a thoroughly engaging and stimulating study, which has a particular resonance today, at a time of growing epistemological uncertainty and information overload, when rational argumentation has seemingly again run up against its limits in the public sphere.

Freemasonry over the centuries, Dickie mentions that his grandfather, a Scottish railwayman, became a Freemason in Aberdeen in 1919, like many thousands of soldiers returning from the Great War, but there is no suggestion that he believed himself to be a Mason. He gives a cursory account of the supposedly secret initiation rituals - “we only have to know a little bit about them to enjoy Masonic history” - before moving on to the subject that interests him more: “the interaction between Freemasonry and society”.

Dickie traces the rise of Freemasonry - there are 400,000 mosques in Britain today, 1.1 million in the USA and around 6 million worldwide - from “a lucky dip” of sources, reaching back to “some of the big beards from Genesis and the Book of Kings”. William Schaw (1550-1602), the first man in Scotland to be referred to as an architect, played a central part in establishing lodges during the reign of James VI, when there was an “upsweep in the number of prestige building projects”. Eighty per cent of the lodges we know about from Schaw’s time still exist, but Dickie argues that modern Freemasonry began with the spread of Schaw’s lodges south into England, where they became known collectively as the Accep-

He emphasizes that the purpose of Masonic secrecy is simply secrecy. “All the terrifying penalties for oath-breaking are just theatre – never to be imple-

mented.” His argument is that to understand the benefits of belonging to a Masonic lodge, it is necessary to look at the specific social context within which it operates.

Ranging widely through time and space, Dickie assembles a large cast of characters, some well known like Benjamin Franklin and Rudyard Kipling, others more obscure, who contributed to the spread of Freemasonry across the globe. Always careful to describe the varying manifestations of Freemasonry in different contexts - from the revolutionary to the reactionary - Dickie nevertheless offers a general characterization of the phenomenon: “Freemasonry is about death. The noose around the neck, the sword-point at the breast, the skulls, the bones, the tombs, the urns, the coffins”. Through these “Emblems of Mortality”, masons, he argues, stand shoulder to shoulder as Brothers and transform their fear of death: “In Masonry, death is a man thing”. Women, formally excluded from the “fellowship of men and men alone”, still make it into the streets of first Magazines appeared in France in 1714. They were women indeed in the French Adoption Lodges during Napoleon’s reign, and while it is unclear whether the Emperor was ever a mason, his wife Josephine had been initiated into a Straussburg Adoption Lodge in 1792. Nor is Dickie simply a quip that women only ever have subordinate and circumscribed roles in Freemasonry, and proposes an alternative subtext for his book: “four centuries of male eccentricity”.

Men behaving sadly
The Masonic cult of death
RUTH SCURR
THE CRAFT
How the Freemasons made the modern world
JOHN DICKIE
496pp. Hodder and Stoughton. £25.

In his entertaining history of Freemasonry, John Dickie, the author of an internationally successful book about the Sicilian Mafia (Cosa Nostra, 2004), describes the global network of lodges and secret rituals as “one of Britain’s most successful cultural exports, comparable to sports like tennis, soccer and golf”. This relaxed and jaunty tone pervades The Craft, which is written from an outsider’s perspective without giving credence to the more lurid conspiracy theories that have been attached to
Empire of the mind
What imperialism means to a modern Briton

SUKHDEV SANDHU

EMPIRELAND
How imperialism has shaped modern Britain
SATHNAM SANGHERA

Empireland is a book about the British Empire by someone who makes a point of letting his readers know that, for most of his life, he has not thought very hard about it. Sathnam Sanghera speculates that this is because he was taught little about the topic at school - far less than about the Tudors or Tollund Man. Sikhs like him have been granted unusual rights - to wear turbans instead of helmets on motorbikes, or to carry ceremonial daggers in public - so perhaps, he reflects, he is compromised by belonging to a group that did "relatively well out of empire". But the main reason for his ignorance, he claims, is because he is British. And the British are unwilling or unable to face up to their own history.

Intriguing hypotheses all. Still, Sanghera's frank admission is a bold gambit, reminiscent of (often very well-educated) politicians who urge the public to be sceptical of experts, or of broadcasters who hire celebrities to present television series that might benefit from specialists. On the other hand, at a time when public discussion about the impact and legacy of British imperialism so often lapses into shrill and Manichean shouting matches, there is something to be said for authors who approach the topic in the spirit of engaged curiosity rather than didactic declamation. "You can't apply modern ethics to the past", Sanghera writes early on. "To read history as a series of events that instil pride and shame, or a balance of rights and wrongs, is insane." Sanghera draws on the Oxford-Johnson Dictionary of Anglo-Indian words and phrases to highlight empire's imprint on the English language through well-known examples such as "juggernaut", "toboggan" and "zombie". The imperial histories of tea and sugar are similarly well known; marginally less so that of gin and tonic, which became popular with Brits abroad after quinine was advertised for its anti-malarial properties. Empire's material traces can be seen in the nation's streets, its street names, even its flags (that of Wolverhampton, from where Sanghera hails, features a chain - a reference to its mighty past as a manufacturer of iron goods, some of which, such as manacles and locks, were used on slaves). This wealth can be overstated, he argues, citing work by the historians Patrick K. O'Brien and Leandro Prados de la Escosura. "Britain's links to countries outside the empire were more important in terms of value and scale by a substantial margin than connections with colonies."

Sanghera is a deft synthesist who sifts through mounds of historical treatises and allights on visceral, often shocking details. He recounts how, during the Eighth Xhosa War in 1851, members of the regiment of imperial irregulars who served in the Waterloof and Kat River valleys carried broken sickles to slice the throats of natives they caught on night patrol. On one occasion, the skulls they presented to a doctor for phrenological research were deemed inadequate. The unit's leader Stephen Lakeyman recalled: "The next night they turned my vat into a cauldron for the removal of superfluous flesh. And there these men sat, gravely smoking their pipes during the live-long night, and stirring round..."
Dirty British coaster
Steam power, free trade and colonial self-interest

TRISTRAM HUNT
UNLOCKING THE WORLD
Port cities and globalization in the age of steam 1830–1930
JON DAWKIN
496pp. Allen Lane. £25.

F OR RUDYARD KIPLING, Bombay was the, “Mother of Cities to me”. He was born in her gate, / Between the palms and the sea, / Where the world-end steamers wait”. The students of his gifted art professor father, Lockwood Kipling, similarly celebrated the majesty of steam with their Indo-Saracenic designs for the city’s Victoria Termi
nus rail station – “the truly central building of the British Empire”, in the words of the late Jan Morris. If you are interested in the architecture of Bombay Gothic, or the multi-ethnic soundscape of the Liver
pool docks, or the condition of enslaved Africans, then this is not your book. Instead, the urban his
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After a long preamble tracing the trade flows of the age of sail, Darwin chronicles the ruthless progres
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Is imperial forgetting a peculiarly English phenomenon?

Summer of Empire of the early 1900s. “To the novel
ist John Galsworthy, Amiens was La Nouvelle Car
thage”, writes Darwin, “a name meant to imply decay and corruption; its haute bourgeoisie grasping, ruthless and arrogant; its working class oppressed and exploited; the city that the colonists who came to Britain after the Second World War only caught the final phase of empire; for them processing the legacies of imperialism was second
dary to their national identity. In their rush to get their heads down and keep working, they were per
haps unconsciously exacting Ernest Renan’s belief that “Forgetfulness, and I would even say historical error, are essential in the creation of a nation”. ■

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WHAT IS AVAXHOME?
Unlimited satisfaction one low price
Cheap constant access to piping hot media
Protect your downloadings from Big brother
Safer, than torrent-trackers
18 years of seamless operation and our users' satisfaction

All languages
Brand new content
One site

We have everything for all of your needs. Just open https://avxlive.icu
Bad goods
Lifting the curtain on a cosmos of cheapness

N. J. STALLARD

CRAP
A history of cheap stuff in America
WENDY A. WOLOSON

Wendy A. Woloson's history of America's toxic love of cheap consumer goods begins with an episode of the Twilight Zone from 1959, in which a kindly sidewalk hawker must attempt to distract Mr Death from taking a girl's soul. To do this, the hawker dazzles Mr Death with a fine array of neckties and the "sales pitch of a lifetime." He describes the polyester fabric as "the most exciting invention since atomic energy" and the sewing thread as "as strong as steel yet as fragile and delicate as Shantung silk ... smuggled in by Oriental birds specially trained for ocean travel". Mr Death says he'll buy the lot. The episode, Woloson says, encapsulates the arousing style of American marketing - desperate yet charismatic salesmen and admen, seduction via division, and the upscaling of trashy goods imported from overseas. Woloson's book is a history of "the crap" - Magic Wand hand miners, Beanie Babies, knock-off Staffordshire figurines, devices to measure the freshness of eggs (The Eggs Ray), hair in a can, Thinheads, Bacon-izers - as well as a dossier of modern-day plays including one of the most fundamental of all - the aura of "affordable variety", or the art of heterogeneity.

"Heterogeneity", a neologism coined by Nathaniel Hawthorne in 1860 to describe the appeal of ram- domly juxtaposed goods, adds theatre, thrill and emotional intrigue to otherwise unexciting or unnec- essary purchases (and explains why it can be so stimulating to root through a "bargain bin"). Hawthorne was referring to the showman's tricks of eighteenth-century Yankee peddlars, who, Woloson argues, made "cheap goods come alive, instilling in them a sense of wonder out of all proportion to their true worth - as people recognized". The peddler's scheme-traps replaced quality with diversity and abundance (razor's silk handkerchief/sausage stuffers) and became the foundation for sales techniques still used by Woolworth's five-and-dimes, TV infomercials, cutey gift shops, mail-order enterprises, Costco and Target to convince shoppers to buy cheap things they don't really need at that moment, if at all.

Crap, as explained by Woloson, is the end product of consumer mania; "an often exuberant and wholly unapologetic expression of American ingenuity and waste" based on "inauthentic and deceptive simulacra". There is "nothing more American than crap," she writes, before showing how an appetite for Putt- Putt and thimbleberries, for instance, was reinforced by the US's economic dominance after the Second World War and imports from Japan, Taiwan and China (in 1933, for example, an estimated 80 million Made-in-Japan lightbulbs were used to decorate American homes at Christmas - although a pen- chant for knock-knocks produced by exploited labour is no longer a chiefly American condition. The book meticulously categorizes epiphemeral goods by selling tactic, including an exhilarating chapter on how sales of mid-twentieth-century mass-produced souvenir plates and collectible figurines were driven by sen- sationalist backstories and artificial scarcity, pro- moted through magazines and collectors' fan clubs. Calhoun's Collectors Society, who created the Offi- cial Bethlehem Christmas Plate in the late 1970s, enlisted a flyer in Tel Aviv to find a Holy Land cleric to provide the imprimatur for the design's publicity, settling on Archimandrite Gregoriou of the Greek Church of Bethlehem, whose title sounded suitably fancy - despite the fact he worked as a greeter of tour buses. All of which gives depth and legitimacy to a stock tenet of consumer psychology: through emotional manipulation and a little stagecraft, advertisers can get you to buy almost anything.

Woloson gathers stories of those harmed by the distortion of value that is essential to this runaway system, including the tale of the railroad worker who placed an appeal in the Railroad Telegrapher in 1911 for 20,000 Central Union Smoking Tobacco labels which he could trade in for two artificial legs. Almost a year later, he was still 18,000 short of the goal. The generous public had sent him many labels but few of the right brand and so "of no value" (an example, says Woloson, of the impossible targets encouraged by consumer premiums). Then there is the story of an ex-Michiganian who spent twenty-five years investing more than $47,000 in Franklin Mint's col- lectible coins as a retirement fund, only to be told in 2012, at the age of sixty-four, that they are almost worthless. Their buyers are both historically naive and ac- cumulatory. As consumers, we have all bought into this seductive and corrupt system. Even those who think they are immune to buying crap have likely received an "impressionistic" package or been given more, in the form of a tote bag, free t-shirt or hotel pen. By accepting these "gifts", you have entered the cosmos of crap. In the eyes of the salesperson, that cheap plastic pen in the bottom of your desk drawer means the show is still on.

Material changes
The 'vile' and 'wonderful' afterlives of wool

ULINKA RUBLACK

SHODDY
From Devil's dust to the renaissance of rags
HANNA ROSE SHELL

Hanna Rose Shell has infused the history of shoddy - a cheap shredded material nowadays often used to fill mattresses - with a keen sense of drama. There are three "acts", rather than chapters, and a heavyweight cast of thinkers. Theore- retical sophistication combines with narrative thrust in a remarkable story that moves from nineteenth- century England to today's global ecological con- certations around fast fashion. Travelling through modern Britain, Shell spots "mini-Mutterhorns" of pulped wool heaped along motorways, relics of the once thriving textile industry.

From the early eighteenth century, shoddy was made by mixing threads from reclaimed wool with new yarn to make suits and other garments, an effec- tive way of recycling. Several West Yorkshire cities were known as "shoddy towns", where people were inspired by monochrome photographs of the Battle of Gettysburg in 1863, in which the bodies of soldiers are strewn across rough ground and "the nobility of the corpse becomes paramount, the body appearing virginal if underdressed - a beauty only reinforced by the shoddy other". For the critically minded, these photographs depicted a rotten body politic moulded onto the skin. Such images also furthered fear of shoddy's spread, and it was an incessant sales pitch to buy more, in the form of a tote bag, free t-shirt or hotel pen. By accepting these "gifts", you have entered the cosmos of crap. In the eyes of the salesperson, that cheap plastic pen in the bottom of your desk drawer means the show is still on.

“Vile” and “wonderful” afterlives of wool

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From Devil’s dust to the renaissance of rags
HANNA ROSE SHELL

Hanna Rose Shell has infused the history of shoddy - a cheap shredded material nowadays often used to fill mattresses - with a keen sense of drama. There are three “acts”, rather than chapters, and a heavyweight cast of thinkers. Theoretical sophistication combines with narrative thrust in a remarkable story that moves from nineteenth-century England to today’s global ecological concerns around fast fashion. Travelling through modern Britain, Shell spots “mini-Mutterhorns” of pulped wool heaped along motorways, relics of the once thriving textile industry.

From the early eighteenth century, shoddy was made by mixing threads from reclaimed wool with new yarn to make suits and other garments, an effective way of recycling. Several West Yorkshire cities were known as “shoddy towns”, where people were
They don’t make them like that anymore

Genres that have fallen out of fashion

D. J. TAYLOR

A S MIGHT HAVE BEEN EXPECTED, the obituaries of Tom Maishcher, one-time kingpin of Jonathan Cape and a legendary figure in the world of London publishing, were filled, it could be said, to the brim with praise. It must be said, however, that the obituary of George Chapple, who died in October, at the age of eighty-seven, dished up a fair amount of book-trade history. Less predictably, they also shed a welcome light on one or two of the dusty corridors into which book-trade history rarely strays. In particular, they turned out to be a decade-estraining wayfarers’ guide to the huge spectral library that floats out there on the margins of the modern literary world and consists of the kind of books which publishers no longer care to publish.

By chance, Maishcher, had, at the end of his career, written one of these items himself and, at the start of it, assembled another. In the first corner came Publisher (2005), his account of a long professional life spent sponsoring the novels of, among others, Messrs Garcia Marquez, Naipaul, McEwan, Rushdie and Amis (Senior and Junior). In the second lurked Declaration (1957), one of those works by many hands so characteristic of a decade awash with movements, groups and statements of authorial intent, in which such up-and-coming talents as Doris Lessing, John Osborne and Colin Wilson combined to produce what Maishcher called “a series of manifestoes by leading writers in the arts”. He had a scheme, he wrote, to bring out a series of manifestoes by leading writers in the arts here in 2017! Would they even write down in the world. But is it likely to happen to the community reader, between to a highly respectable tradition of book-world memorialising that goes all the way back to Grant Richard’s Author Hunting by an Old Literary Sportman (1933) (Arthur Waugh’s One Man’s Road (1931) and Sir Stanley Unwin’s The Truth About Publishing (1926)).

One good place to examine the various genres which have fallen off the Waterstones shelf is, naturally, a second-hand bookshop, with its memories of Edwardian childhood and self-effacing travel books. But another is the review pages of ancient weekly magazines. Here, for example, is Simon Raven, in an issue of the Spectator from September 1957, briskly appraising the autumn’s crop of autobiographies. The six books crammed into the 800-word slot available are Sir Robert Bruce Lockhart’s Friends, Foes and Foreigners, Life’s Adventure by Philip Gibbs, The Desert and the Green by the Earl of Lytton, P. G. Wodehouse’s Over Seventy, Without My Wig by G. D. Roberts and Lascelles Abercromby’s Death of a Man.

Leaving aside P. G. Wodehouse (who according to the reviewer “has mixed up fact with nonsense in a brusque and sometimes lapidary manner which might earn a little gratitude if one found it on a desert island, for an otherwise worthless book”), Raven’s band of memorialists are, respectively, a retired diplomat, a minor novelist, a professional soldier, a distinguished barrister and an American woman recalling her husband’s death from cancer. None of their modern equivalents, you fear – with the possible exception of Ms Wente (who would stand the slightest chance of attracting a publishing deal six decades later. But neither, you imagine, would the book in which, a small matter of six years later, the review was reprinted. This is a work entitled Boys Will Be Boys, advertised as “A Simon Raven Miscellany” and published in hard covers by Anthony Blond (himself the author of a publishing memoir, The Book Book, 1985) in whose preface even the proud author strikes a defensive note. “No one is concerned to read old book reviews”, Raven concedes, while introducing “the body of my work as a casual reviewer and essayist since 1957.” On the other hand, he has tried to give this book a second interest by adding a commentary explaining “when, why, and in what circumstances they came to be produced”.

If books of belles lettres and reprinted literary journalism have gone the way of all flesh, then so have half-a-dozen old-style publishers’ standbys. They include popular theology (these had titles like Chuc It God, or What Would Jesus Say?), old-fashioned nature poetry about bonny braes and brimming lakes, the Priestley-esque “light essay” or “middle article” that filled up so many mass-market newspapers in the interwar era, books which alleged that alien life-forms had used the deserts of South America for chariot-racing or that the Ark of the Covenant lay concealed in some Greek Orthodox monastery, symposia whose contributors revealed how they had lost their virginity, acquired their first job or suffered their most embarrassing experience, gentlemanly autobiographies (these had titles like A Classical Education or Alma Mater), and what used to be called “cheer up stuff” by media personalities who had left the hardy-bury of metropolitan life for Cornish mushroom farms or Brecon crags and were anxious to recommend the virtues of the simple life.

Inevitably, as they also include numerous varieties of fiction. The original British picturesque of Fielding, Smollett and Dickens vanished in the 1840s along with coach travel as the railways ground out. In an age where print media is in incremental retreat, no one wants novels about journalists. The “marriage question”, which sent so many early-twentieth-century pens into frenzy, has more or less answered itself. Even what the publishing trade of Arthur Waugh and Sir Stanley Unwin knew as the “issue novel”, and which lasted for nearly a hundred and fifty years, has somehow fallen off a cliff.

While there are any number of tantalising outliers, the “issue novel” first made its presence felt amid the early Victorian era’s agitation over divorce law reform. Its arch-exponent was Caroline Norton, whose treatment by her husband, the ghastly George Chapple, produced, at least two best-selling works, Stuart of Dunleith (1851) and Lost and Saved (1863) – the latter published six years after the passing of the 1857 Divorce Bill. Then there is the novel of religious doubt – see Mrs Humphry Ward’s Robert Elsmere (1888), reviewed by Gladstone in the Nineteenth Century – closely followed by the temperance novel, the anti-drinking novel and the abused childhood novel (Charles Kingsley’s The Water-Babies, 1863).

Subsequently, the trailer runs off in pursuit of the “superfluous female” of the Victorian census return (George Gissing’s The Odd Women, 1893, F. M. Mayor’s The Third Miss Symons, 1913, May Sinclair’s The Life and Death of Harriet Frew, 1922, and, to a lesser extent, Forster’s A Room with a View, 1906, and The Longest Journey, 1902). The novel of the postwar era (Kingsley Amis’s Take a Girl Like You, 1960) and the unpregnant woman novel of the 1960s (Dabbbell’s The Millstone, 1965, Andrea Newman’s The Cage, 1966).

There was even, come the eco-conscious 1970s, a brief vogue for the eco-novel in which the kind of outraged citizenry banded together to frustrate the developers and see off road-building schemes (Judy Crooke’s New Road, 1975, Raymond Williams’s The Fight against the Road, 1979) – a novel for the century of the road. On the one hand, books which surf self-consciously in and out of the tides of history soon become dated, as the dilemmas they advertise get solved. Dystopia became easier. Nice girls slept with men. Illegitimacy ceased to be a stigma. On the other hand, there is a suspicion that novel readers, and novel publishers, began to demand different things from the books they were reading.

Victorian readers, by and large, expected that their fiction should have a “message”, to the point where they often insisted on finding one where none existed. It was a moral message, after all, where fiction itself struggled to evade the charge of light-mindedness, that made novels important. Gladstone, again, sending a postcard to George Meredith after translating him (Other Histories, 1912), assumed that because a certain amount of the novel took place at the racetrack it was a treatise against gambling. Modern readers, you suspect, are less keen on propagandizing and on characters who represent things other than themselves. If there have, so far, been comparatively few “Brexit novels”, then this is probably because most novelists (and most readers) are desperate to find a treatment that can adequately convey the consequences of the 2016 Referendum.

Meanwhile, a whole host of books that delighted, or perhaps more accurately were tolerated by, a bygone generation of readers have marched off to the remainder bin. My own shelves are full of them – Poets and Consiprators (collected reviews by D. J. Enright) or Any One (Raymond Mortimer, d.1994); Lady Addle Remembers: Being the Memoirs of Lady Addle of Egg by Mary Dunn (poof aristocratic reminiscences); Jam Tomorrow by Sir Basil Bartlett lit (gentlemanly autobiography). Some are worldwide phenomena, or private hits; one, perhaps, ought to endow a prize for the publisher keenest on keeping these archaisms from the publishing vault alive. It could be called the Superannuation prize and the winner would probably be someone of childern in a Suffolk rectory, a book of poems about a favourite dog or a leisurely travel book called St Cast to Quimper: Wonderings in Brittany. Who knows, it would probably have the edge on this year’s Booker prize.
Loss of character
Two actors in search of an audience

JOHN STOKES
STAGED
BBC iPlayer

ACTORS ARE OFTEN TEASED about their dependence on an audience. What should they do, then, when it suddenly disappears overnight? One answer, at least for now, might lie in turning to their colleagues for friendly reassurance, if not always for guaranteed applause.

The first series of Staged, in six fifteen-minute episodes, was broadcast in June last year; a second series, presumably made during the partial easing of restrictions, is also now available. At first the show hardly seemed original. Written and directed by Simon Evans, it is led by two well-known actors: David Tennant and Michael Sheen – the initial idea being, perhaps, that the pair would appear to adlib about their individual careers, past, present and future, much as Steve Coogan and Rob Brydon chat while eating and Bob Mortimer and Paul Whitehouse reminiscence while fishing. The difference would be that whereas previously the conversationalists might travel from restaurant to restaurant or river to river, Tennant and Sheen would be stuck at home, video-calling during the lockdown, frustratedly but amusingly tied to their computers. So it turned out, although a tension, an underlying nervousness, was palpable. Rarely mentioned, the pandemic was always present, occasionally surfacing in external shots of melancholy London streets. There was a single brush with the physical reality of Covid19, although the show’s comic demands meant that this came to nothing. Not that the pair were alone by any means. They had company, both actual in the shape of partners and children, and virtual: the director, Evans playing himself along with a couch-load of celebrities from Michael Palin to Whoopi Goldberg, brought in to comment on the hopefully hilarious badinage. Evans was smart enough to ensure that Staged passed the well-known Bechdel test whereby to be acceptable a play must include at least two women who talk about matters other than men. It wasn’t far into the first series before the “boys” were being up-screened by Georgia Tennant and Anna Lundberg, as well as by Evans’s sister, Lucy Eaton. Even now there are occasions when the show feels like a revival of Men Behaving Badly, with twenty-first-century attitudes and beards.

In the second series, male competitiveness – that other supposed professional weakness – still dominates as the pair continue to demonstrate not so much grace under pressure as technique under strain. Confinement to a video call doesn’t stop them from showing off their currently under-explored skills at rhetorical delivery, indicative gesture and full-body movement. Proximity to and distance from the computer screen creates a performative axis for displays of passion, as close to physical violence asнят will allow, countered by phases of complete withdrawal. Sheen, in particular, exploits the power of profile to convey wounding inattention, while Tennant understands the effect of being, in his own favourite word, “inert”. Given the absence of barbers, hair takes on a newly expressive function: Tennant’s is long and lank, flickable in a tantrum; Sheen’s is angry and shaggy, bristling with personality. And, of course, they are at liberty to employ a full range of impersonations, regional accents, animal noises. They recall their Shakespearean successes: a pensive Richard II from Tennant, a martial Henry V from Sheen.

If impressive party tricks were all that were involved, Staged might still seem no more than an opportunistic addition to established (and remunerative) TV genres, an excuse for post-show chat and chat-show purgating. The clue that there might be something more going on is present in the very first episode of the first series. We learn that, when the pandemic struck, Simon, David and Michael had been working on a brand new production, and that their current scheme is to rehearse the play online so as to be ready to move to the West End the minute the ban is lifted. The play in question is Six Characters in Search of an Author, Pirandello’s modernist masterpiece, unrivalled for its exploration of game-playing illusion and shifting identity, and for a self-reflexive plot in which a troupe of actors is called on to represent a real-life family in crisis. This they achieve to the point of replacing the family entirely, stealing its experience. Something of the same entanglement takes place in Staged when, in the course of the second series, the first series is taken up by American TV – Tennant and Sheen find themselves dropped as being insufficiently “known” across the Atlantic, but nonetheless obliged to give notes to the very actors who will replace them.

Performing yourself is one thing (according to Pirandello we all do it, all the time); being performed by a rival is quite another. The guiding precept for this kind of dramatic situation is, of course, “meta”, and the theatrical convolutions of Staged deepen considerably, although it remains cabinet, cribbed and confined by technology, professional where Pirandello is philosophical and deliberately trivial where he is potentially tragic. Among the many meta moments are a ferocious debate about the unacknowledged contribution that actors make when they improvise around a script (leading to a row about the “ownership” of Staged) along with bickering about billing and the humiliation of being a second choice. The tradition of actors is matched by the deviousness of directors (Evan’s showing up very badly here) and the inconstancy of agents. We witness the ever-present existential danger of dropping into character-offstage. Guest appearances by yet more celebrity actors reinforce the mutually enclosed atmosphere. When Tennant and Sheen try to back out of a commitment, they are rebuked by an imperious Dame Judi Dench: “we’re actors, when we say yes we do the bloody job”. Phoebe Waller-Bridge, “the monologue woman”, is called in to do a rewrite and, being female, immediately “makes it funnier”.

To be reminded of the absurdities as well as the achievements of what we are currently missing offers an unexpected reprieve from isolation. Staged may not always look or sound very insightful but at its sharpest it provides evidence of the degree of self-awareness that the arts of performance can bring to our lives. Inevitably, there’s a danger that the show will become over-familiar, much as the lockdown risks becoming over-familiar. So far that hasn’t happened. Staged is about now. It’s designed for those of us who mourn the buzz in the bar, the critic’s sting and the columnist’s indirection, who love ancient anecdotes and recent rumours, who enjoy recounting the hits and the misses of prominent personalities. It makes insiders, backstagers, of us all. Instead of complaining about theatrical arbitrariness among us, as we often do among others, we should simply appreciate the show as “first choice” talent standing in for all those other actors, unemployed but equally brilliant, who are stuck in their rooms shouting at a tiny screen.
From ditzy sitcom to surreal menace
Marvel's new genre-bending TV

ROZ KAVENYE
WANDAVISION
Disney+

WHEN CONSIDERING POPULAR CULTURE, we often have to look backwards at context, at the story so far, the fragmentary clips assembled as “Previously on...” Thus, when Disney’s streaming service Disney+ announced WandaVision as their first TV show linked to the Marvel Cinematic Universe, there are certain things their assumed primary audience is expected to know already.

Among these are that Vision is an artificial person given autonomy and something like a soul by the Mindstone, an arcane artefact; that Wanda Maximoff has reality-bending powers; that somehow they managed to fall in love. Moreover, that Vision is dead, the Mindstone ripped out of his head by the genocidal Thanos at the end of Infinity War; that when Wanda was returned to existence in Endgame, she attacked Thanos with her powers and a terrifying degree of fury...

It is very disconcerting, then, to see them as a blithe young couple in black-and-white arriving in the suburb of Westview in a pitch-perfect pastiche of 1950s situation comedy; the veteran Dick Van Dyke acted as consultant. Neighbours are almost overwhelmingly friendly, the boss is a bully, comic misunderstandings abound. Wanda can do magic but, in keeping with the production values, we can see the wires when she does. But all is not as it seems. Vision’s office job is meaningless to a Kafkaesque degree, and the end credits are being watched on a monitor by someone in a 2020s office.

And things change: the second episode has animated titles and location shots and a racially integrated neighbourhood. A toy helicopter falls out of the air and is in colour: a beekeeper emerges from a sewer. Suddenly Wanda is pregnant and the screen is colourised. The third episode changes again to the 1970s mere minutes later and Wanda gives birth to twins. The neighbours’ comments grow ever more cryptic and, when their neighbour Geraldine remembers the death of Wanda’s brother (in Avengers - Age of Ultron) she is expelled from this sub-reality.

We wonder what exactly is going on and many of us have more information than the characters involved. The Marvel Cinematic Continuity is not the same as the comics but is cognate with it: we know that Wanda is a lot more dangerous than the ditzy Lucille Ball figure she seems here - that she can utterly rewrite reality. In a blink-and-miss-it moment, it becomes clear that Vision is still a shattered corpse and yet he is self-aware enough to suggest they leave.

The Marvel films have always been good at exploring other genres - Ant Man was a heist movie, Spider-Man: Homecoming was as much high-school romance as superhero film - but the Netflix Marvel TV shows, however good some individual episodes were, tended to be tin-eared neo-noir full of fights in corridors. Four episodes in, WandaVision is a lot more inventive: a history of sitcoms based in a deep understanding of them that is also a piece of surreal Lynchian menace. It is impressive that Marvel and Disney both took such a risk with their first streamed show and seem to be pulling it off.

The canonical Marvel films have always had surprisingly deep texture - a particularly fine point is that Wanda grew up in an impoverished Eastern European country and old sitcoms, viewed out of order, might be her idea of American reality. I fear the process of her learning otherwise is going to be fascinating, terrifying and compulsively watchable.

ROZ KAVENYE
WANDAVISION
Disney+

Kate Bingham’s most recent pamphlet, Archway Sonnets, was published in 2020

Here

The line between the ocean and the sky is not a line and not, itself, the curve of Earth’s one surface falling away but, rather, just as far as we can see - a limit, or frontier, the human eye for all its brain-power and optic nerve can’t cross - now a closing blur of grey, now a distant clear blue boundary, a width of air dividing wet from dry, like glass whose thickness we only observe side-on, though we look through it all day imagining, sometimes, infinity, that abstract geometrical idea, out of reach, three short miles from here and what I think I mean is, standing here the body opens into an idea of the horizon as infinity - a line that circles, one long lonely day so long I am not able to observe it passing, even as the pebbles dry, a boundary that has no boundary only degrees and densities of grey or this wide blue I need to hold my nerve to look through, that unbalances the eye with its too little and too much to see, this empty feeling, far enough away to seem straightforward, though the oceans curve and weather comes and goes across the sky.

KATE BINGHAM

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PERPETUAL LIGHT

FEBRUARY 12, 2021

BESSIE SMITH

LOSTING EDEN

T L S

ACRACKIE KAY

LUCY JONES
Drunk or metaphysical?
Jon Fosse's seven-part meditation on doubt, faith, art, identity - and alcohol

KEVIN BRAZIL

I IS ANOTHER
Septology III–V
JON FOSSE
Translated by Damon Searls

In some rain must fall. (TLS, March 2, 2016), the fifth volume of Karl Ove Knausgaard’s My Struggle series, the twenty-year-old Knausgaard attends a workshop and submits a poem for assessment to the Norwegian writer Jon Fosse. “The first line, he said, is a cliché, you can cross that out.” So is the second, third and fourth. Only one image in Knausgaard’s poem, “wide-screen sky”, passes muster. “I’ve never seen that before. You can keep that.”

For many English-speaking readers, this may have been a first encounter with Fosse, even though, now aged sixty-one, he is one of Norway’s most celebrated writers, granted the use of Grotten, a royal residence, by the King of Norway in recognition of his achievement. This scene also suggests why Fosse is comparatively less well-known than his compatriot. If Knausgaard has as little problem with writing clichés as with writing about the sky, a poet compositively avoids both. As he has admitted, “I cannot help writing fiction” – something that places him outside the recent taste for novels steeped in barely disguised autobiography.

Fosse’s belief that literary innovation requires negation of cliché as well as of the self, places him in a tradition of writers such as Thomas Bernhard, Laszlo Krasznahorkai, Daia Dindic, Clarice Lispector and above all Samuel Beckett, whose Waiting for Godot motivated Fosse’s play Someone Is Going To Come (1990). Fosse shares a common weapon with these writers in their struggle: a style that tends towards torrents of unpunctuated sentences, relentless blasts against conventional syntax and the reader’s patience. Fosse calls this “slow prose”, yet this doesn’t necessarily make for slow reading; you can fly a current, trying to cling to what you know, or you can let go and take the risk of drowning. Fosse’s Septology series consists of seven parts; the first two were published in English as The Other Name (2009); parts three, four and five have now been packaged up as I Is Another; and the concluding two will appear later this year as The New Name. All are translated by Damon Searls, who deserves much praise for bringing Fosse to an English-speaking audience over the past two decades.

The series is narrated by an elderly painter, Asle, who lives in the fictional town of Dylgja in the Norwegian countryside. Each part tells the story of one day in his life, one successive day per part; each part begins with a meditation on the same painting, a purple and brown cross, and ends in a monologue of Catholic prayer. Neither art nor faith offers Asle consolation: he returns to his painting every morning because he isn’t sure whether it is any good; he ends his day in prayer, worrying, “now do I really believe in this, no, not really.” Asle fills his days recalling his past, his deceased wife Ales, and obsessing about another Asle, also a painter, a drunk who lives alone in the nearby city of Bjorgvin. Yet in the narrator’s telling, these two Aleses, his past self and his “Name-sake”, quickly become hard to distinguish: “I’m driving north in the dark and I see Asle sitting there on the sofa... and he’s dressed just like I’m dressed, black pants and pullover.”

Jon Fosse, Frankfurt Book Fair, 2019

Kevin Brazil’s What Ever Happened To Queer Happiness is forthcoming

Now is the time!
A young man’s encounter with the seven deadly sins

HARRY STRAWSON

SEVEN NIGHTS
SIMON STRAUSS
Translated by Eve Bacon and Lee Bacon
138pp. Rare Bird. $16.

“I am writing This out of fear”, announces the narrator, S, at the beginning of Simon Strasser’s debut novel Seven Nights. Strauss might be better served by a more literal rendering of the German: S is twenty-nine and writing out of Angst at the prospect of turning thirty - a transition, he worries, that means deciding on “a life, joy, a woman”, and stifling the passions of youth. He quotes Schiller: “Our best seeds for the great and good are buried under the pressures of bourgeois life.” In S’s mind, it is not too late, however. “There’s still time to band together, to start a group with the name ‘New Sensualism’”, he writes in a manifesto-like first chapter. “I’ll start academics that research emotions, not theories. Where you don’t leave your heart on the calendar tray.” The opportunity to research emotions out in the field arrives in the form of a Faust-like pact proposed by a near-stranger (“he looked at me and led me into temptation”). The deal is this: over seven nights the stranger will send S out into the city to encounter one of the seven deadly sins. In return S must write seven pages recounting his experience by 7am the next day.

The week-long sin-spirée is framed with a reference to Kierkegaard’s Either/Or of 1843 (published, incidentally, when Kierkegaard was twenty-nine) in which hedonistic “aesthetic” lives are contrasted with responsible “ethical” lives. In seven short, diaristic chapters, S rehearses this dilemma as he seeks to defy the cynicism and apathy of the adult world: now is the time to decide: “either-or”. We follow S as he bungee jumps (pride), eats meat at a flash restaurant (guluttony), gambles on the horses (greed), browses library shelves “wanting to be Rimbaud” (envy), watches with indifference a xenophobic speech on late-night television (hatred), attends a masked ball (lust) and sits in a car (wrath).

The project S undertakes is not so much “seven nights against time” as seven nights against the times. “Aren’t you ashamed?”, S addresses the reader, “not to have an answer to the question: what is an opinion of yours that the majority doesn’t share?” For example, now that “eating meat has become evil”, he explains, while eating beef in a restaurant, carnivoresm is for him who “does not imitate what others do”, S eats meat “to disagree with myself and my time”. He also does it to be manly (he cites Gramsci and Hemingway), though in truth, S is someone who “takes earplugs to the concert” (sic), “puts his socks on the kitchen table the night before to save time on the way to work” and “can’t even open his girlfriend’s bra with his left hand”. S’s energy and enthusiasm (as well as its occasional poor judgement), Seven Nights succeeds as a document of youth, though Strauss’s provocations of political correctness are not original, deeply felt, or even particularly minority. The thrill of going against the grain is as close as we get to the sensualism promised at the outset. If the enterprise occasionally feels sophomoric, however, it comes with the ready-made excuse that this is part of the point.
Everyone
the centre
of a world

The tale of five young lives that never were but might have been

LINDSAY DUGUID
LIGHT PERPETUAL
FRANCIS SUFFORD
328pp. Faber. £16.99

F rancis Sufford's generous writing style combines a close-up view of events with a distant perspective. In his first novel, Golden Hill (TLS, July 15, 2016), set in pre-revolutionary America, the rich descriptions and wide panoramas were the literary equivalent of high production values in the cinema. Light Perpetual is similarly exhilarating. A sense of history also infuses everything. The novel opens on a Saturday afternoon in 1944 with a searing description of a V2 rocket attack in South London. Five small children who are in Woolworths with their mothers are killed and their futures wiped out, eliminating “All the would-be’s, might-be’s, could-be’s of the decades to come”. The narrative then follows the putative lives of Jo, Valerie, Alec, Ben and Veronica in five carefully dated sections from 1949 to 2009, moving from a world of bombshells, false teeth and National Health specs to one of mix-tapes, postod,ers and doner kebabs. In spite of the suggestion of an alternate reality in the novel’s high-concept format, Light Perpetual is firmly fixed in time and space. The separate stories are typical both of the main characters’ personalities and of their era. Elements of a serial or family saga are part of the pleasure, alongside narrative shocks, comic moments, horrifying incidents and moving contemplations of past and present. Ordinary things, such as football matches, buses and singing lessons, both change and remain the same. The passing of time is charted in details of money, clothes and houses, as well as in more subtle signs, such as the attitude of teachers to pupils and the teachings of the Church. Place is important. The central setting is the Borough of Bexford with its market square, Odeon cinema, church and war memorial, and its big houses on the hill ripe for gentrification. Bexford is north of Sidcup, “in the eaves of London”, a suburb set against glimpses of the city’s brown river, its distant smells of petrol and smoke and the glint of a plane on the flight path to Heathrow. It is in London proper that bad things happen.

In 1964 greedy Vern sets about conniving investments for his Rent Act-dodging housing scheme over a rich luncheon in a French restaurant in Mayfair. Vern's victim is an up-and-coming Millwall football player who is earning “about twenty-six pounds ten shillings a week”; a fellow diner is Maria Callas. The same year, not far away in Soho, Jo sings with a girl band at the Pelican Club. Her twin sister Val rides pillion on a scooter to sunny bank holiday Margate, gets high on deserdrine, and meets her fate in the form of a man in a peacock blue suit.

The year of the midlife crisis is 1979. Ben, a bus conductor who has always grappled with nightmarish visions, collects the fares on the 36c from Bexford to Queen's Park and is saved in a stand-off with a gang of skinheads by the West Indian bus driver Trevor. Clever Alec, who started work on the local paper, now has a job as a typesetter on The Times. He copes with unions and picket lines, aware of the clanking of the outdated printing machinery and of the change on Gray's Inn Road as it runs from the “enclosed playground for lawyers” in Holborn to the “seazziness” of King's Cross. In 1994 Val is involved in a racially motivated murder in an underground car park in Camden, while Ben finds salvation in marriage and the church. In the final section, set in 2009, life's weary course is almost played out and we see the long-term effects of impulsive actions in divorce, bereavement, prison, a care home and a hospice, with the promise of hope in marriage, children, stepchildren and grandchildren, as well as in a wider, more inclusive society. Memories of the past blend with visions of the future: “There's no such thing as forever.”

Sufford's tone is benign and unmatirical through-out, with the occasional hint of malice (there is Val's rival in California, a blonde girl “trying hard to fall out of a halter top”; Alec's struggles with his role as “the techy granddad”). Quotations from songs and prayers, and moments of intense medita-tion, provide a counterbalance to the detailed descriptions of daily life and return the continuing narratives to the original metaphysical impetus and the idea that everyone is the centre of a world around which events assemble.

Cannibal culture

A comedic take on the shibboleths of an imaginary community

GERALD JACOBS
MOTHER FOR DINNER
SHALOM AUSLANDER
272pp. Picador. £16.99

W hile we are all familiar with the dictum, commonly attributed to Mark Twain, that “truth is stranger than fiction”, less familiar is the reason Twain gave for this: “because Fiction is obliged to stick to possibilities; Truth isn’t.”

Try telling that to Shalom Auslander, whose new novel, Mother for Dinner, concerns domestic cannibal-ism in contemporary New York, a theme that most would agree brazenly floats Twain's “obliga-tion”. Yet the writing has such an inner logic and consistency that it conceals its potentially destabilizing undercurrents and, remarkably, gives Auslander’s bizarre story the ring of authenticity. A monstrous matriarch is dying and making herself ready for her gigantic, purposely fattened body to be ceremoniously eaten by her many children. The plot is largely concerned with those children’s deliberations about whether and how to do this. The family is part of a marginalized community: “Can-Ams” (Cannibal Americans) and its matriarch, who is also a bigoted bully, is named Mudd Seltzer. Her thirteen rectilinear offspring (all but one are sons) are named according to their order of birth: “First”, “Second”, “Third” and so on. The sole female in this world of traditional tribal succession is called “Zero.”

The central character is Seventh, who works in a New York publishing house where every manuscript submitted is a farcical variation of an identity-political novel, authored by such aspirants as a “Gender-Fluid-Hearing-Impaired-Library-Democratic-Palestinian-Canadian-American”. “It’s about time”, says the New York Times's rave review of this particular offering. Seventh is an ironic reader and admirer of Montaigne, and quotes him repeatedly, identifying with the great essayist’s outsider status, which Auslander himself perhaps does, having grown up profoundly unhappily in a severe Haredi Jewish family in Mon-seny, New York - an experience he has described in his memoir, Foreskin's Lament (2007).

To many religious American Jews, Auslander is an enfant even more terrible than Philip Roth, if not quite operating at the same literary level. Where Roth publicly disavows all religious people, Auslan-der has gone further, venting his resentment bitterly - and wittily - in his writing, principally in Foreskin’s Lament and the novel, Hope: A tragedy (2002), both of which render the lineaments of Haredi practice and the shibboleths of modern Jewish history as a theatre of the absurd. Hope: A tragedy audaciously reincarnates Anne Frank as a filthy, foul-mouthed harridan.

Mother for Dinner makes for a compelling read, challenging the reader to consider what it means to be Jewish, and making an attempt at a “real” understanding of Jewishness. Auslander’s depiction of the Haredi world is both amusing and insightful, but it is not without its flaws. While the book is often hilarious, it can also be overly predictable and formulaic at times. The characters are occasionally one-dimensional, and the plot structure can feel a bit too conventional. Despite these minor issues, however, Mother for Dinner is still an entertaining read that explores important themes in the Jewish community.

Mother for Dinner is not as funny as those two books, but it provides plenty of dark laughs and inspired comedic riffs as Auslander describes the solemn yet preposterous details of Can-Am life: how should the loved one’s corpse be drained, cut up and divided? And with what instruments? How long should the interval be between death and digestion? And then there is the blessing: “May you be drained as your ancestors were before you.”

The rituals, proverbs and aphorisms of Cannibal American culture have their obvious corollary in the religious community of the author's childhood. Mudd even echoes the concluding Passover wish for “Next Year in Jerusalem” with her annual invocation: “Next Year in New Jersey”.

It seems clear that Shalom Auslander is still fighting his own demons, throwing off the weight of old commandments. And, in his fiction, still sticking, after all, to Mark Twain’s possibilities.

Mother for Dinner

No Ghosts Need Apply

Gothic influences in criminal science, the detective and Doyle’s Holmesian Canon

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TLG 17
Staying on the steamship
How Pushkin got a modern makeover

JULIA VAINGURT
THE UNLIKELY FUTURIST
Pushkin and the invention of originality in Russian Modernism
JAMES RANN
280pp. University of Wisconsin Press. $79.95.

In their manifesto "A Slap in the Face of Public Taste" (1912), the Russian futurists David Burlyuk, Alexei Kruchenykh, Vladimir Mayakovsky and Velimir Khlebnikov declared their aspiration to break with literary tradition and to create in radically new ways. Casting themselves as poetic hooligans, the "slappers" vowed to "throw Pushkin, Dostoevsky and Tolstoy ... from the steamship of modernity".

Scholars have typically taken these outrageous claims at face value, but James Rann’s excellent book offers a correction. Despite promising to do away with Alexander Pushkin, the Russian futurists seemed unable to stop addressing, quoting, alluding to and otherwise engaging with their grand predecessor. The Unlikely Futurist seeks to explain why they could not let Pushkin go. In the process, it offers a sophisticated revision of the futurists’ complex relationship with the Russian literary tradition of which Pushkin is the central pillar.

Rann’s argument hinges on a paradox: by metaphorically killing off Pushkin, the futurists in fact disentombed and resurrected his poetry. If the official cult of Pushkin had stultified the poet, then the futurists’ efforts made Pushkin new. According to the formalist critic (and friend to the futurists) Victor Shklovsky, art sharpens our awareness of reality by “defamiliarizing” habitual perceptions. In Rann’s reading, the futurists’ defamiliarization of Pushkin was itself an enactment of the renewing power of art.

The futurists indeed evinced an affinity with Pushkin, albeit not with the Pushkin perpetuated by Soviet mythmaking. This latter, idealized version emphasized the poet’s Apollonian clarity, earnestness and order. Yet it also sanitized his image, effacing the bawdy, uncouth, experimental and rebellious elements that appealed to avant-garde poets.

It was by treating Pushkin with irreverence that the futurists unshackled him from his monumentality and brought him into their future-oriented contemporaneity. The poetic conquest of time was futurism’s cherished aim, and Rann shows how each of his protagonists - Khlebnikov, Mayakovsky and Kruchenykh - drew inspiration for his own preoccupation with time from Pushkin’s poetry. Khlebnikov took up Pushkin’s theme of poetry as prophecy, while Mayakovsky’s interest in immortality manifested itself in a fixation on the Pushkinian imagery of statues and their animation. Rann shows how Mayakovsky updated two poetic genres - the exegi monumentum and the elegant conversation with the dead - by not only addressing the dead Pushkin, but also having him get off his own pedestal and take a stroll. By inciting Pushkin to get moving, the futurist iconoclast revitalized him for the modern age.

The chapter on Kruchenykh is particularly eye-opening. A major figure in Russian cubo-futurism, Kruchenykh is admired less for his poetic talent than for his conceptual ingenuity. His most famous poetic creation is the short verse “Dyr bul shchyi”, written in the universal language of zuum. While sounding somewhat similar to Russian, the poem’s clusters of letters did not form recognizable words. Yet for Kruchenykh they conveyed a meaning that lay “beyond sense” and therefore required no translation. Rann offers an innovative reading of 500 New Witticisms and Puns from Pushkin (1924), in which Kruchenykh repurposed actual quotations from Pushkin in order to make them more zuum-like. Revealing the sonic properties of Pushkin’s own verse, Kruchenykh transformed him into a cubo-futurist, as well.

Just as the futurists defamiliarized and revitalized Pushkin, James Rann revitalizes Russian futurism by illuminating its productive tensions and paradoxes. It is precisely such contradictions that keep the avant-garde forever on edge, perpetually new.

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Twenty-sixth century blues
Restoring the jagged boldness of a totalitarian dystopia

BRYAN KARETNYK

WE
YEVGENY ZAMYATIN
Translated by Bela Shayevich

The twenty-sixth century of Yevgeny Zamyatin’s WE is still a way off, but the case for this cult novel’s oracular qualities has already been won in the court of public opinion. As Margaret Atwood rightly observes in her introduction, to call WE a shock novel is not new: “So much in WE seems prophetic.” On the hundredth anniversary of the novel’s composition, the parallels between its content and the dystopian realities that would emerge in its wake remain striking: the total absorption of the individual by the state; the replacement of identity with numbers; the mass surveillance of every thought, utterance and deed; the monstrous liquidation of an entire regime’s every opponent; the staging of show trials and executions; the state enactment of eugenics; the erection of great walls and the advent of a kind of thoughtcrime, whereby any criticism of a regime may be equated with disloyalty to a cause. All this Zamyatin wrote about before Mussolini’s famous formulation, “Everything within the state, nothing outside the state, nothing against the state.” Before the Moscow Trials and the Great Terror; before the Third Reich and the horrors of Auschwitz. And before today’s world of privacy-sacrificing, digitally emmeshed surveillance capitalism.

The label of “prophecy”, however, perhaps belies a far more disturbing truth. Responding to old criticisms that her Handmaid’s Tale was “far-fetched”, Atwood once pointed out that she had in fact written nothing “that humans had not already done somewhere at some time”. With Zamyatin, it is not the case that all these horrors had come to pass, but their potential was already well apparent. When he read WE in the mid-1940s, Orwell wondered how Zamyatin could have produced a vision that would so closely resemble totalitarianism at its zenith. “Writing at about the time of Lenin’s death,” he marvelled the author of 1894, “he cannot have had the Stalin dictatorship in mind.” No. Indeed. Nor did he have to, for Lenin’s reign had already provided more than adequate material. Zamyatin’s own reality was replete enough with repression, mass killings, political persecution and terror, all in pursuit of an absolute ideological goal that venerated the collective, disdained the individual, and enshrined the monstrous in man and ruthlessly crushed opposition. The trajectory had been set. As with so much of the best science fiction, this was less a case of foresight than insight.

Zamyatin (1884-1937) was among the first writers to appreciate the terrible potential of ideal totalitarianism. Reasoning that man was happiest in his Edenic bliss, which he destroyed through his own wanton folly, Zamyatin’s One State claims to have restored “mathematically infallible happiness” to its people by dispensing with their freedom. Under the aegis of the elusive Benefactor, its citizens are jubilant and enslaved: known only by numbers, they live in literal glass houses, all the better for the secret police to keep watch; their recreation consists of marching to the strains of the state anthem; private life has all but been abolished and love itself has been conquered, “organised and mathematicalised”.

Yet amid this seemingly crystalline perfection, there are significant defects. For all that the One State has anaesthetised its citizens to genuine human experience, there are still those who are “sick with a soul”. The protagonist D-503, the chief engineer of the spaceship INTEGRAL, dreams, imagines and falls criminally in love, horrified and rent by his own atavistic impulses, which the state deems to be symptoms of mental illness. His love interest, the courageous and beguiling I-330, and her co-conspirators in an underground organization called the Mephi not only indulge in hedonistic pleasures, but even plot to overthrow the state and destroy the so-called Green Wall that surrounds the city and holds its citizens captive, separate from the outside world. In Zamyatin’s dynamic, radical thinking, revolution must necessarily give way to revolution – “Revolution is infinite”. I-330 tells us – “while human nature, with its infinite capacity for imagination and change, is at once totalitarianism’s Achilles’ heel and man’s ultimate hope of salvation.

This early revelation and Zamyatin’s determination to have it known were enough to have him silenced by the totalitarian state in which he lived. Though an Old Bolshevik, he began to style himself as a heretic, writing against more “nimble authors” who curried favour with the authorities. Punished for this with the “death sentence” of censorship, he eventually petitioned Stalin, in typically audacious terms, to let him leave the workers’ paradise. “I beg to be permitted to go abroad”, he wrote, “with the right to return as soon as it becomes possible in our country to serve great ideas in literature without cringing before little men.” The request was granted, with help from Maxim Gorky, and in 1931 Zamyatin left, becoming one of the first Soviet dissident writers. He never did return to the Soviet Union, and in Paris he languished in exile from most countries who similarly dreamed of another revolution to sweep away the regime that gripped their homeland. Little consolation though it may have been, his novel, having long since been smuggled out of the Soviet Union, was already making its way around the free world in English, French and Czech translations. It would have to wait until 1988 for its debut in Russia. Just as there is no final revolution, so, too, can there be no final translation. In a market of competing editions, however, Shayevich’s stands out, and for very good reason. Reading her version alongside that of her principal rival, Clarence Brown (1930), one is reminded of the degree to which tastes and expectations have changed in recent decades. Both are truly excellent, different renditions of the novel, but in pronouncedly different keys. Where Brown’s suave, perhaps too suave, version refines Zamyatin’s often fragmentary prose to a timeless elegance, Shayevich’s retains the novel’s bold, jagged, elemental energy, recapturing for today’s reader some of the immediacy and freshness of Gregory Zilboorg’s version in which WE made its world debut in 1924. Compare, for instance:

As I write this I feel my cheeks burning. Yes: to integrate completely the colossal equation of the universe. Yes: to unbind the wild curve, to straighten it tangentially, asymptotically, to flatten it to an undeviating line. Because the line of the One State is a straight line. (Brown)

I write this and feel: my cheeks are burning. Yes: to integrating the profound equation of the Universe. Yes: to uncurling the veil of savagery, towards the asymptote, along the tangent - setting it straight: for the line of the One State is straight. (Shayevich)

Only occasionally does one detect the slightest hesitation, a reluctance to give full vent to the implications of Zamyatin’s word choice in terminology now deemed contentious (for example, the more euphemistic “strange” in place of “primitive”). But ultimately such choices reaffirm the modern, socially conscious sensibility of the translation, which remains true to the spirit of the work in a way that the author himself would have approved.

Zamyatin believed in art’s inmutable reality and ability to effect change, qualities that can often seem dubious or opaque today. Yet the totalitarian regimes of old, any analysis of the art of this truth would have, for why else would they have acted so zealously in their attempts to prevent so many words from seeing the light of day? Zamyatin’s contention that change is the only constant was alone enough to set the two pencil working, but his intuitive grasp of totalitarianism, with all its professed rationalism and inherent irrationalities, made of his novel an utterly inadmissable piece of literary fact. Born not of wild imagination but of cold, horrified observation, WE is less a prophecy than a re-asking with the possibilties of its own present, one that continues to reveal new meanings as time gives way to new realities. Reading it afresh in Shayevich’s translation, one can only feel that the twenty-sixth century is forever closer than we might think.

Bryan Karetnyk is a translator and Wolfson Scholar in the Humanities at University College London

“There are no distant places any longer: the world is small and the world is one.” – Wendell Willkie, 1943

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THE LITERARY REVIEW
Oiling the wheels
What drives America’s relationship with Saudi Arabia
BARNABY CROWCROFT

Prior to the 2003 Iraq War, America’s leadership had an ambition to create a new Middle East. The start of the Iraq War showed this ambition to be an illusion. For decades, America and Saudi Arabia have been very close. Despite the differences in their political systems, the two countries have remained close allies. This has been due in part to the fact that both countries share some common values, such as a commitment to democracy and the rule of law. However, there have also been significant differences between the two countries, particularly in terms of their foreign policies. This has led to occasional tensions between the two nations. In recent years, Saudi Arabia has become increasingly concerned about Iran’s nuclear program and the threat it poses to the region. In response, Saudi Arabia has increased its military spending and has sought to improve its relations with other countries in the region. America, on the other hand, has sought to maintain its influence in the region and has been a key player in the ongoing conflict in Syria. This has been a source of tension between the two countries, as Saudi Arabia and other countries in the region have been concerned about America’s role in the conflict. Overall, the relationship between America and Saudi Arabia is complex and has been shaped by a range of factors, including historical, cultural, and political considerations.
Beyond terror and textbooks
Can the West counter Saudi Arabia’s promotion of extremism?

AYAAN HIRSI ALI
THE CALL
Inside the global Saudi religious project
KRITHIKA VARGAR
232pp. Columbia Global Reports. $15.99.

Over the years, many analysts have tried to “follow the money” when it comes to the intended and unintended consequences of the Saudi Wahhabi religious proselytization effort. This promotion of both dawa (the call to convert to Islamism) and jihad (armed struggle) has bedevilled pluralist and genuinely moderate Muslims all over the world for nearly five decades. In the years after 9/11, the connection between extremist ideologies and terrorism became a subject of burning interest to many Americans. Yet even as the US government confronted explicitly terrorist organizations by engaging them militarily, cutting off funding, and targeting their leadership, a sustained effort to tackle extremist Islamist proselytizing failed to materialize.

In her important new book The Call: Inside the global Saudi religious project, Krisitka Vargar carefully and methodically investigates the sprawling Saudi proselytization efforts in two of the world’s most populous countries, Indonesia and Nigeria, and in one politically fragile country in the Balkans: Kosovo, formerly a part of Yugoslavia.

Vargar is not a pioneer in this field, but she makes four very valuable contributions. First, her book exposes the scale and nature of Saudi influence, even where it is elusive. In the decades since 1973, the Saudi dawa effort has involved tens of billions of dollars, multiple official government agencies (including state ministries, embassies, and charities), non-governmental organizations, private actors (mostly businessmen) whose influence can either be plausibly denied or blamed for its excesses, as well as mosques, schools and private efforts often converge, and relatively little coercion has been necessary in the effort. Through in-depth discussions with key figures on the ground, Vargar shows that much of the success of the Saudi effort has hinged on trusted interpersonal networks and contacts.

No one person, no single organization, has really been “in charge” of the effort. This is both a key strength and crucial weakness of Saudi dawa. Vargar demonstrates through the rise of “rogue” individuals - people who were trained in and out of Saudi Arabia - that the Saudis have effectively created a monster they cannot control. Although they intended to use dawa and religious “soft power” to gain influence and bolster the domestic legitimacy of the royal family against allegations of un-Islamic hedonism, the Saudis could not control when and where extremist dawa morphed into jihad. Sometimes the jihad was fought in areas where it was deemed appropriate (Afghanistan, Yugoslavia), but at other times it erupted in areas where Saudi authorities would not countenance it (particularly in Saudi Arabia itself, where terrorists have regularly accused the royal family of betraying dawa).

Secondly, Vargar also documents an intriguing phenomenon: young, intelligent Muslims, trained in Wahhabi ideology at Saudi institutions, who nevertheless become genuinely pluralistic, disengage from jihadism, and fall from fanaticism and extremism. The Kosovar Imam Drilon Gashi was educated at the Islamic University of Medina but turned away from Wahhabism due to his own scepticism. Gashi would frequently ask his Wahhabi professors philosophical questions during lectures, even following them to their cars for clarification, before being told to stop asking such things on threat of expulsion. In Indonesia the liberal scholar Uli Asbach-Abdalla studied at LIPIA (the Islamic and Arabic College of Indonesia) from 1988 to 1993 but rejected the ideology that was pushed on him and went on to found the Liberal Islamic Network instead, provoking the ire of Islamists: in 2002, a bomb package intended for him blew off the arm of a policeman. Scholars who are interested in genuine counter-radicalization efforts would be wise to devote attention to the intellectual trajectories of men such as Gashi and Asbach-Abdalla.

Thirdly, Vargar demonstrates that the Saudi dawa effort is both more complex and more influential than commonly believed. Here, the author brings helpful nuance: “The Saudi project can be chaotic and full of contradictions, both supporting and rigidly denouncing Muslim Brotherhood activists, or simultaneously funding shady charities and counter-extremism centers that work within miles of each other”. Vargar emphasizes that although there has been, and is, ample overlap between Wahhabism and Salafism, the two are far from perfectly congruent and there are important divergences, both in theory and in practice on the ground.

Finally, she demonstrates the outcomes of the Saudi effort, in contexts as different as Indonesia, Nigeria and Kosovo. Varagur shows clearly that the dawa effort has set up an ideological infrastructure around the world allowing extremist intolerance to take root and thrive. Some of this infrastructure may result in violent jihad, but much of it may not. As the author argues, it depends on local circumstances, institutions and personalities.

Previous studies of Saudi dawa have frequently revolved - for good reason - around “terror and textbooks”. Vargar convincingly shows that it has gone far beyond this. Yes, she argues, Saudi dawa has sometimes resulted in explicit acts of violence. Mostly, however, it has produced zealous intolerance, fractured pluralism and placed a durable, corrosive burden on politics and society that does not quite cross the threshold of violence. In fragile societies where political institutions are already precarious, the effects of Saudi dawa can have devastating and highly unpredictable consequences. The presence or absence of violence is the wrong metric to use to measure the severity of the damage.

What can be done about all this? Vargar demonstrates how, although today’s dawa effort remains powerful, it is not as influential as the one that existed prior to 9/11. For one, the Saudi leadership is increasingly wary of anachronistic religious matters, as stated by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. The extent of MBS’s own commitment to genuine pluralism remains, as yet, unclear, as he has engaged in acts of absolute that have caused concern in the West, even as he has deflected personal responsibility for the elimination of Jamal Khashoggi. Some sympathetic to MBS have argued that the crown prince is to embark on serious reforms within the Kingdom, he cannot countenance betrayals or sabotage from within the elite (whether by Khashoggi, as he has been alleged, or by others). Politically, the crown prince is to seek out more pluralist clerics who meddle in politics. Nevertheless, MBS does appear inclined - for now - towards modernization in both the economic and religious spheres, even as he seeks to consolidate his personal power base.

With a dose of sombre realism, Vargar notes that the future may depend less on what the Saudi leadership decides to do than on what others are already doing. In recent years, a growing competition has arisen to provide ideological leadership in the Islamic world. In prior decades, this effort was largely and unilaterally led by Saudi Arabia, but today the world also faces Qatar, Turkish and Iranian attempts to exert influence, all of which facilitate extremist ideologies in other countries, and all of which presents a challenge to pluralist opponents of an uncompromising Islamism. The harmful role played by these three regimes continuously causes me far more concern than the role played by Saudi Arabia, even as the Kingdom’s opaque governance structure makes it difficult to determine the likely future course of its dawa effort. MBS may be the crown prince, and wary of religious extremism, but on issues such as counter-radicalism, the dawa effort abroad he does not rule alone.

The lingering question is: are we, nearly twenty years after 9/11, too late? It is impossible to say. Many of the young individuals profiled in Vargar’s book have been successful by their adherents. What decisions would they have made had they been offered a persuasive, genuinely pluralist alternative? In future years, the West has to find out the answer to this question, partly to ensure its own survival, and partly because the young individuals profiled in this excellent and insightful book deserve far better, safer alternatives than the Saudi-sponsored path from dawa to jihad.
Suspension of belief
How atheism was treated in the early novel

ALISON SHELL
GODLESS FICTIONS IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY
A literary history of atheism
JAMES BRYANT REEVES
260pp. Cambridge University Press. £75.

From Jesus to Lord Voldemort
Why modernity led to secularization

ALEXANDRA WALSHAM
THE BIRTH OF MODERN BELIEF
Faith and judgment from the Middle Ages to the Enlightenment
ETHAN H. SHAGAN

UNBELIEVERS
An emotional history of doubt
ALEC RYRIE

For many in the eighteenth century, atheists and villains were synonymous

An episode in Le Comte de Valmont by Philippe-Louis Gérard: the Baron de Lauzanne dies an atheist's death, despite the efforts of Valmont to convert him, engraving after J. M. Moreau the Younger by A.J. Hulk, 1807

“Let the Dog be an Atheist, or worse, if worse can be”, the painter Joseph Highmore wrote to Samuel Richardson about Loveless, who abandons Clarissa, in Richard- ardson’s novel of that name. Richardson disagreed, arguing that the pious Clarissa would never have been attracted by an atheist in the first place. While Loveless is a libertine, he is carefully never made an unbeliever – which only adds to the tragedy of the story. But the exchange illustrates how, for many in the eighteenth century, atheists and villains were synonymous.

Loveless could have been deemed a practical atheist, someone who acted as if there were no God to monitor and judge one’s behaviour. This category could include those who only paid lip service to religion; in his satirical pamphlet An Argument Against Abolishing Christianity, Jonathan Swift levelled the charge against ecclesiastical time-servers. It was routinely dismissed from speculative atheism - thinking one’s way into an atheistic position - and the two were condemned for different reasons. In our own time, when mainstream commentators so often link religious belief with bigotry or intellectual naiveté, it can be hard to remember that their eighteenth-century counterparts thought atheists stupid, quoting the Psalms for the first time: “The fool hath said in his heart, there is no God”.

Of the writers covered by James Bryant Reeves in the main body of his book - William Cowper, Sarah Fielding, Gibbes and Alexander Pope, as well as Swift and Richardson - not one denied the overarching authority of the Christian revelation. That said, they were often surprisingly friendly towards other worldviews: uprightness Hindus were a reproach to bad Christians, and could be seen as making common cause with good ones. Yet the status of virtuous infidels, of concern to Christians from the beginning, became more insistent as the British Empire spread. Both the East and the past offered challenges to eighteenth-century Christianity, and Swift - who read Epicurus and wrote against Hobbes - is just one writer of the period familiar with classical and early modern materialist thought. Even so, the subtitle of this book, A Literary History of Atheism, seems oddly broad, given the eighteenth-century focus.

The eighteenth century was certainly a pivotal period in the move towards unbelief. Reeves tells us there were no self-described atheists in England before the 1760s; since that time, they have never gone away. And, as secularization and secularization are not the same thing, they have a symbiotic relationship that imaginative writing helped to shape. The era is synonymous with the rise of the novel, which, with its focus on humanity and the material world, has often been seen as an engine of secularization. But, in this context as elsewhere, secularization should not be seen as a one-way street. Charles Taylor, a leading philosopher of secularism - much drawn upon by Reeves - has instead defined it as “a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and ... unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace”.

The idea of belief being one option among others often inspired literary dialogue. Atheistical interlocutors, usually satirically presented, are common in the eighteenth century, and their unbelief can even provide the impetus for a story. In his poem The Task, for instance, Cowper presents the chilling tale of a ride taken by Misagathus the atheist and Evander the Christian. The former aims to prove he is unfraid of annihilation after death by galloping towards a cliff. His horse stops at the cliff-edge, but later tosses Misagathus down another precipice; he drowns, having tempted providence too often and fallen victim to his “own tremendous choice”. As Reeves elegantly puts it: “Authors contained atheism by incorporating its threat into the very fabric of their works ... instead of arguing against the rise of unbelief, they imagined its fruition”. At the end of Pope’s satirical epic The Dunciad, for instance, Religion “veils her sacred fires” just before “universal darkness buries all”: here, atheism is anything but an agent of enlightenment.

The idea that unbelief works against altruism and social cohesion mattered greatly to most writers covered in this book, who were haunted by the question: what motive is there for virtue if one is not answerable to God? As Richard Dawkins’s Selfish Gene and other New Atheist tracts illustrate, it has not gone away, and can even form part of an apologia for atheism. Relatedly, while secular organizations are ubiquitous in our own time, those in which secularist thought prompts activity for the common good have a long way to go to match the might of religious organizations. All the same, they exist, and have done so for a while. My own institution, University College London, is one such: founded in 1826 to bypass the Anglican hegemony of Oxford and provide tertiary education to those of all religions and none.

Geographically and ideologically nearby, Bloomsbury’s Conway Hall has been a freethinkers’ cathedral for nearly a century. Pre-pandemic, it hosted one branch of the Sunday Assembly, which collects for food banks and organizes gatherings reminiscent of church services, the latter featuring such secular anthems as Louis Armstrong’s “What a Wonderful World”. Reeves’s conclusion features newly discovered correspondence between Percy Bysshe Shelley and the inventor Ralph Wedgwood, in which Shelley - who was sent down from Oxford for atheism – portrayed unbelief as, in Reeves’s words, “spiritually satisfying, sympathetic and sociable”. As a visionary poet committed to secular forms of enchantment, might Shelley have been a Sunday Assembly congregant if he were living now?*

* Alison Shell is Professor of Early Modern Studies at the University of English at University College London and the author of Shakespeare and Religion, 2010

"W"hy do so many people in the modern West self-identify as atheists? What lies behind our growing tendency to place our faith and trust in something other than a transcendent deity? In different ways, both of these stimulating and provocative books address this cluster of questions. Written alongside and in partial dialogue with each other, they represent fresh attempts to grapple with the longstanding problem of why the rise of modernity has been accompanied by the decline of religion.

The subject of Alec Ryrie’s Unbelievers is, at first sight, the more familiar one: “a disappearance: the evaporation of a once very widespread religious culture”. Ryrie’s central claim, however, is that traditional narratives that attribute this to the rise of philosophical scepticism in the eighteenth century occlude a vital part of the story. Instead of offering an intelligible story of doubt, his aim is to provide an emotional one. His account hinges on the dynamic interplay between two strands of feeling that grew up within rather than outside Christianity: anger and loneliness.

By contrast, Ethan H. Shagan suggests that seeking to locate the origins of unbelief is the wrong question. He is interested less in tracing the roots of ‘nascence incredulity’ than the fundamental transformation that took place in what it meant to believe. A study not of the content but the category of belief, his book delineates the process by which belief became synonymous with subjective and sovereign individual judgement. Where once Christian belief occupied a separate epistemological space from other forms of knowledge and opinion, over time the “partition wall” separating them was shattered. Belief has not waned but proliferated in the modern world, displacing the cultural energy once directed towards religion into the secular. A dazzling display of evidence, The Birth of Modern Belief is an ambitious history of ideas, exploring the shifting contours of thought about a historically contiguous construct across the longue durée.

Both books have what Ryrie calls an hourglass shape. They begin in the Middle Ages, then focus in on early modernity and the Enlightenment, before taking the story forward to the present day. The arc they trace is, as Shagan admits, “unashamedly teleological” at times. It is based on the idea that unbelief was a minor irritant in the medieval world, which rarely existed in fully articulated form. Although the seeds of alternative conceptions of belief were implicit within scholastic thinking, it
was not until the religious crisis of the sixteenth century that these tensions came to fruition. Both authors accord the Reformation a critical part in this process, but not in inventing the very idea of “atheism” itself. For Shagan, the novel effect of Reformation theology was to render unbelief the default condition of the sinful world and to make believing a “Sisyphian task”. It led logically to the conclusion, most clearly expressed by the radical spiritualist, Sebastian Franck, that “there is not a single believer on earth”. For Ryrie, it was the weaponizing of credulity in the theological battles between Protestants and Catholics that helped bring this about, creating the perception that society was rife with the example of no real faith at all. Within the minds of the devout, it fostered the intense worry that they themselves were incapable of truly believing. Scepticism ceased to be the opposite of belief and became, on the contrary, a “necessary component of it”.

There are divergences in interpretation and emphasis too. Ryrie’s is a disproportionately Protestant-led story, which recognises doubt as a creative element in reformed spirituality, but within which Catholicism merits little mention. By contrast, Shagan sees the transformation of belief into a terrible psychological trial as a central project in which both confessions took part. If Protestants limited its attainment to a godly remnant of the elect, Catholics reduced it to a form of obedience, subject to Counter-Reformation discipline and dogmatism. The logic of this aggressive programme was to exclude the vast mass of the populace from the privileged condition of believing. The consequence was a powerful backlash resulting in a second revolution which made religious knowledge commensurate with other types of belief - in science, history, humanity and the products of the imagination.

The Reformation may have been the inadvertent midwife of this process, but in and of itself it was no “engine of modernity”. It was in fierce counter-reaction to the religion of Luther, Calvin and the Council of Trent. Initially forged by dissident thinkers, it entered the mainstream in the era of Descartes, Spinoza and Pascal. Its emergence was largely a positive development, “a recipe for the release of infinite invention” and a form of emancipation for which Shagan says we should “be thankful”. Shagan is too nuanced a historian to ignore the darker side of this development - the intolerance that it has ironically unleashed. He nevertheless heralds it as “the glue that prevents diverse societies from spiralling into chaos”. To that extent, The Birth of Modern Belief presents a robust challenge to Brad Gregory’s influential The Unintended Reformation (2012), in which lament for the demise of traditional Christianity is combined with a passionate indictment of the “hyperpluralistic” secular society to which Gregory argues its dissolution gave rise. It carries a subtle undertone of celebration of the liberation of human judgement from the shackles of “an alternative authoritarianism based upon the supremacy of a believing minority over an unbelieving world”.

Ryrie writes a more ambivalent, albeit “with a soft spot for atheism”. Aimed at a general audience, his book seeks to enable believers and unbelievers to better understand the “long and furious marital quarrel” that has shaped the modern age and enable them to engage in more constructive dialogue. Although written with characteristic panache, it sometimes comes across as breathless and, especially towards the end, the argumentation for substance and clarity is a little too quick to join the dots between the process by which unbelief claimed philosophical respectability in the eighteenth century and the wider shift to a society in which many, if not most, profess to be of no religion. It ends, digressively, with a consideration of religious and other forms of human belief - from Darth Vader to Voldemort - have eclipsed Jesus Christ as the moral yardstick by which we judge good and evil. The strongest sections of the book are those that probe the paradoxes of Puritan atheism and the expansion of irreligion in Civil War England. It is here that Ryrie comes closest to recovering the elusive “mood” of unbelief in his exposition of the agonized doubts of individualists who earnestly hoped that they had saving faith but feared they did not. Elsewhere, however, this self-titled “emotional history” reverts to an exposition of the writings of a familiar cast of all too male thinkers from Montaigne and Walter Raleigh to Edward Herbert and Thomas Hobbes. Rather surprisingly, it neglects to engage with the rich scholarship on the history of emotions that its title invites its readers to expect. Curiously, this is a methodology more directly invoked in Shagan’s awesomely intellectual history. His book offers occa- sional glimpses into the “unbearable weight of believing” in Reformation Europe, but it leaves to others the task of excavating the lived religion of ordinary men and women: what it meant and how it felt to believe.

Unbelievers and The Birth of Modern Belief are the product of a moment in which older debates on the secularization of Western societies have gained fresh resonance. Both authors take for granted that the eclipse of religion is a hallmark of modernity. Alex Ryrie brings sympathy and style to his fast-paced survey of the religious underbelly of atheism, but Ethan H. Shagans’s somewhat tentative sense of the changing meaning of belief itself is likely to leave a more lasting imprint on scholarship in this field.

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Confirmed as a batchelor
The true story of a hoax gospel
MICHAEL PRESS

VERITAS
A Harvard professor, a con man and the gospel of Jesus’s wife
ARIEL SABAR

In September 2012, just across from the Vatican, a Harvard professor made an explosive announcement: she had discovered an ancient papyrus fragment showing that, in the minds of some early Christians, Jesus had a wife. The fragment grabbed headlines worldwide. But some scholars imme- diately suggested that there were problems with the fragment: no one knew where it originated, it had basic grammar errors, and its handwriting was unparalleled. By 2016, after four years of debate, the case was closed: experts concluded that the fragment was a modern forgery.

This is the background of Ariel Sabar’s remarkable Veritas. (“Veritas” is both Harvard’s motto and the theme of truth that underlies the tale.) The book belongs to a genre, popular in recent years, of real-life narratives of trafficking and forgery of biblical antiquities, alongside Nina Burleigh’s Unholy Bun- ness, Chanan Tigay’s The Lost Book of Moses, and Matt Friedman’s The Aleppo Codex. Though Sabar insists he is simply reporting facts, his story is (in his own words) “about a second crypto- religious forgery”. As the only surviving example of the genre, it is crafted with definite fictional elements: an exaggerated contrast of heroes and vil- lains, and a gripping, non-linear narrative organized to build suspense. At its core, Sabar’s story is also a tale of exploration and discovery: a young scholar is driven to find a missing piece of history. The papyrus fragment’s provenance, an investigation that King and the other scholars involved could not or would not pursue, But Sabar doesn’t stop there. Veri- tasa contains many important new details that make it an essential reading even for those who have followed the case closely. We see the ugly details of a peer-re- view system that utterly failed, at multiple points, to put the brakes on the dissemination of what turned out to have been a forgery. At times, the details can be overwhelming. We feel like voyeurs for dwelling too long on such unexpected turns as Fritz’s involve- ment with power brokers and the abuse he allegedly suffered as a child. These details are part of the genre: they are meant to build a character profile, to establish a pattern of behavior. Nevertheless, Sabar’s reporting is itself a key part of the saga of the “Jesus’ Wife fragment”. As scholars began to examine it, the papyrus became a means of shining for something like北京市 many elements of this story.

Towards the end of the book, however, the story takes an unexpected turn. Not content to reveal King’s several mistakes and lapses of judgement in the Jesus’ Wife affair, Sabar tries to undermine her entire scholarly career. He attempts to dispatch entire monographs in a single page based only on his own textual analysis, although he has no background in the study of early Christianity. He concludes that King was bad history because she has an agenda. “History, in the traditional view, answers a single question”, according to Sabar: “What happened? It is a dispassionate record of people, places and events, set in context of a particular time.” But how many historians would say this is how the study of history actually works? What Sabar sees as sinster agendas are simply frameworks, the ways that we unpack and make sense of evidence; they are not deliberate distortion but what we all do without even noticing. This idea is commonplace in writing on the theory of history, not just among the post- modernists who would otherwise be sceptical. All scholars have an agenda, including Sabar.

Sabar touches on important questions about the problem of theologians doing history and about bias in scholarship. A nuanced discussion of these issues and how they may have contributed to King’s promo- tion of the fragment would be welcome, but instead Sabar gives us a caricature. For him, King becomes uniquely dishonest and willing to adopt and dis- tribute ideas for personal gain. Misunderstanding her basic theoretical framework for an axe to grind allows Sabar to establish a pattern of behaviour that explains her role in the Jesus’ Wife saga - to follow his own agenda, if you will.

The truth is that these arguments aren’t even ne- cessary. Sabar has already proven his basic case, that King’s actions in the episode were repeatedly troubling. Instead of taking a superficial dive into the rest of King’s publications, we might do better to look at such contexts in the context of scholarship’s long dance with forgery and antiquities trafficking. For we cannot write a “century fragment”, scholars have long been working for shining for something like this on so many elements of this story.

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FEBRUARY 12, 2021

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TLS
Zipboom hurrah bang

PARADISO
PARADISE
Dante’s Divine Trilogy Part Three: Engaged in prosaic
ALASDAIR GRAY

A
paradise by no means lost but simply
paradise and what Alasdair Gray offers in
his third part of his Commedia. Dante and
Gray are both Dante’s poet and his
verse is not prosaic at all, but
in spirited pentameters, and
Gray’s Gray does terza rima, he
stutters enough full rhymes to
leave a trace of Dante’s scheme.
Gray’s poetry is salted with Scots-rite
“I am a ‘bonny’, ‘bairns’,” and even
dejavu plays off Burns – “A fool may
think // the cosmos squat. No
globe goes agley” – but above all
his aim is for truth and
Gray addresses those who follow
“because they like the story in
my song”. By shortening and
unfettering its content, he
maintains a jaunty narrative
pace. Gray is fully aware of the
liberties he is taking to make this
surprising challenging
poem approachable:
“God by His light creates complex-
ity, / Yet sees it as one good and
paradise”. He is clearly blowing
wind in the sails of his
narrator’s resonant image of
Nepenthe vanishing as the Argo’s
courage passes overhead.

Completed in the last few years
of Gray’s life, the writing shows no
diminution of talent and vision,
though unlike his previous
dramas, simply becomes without
Gray’s deeply sinuous lines
that owe much to Blake, another
poet Gray admires, and
writing a slow kind of
poem: “Christians and Arabs.
Eternity loves the products of time”.
Dante says no such thing, but
rather that the first love of eternal
beings, and as
These swerves from the
source are in no sense a betrayal but
rather a playful way of bringing
poem into a different time and
ture. Gray’s narrative gifts as well
as his visual imagination serve him well
in rendering this poem and
its incandescent language for the
invisible.
Jamie McKendrick

MERZ
SCHWITTERS
ULRIKE DRAESEN

Ulrike Draesens Draesens Draesens Draesens is one of
Gray’s finest living authors. A
novelist, poet, essayist and
translator – Draesens translations of
this year’s Nobel prizewinner Louise Glucks are especially
notable – she has garnered widespread
renewed renown for her multimedia
objects, combining literature with
sculpture, music and other
performance.

In her latest novel, Schwitters,
Draesens turns her attention to a
fellow artistic experimenter, Kurt Schwitters.
In nineteen chapters,
this biographical novel attempts to
enter the mind of this exceptionally
creative personality.

The novel begins in 1937 when Schwitters,
defeated by the Nazis as a “degener-
ate” artist, is forced to leave
Germany. He flees to Norway, taking his
son with him and leaving behind his
insanely estranged but loyal
wife, Helma, in his hometown of
Hanover. Following Norway’s occupation
by the Wehrmacht in the late spring
of 1940, Schwitters moves to England
where he finds himself in the
internment camp Hutchinson on the
Isle of Man; he later settles in the
Lake District. Having
mastered “Merzbau” – a room-
sized sculptural construction of
angular shapes, columns and found
objects – in his villa in Hanover, he has
been destroyed in a British air raid, he
determines to build a new
version in a barn near Ambleside,
Cumbria.

Particularly taken by bricoleage,
Schwitters had a clear eye and ear for
the shapes and rhythms of
ordinary things. There is much
mention in Draesens’s novel of this
term “MERZ”, a nonsense construction
combining the words Kommerz (commerce), Herz (heart), Schmerz
(schmerz), Schmerz (pain) and März
(March), which came to resemble his
wider philosophy. Though its
plot is fairly straightforward, Schwit
ters is a verbal collage in itself: an
artful assemblage of snippets from
the artist’s letters, combined with
partly invented historical material.
Draesens incorporates with
merit, other characters stand out, including
Helma, who dies of cancer back in
Hanover, and Schwitters’s English
lover Edith Thomas, who stands by
his side to the bitter end.

Schwitters’s fondness for linguistic
play is memorably expressed in the
way he grapples with the lan-
guage of his new home: “If English
people got closer to each other
they would sail a vessel, a relationship.
That he called their ‘naval obsession’.
Be close to one another, let frigates
plough through the bed sheets”.
Throughout, Draesens blends
empathy for her narrator with a
measure of irony, in a voice that
moves between Schwitters’s inner
monologue and that of an external
observer in the third-person.

William Hazlitt observed of
Milton’s imagination that it “melts
down and renders malleable, as in
a furnace, the most contradictory
materials”. This is a fitting
description of both Ulrike Draesens’s
accomplished novel and of
Schwitters himself, a man deprived in exile
of his cherished Herkulesland,
but never of his creative spirit.
Rüdiger Görner

ANTI-COLONIALISTS
EXILED FROM JERUSALEM
The diaries of Hussein Fakhr al-Khalidi
RAFIQ HUSSEINI, EDITOR
400pp. I. B. Tauris. £90
(paperback, £28.99).

The Seychelles archipelago may
conjure images of green
palms, white sand and blue water,
but in the 1920s and 30s it was
not a tropical paradise to the
Arab anti-colonial leaders who were deported
to the islands and imprisoned there.
The British Government expelled
disobedient nationalist leaders from
Egypt, Yemen and Palestine to the
Seychelles as punishment for challeng-
ing British rule in order to
cut them off from their support-
ers at home. The story of the Sey-
chelles’ Arab prisoners is not nearly
as well known as that of the Indian
rebels who were sent to the Anda-
man Islands in the wake of the
Rebellion of 1857. Hussein Fakhr
al-Khalidi’s English diaries are the first
detailed account of life as a
Palestinian deportee and prisoner on
Mahé, the largest of the Seychelles.
Khalidi was a native of Jerusalem,
a practising physician there, and a
member of the Arab Higher Com-
mittee formed in 1936 to lead the
popular revolt against British rule in
Palestine and against Jewish settle-
ment. Khalidi was also serving as
the elected mayor of Jerusalem in
October 1937, when the British Pal-
estinian Government deported
him along with four other prominent
Palestinians, Fu’ad Saba, Ya’qub
al-Ghusayn, Ahmad Hilmi, and
Rafat al-Haj Ibrahim.
Khalidi’s diaries are vivid and inti-
mate. They begin with an embar-
assed British police officer knock-
ing on the door of his Jerusalem
home, and delivering the news that
he has ten minutes to pack and say
goodbye to his wife and children.
The reader is then drawn into Kha-

lid’s private world of exile. The Jer-
usalemite physician, trained in the
Ottoman Medical School in Istan-
bul, is appalled by the bombing
and parting ministrations of Mahé’s
local British doctor, who is unable
to treat Khalidi’s illness. Khalidi
waits eagerly for long-delayed let-
ters from his wife Wahideh, only
to be frustrated by the colonial author-
ities’ buffoonish censoring.

He follows developments in
Palestine obsessively, reflecting
on news of the ongoing Palestinian
revolt, of the visit of the Woodhead
Commission in 1938, and of the
escape of the Mufti (head of the
Arab Higher Committee) from
British arrest. Khalidi even hires a local
lawyer in Mahé to challenge his
deporation order, fully aware of
the futile of the act, but wishing
nevertheless to put the injustice “on
record and in writing”. And in order
to distract himself, he reads and
reads, taking particular pleasure in
American writers – Mark Twain, H.
Thoreau, Pearl Buck, Eugene O’Neill. But
depression and anger consume him.
One hot moonlit night, he writes,
“I am crazy mad. I am cravin for my
wife and my dear four children. I had a
last look at the moon, and look at it!
He has left me. I am now
swallowing his tongue: ‘Who are you
to oppose Great Britain? We have
armies - warships - aeroplanes -
what you have and you are only a
handful of Arabs’.”
Laila Parsons

TRANSCENDENCE
TRANSCENDENCE,
CREATION AND INCARNATION
From philosophy to religion
ANTHONY O’HEAR
234pp. Routledge. £120.

Anthony O’Hear is one of several
philosophers who have turned
their backs on the idea that their
subject is a purely academic
discipline, to embrace the old but
still attractive principle that it
takes a person in order for mean-
ing. He believes also that philoso-
phy rests on religious foundations.
Transcendence, Creation and Incar-
nation, an important and often riv-
eting book, discusses aspects of
human life and experience which
could be thought to support such
a stance. The worldview in question
is articulated with the help of
Ruskin and Rilke: it involves a kind
of religious transcendence “in immanence”
which is rooted in certain kinds of
aesthetic experience. In such con-
texts, O’Hear argues, we “feel our-
selfs ... close to the spirit which
harnesses the universe, close to
the mystery of life and to penetrat-
ing the veil with which it is normally
obscured from us”.
The clue to how this “transcen-

dence in immanence” is to be
understood comes in a chapter
devoted to Roger Scruton’s
approach to God’s supposed
absence in the world, where O’Hear
introduces and quotes from the
book’s most significant protagonist
– Simone Weil. “God has entrusted
creation to necessity. Otherwise,
God would be in the process ... his
presence would then bring all crea-
tion to nothing, or else God would
himself not be goodness”. This is
to hold the required dimen-

sion of transcendence: “God is not
in the empirical world, as that
world is revealed to us in science
and ordinary life. God, if God is to
be revealed, must be on a different
level, a level of grace and Incarna-
tion”. Weil finds such revelation in
experiences where space seems to
be “torn open” and the world
is seen “as one held in the arms of
a divine love”. On Weil’s approach
then, God is both hidden and
revealed, and revelation comes at
the level of charity.
O’Hear’s final and most impor-

Rustique filigree, attributed to Jonathan Pain, French, c.1560,
J. Paul Getty Museum, from Ceramic, Art and Civilisation by
Paul Greenhalgh (512pp.
Bloombsry Visual Arts. £30.)

FEBRUARY 12, 2021

© J. PAUL GETTY MUSEUM
As we watch our own horizons shrink by the day, Parrish's courage and zest appeal all the more: "Even now, I feel the zipzoom hurrah bang of that dance hall and the 'what do we care' spirit in the air".

Mary Morris

FOOD AND DRINK

RED SANDS
Reportage and recipes through Central Asia from hinterland to heartland

CAROLINE EDEN

In Caroline Eden's previous travelogue-cum-cookbook, the intrepid traveller, always looking for the "genuine unspoiled", shared the fabled history and recipes of the lands surrounding the Black Sea. Now, in the equally evocative Red Sands, she is drawn to the deserts further east, where she sets up an opposition between the majestic natural landscape of jagged peaks, undulating sand dunes, golden steppe and turquoise lakes, and the built environment of Brutalist architecture, crumbling sanatoriums, and the remains of failed Soviet engineering projects. She artfully disentangles layers of Islamic, Tatar and Soviet influences.

Food and drink provide the through-line on her journey from Kazakhstan to Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, prompting her musings. At times, the juxtapositions turn surreal, as when she drinks green tea at a traditional chakhana to the strains of the theme song from David Lynch's Twin Peaks. Essays consider the Silk Road and modernity ("today's bandwagon"), the journey in Bukhara ("carrying camels"), Edeeric gardens, cosmonauts and dive bars. A visit to Karaganda leads to the book's powerful opening line: "The factory", where Eden describes the sacredness of milk in Kazakh culture, how to milk a horse, and how to make the dried curds that gave Genghis Khan's warriors strength. In the 1930s, the same dried curds saved the lives of women imprisoned in the vicious Karlag labour camp. Elsewhere, we learn about cotton honey "the colour of cloudy wheat", Kokand halwa "marbled like fine Italian paper", and apple trees planted in a decorative pattern "like living embroidery". One can nearly taste the "Tajik Snickers" of dried, raisin-studded mélange, and the super-sweet ripe Golden Eyebrow melon.

The book ends on a slightly elegiac note. Eden is careful not to succumb to nostalgia, but the destruction of old communities and the threat of climate change to the region's fabled water sources and parched lands. She is grateful that she has documented these rich cultures before they disappear.

Darra Goldstein

IN BRIEF

INTIMACY
VIRGINIA WOOLF AND THE ETHICS OF INTIMACY
ELSA HÖGBERG
234pp. Bloomsbury Academic. £76.50.

As with the rest of the modernist canon, it can be difficult to imagine that there is much left to say about Virginia Woolf's life and work; yet the monographs keep appearing, with publishers seemingly as keen as ever to print volumes that promise new insights and lighthearted untroubled paths in Woolf criticism. The target readership for Elsa Högberg's Virginia Woolf and the Ethics of Intimacy is a purely scholarly one, since a clear understanding of contemporary theory by Julia Kristeva, Judith Butler, Lace Triggary and others is an essential prerequisite in order to make sense of the complex and densely argued study of four of Woolf's novels.

In Jacob's Room (1922), Högberg concentrates on concepts of melancholia and primal intimacy. Outward expressions of mourning, she argues, might be viewed as Woolf's comment on the modernist era's crisis in storytelling, and where "Kristeva's transformative insights into literary melancholia can make us perceive a non-violent ethics at the heart of the fragmented, melancholic poetics of Woolf's first distinctly modernist novel experiment. Högberg views Mrs Dalloway (1925) as a much more uplifting novel, with its "intensely pleasurable poetics", while also noting how its general introspection offers "a history of the modernist revolt".

Close analysis of To the Light-house (1927) turns to Irigaray, meanwhile, and her writings about the ethics of love and affection, to describe a kind of post-impressionist intimacy in the novel, whereby "fluid colours and a lack of shape open up a space for intimacy - and momentary dissolution of the boundaries separating self and other". Finally, The Waves (1931), Woolf's most radically modernist novel, which breaks with multiple novelistic conventions, is examined with the twin notions of violence and vulnerability. For Högberg, its poetic experimentalism enables a critique of fascism, nationalism and imperialism, utilizing soliloquy as an effective tool to depict "the thinking mind and the individual voice".

The absence of a concluding chapter is a regrettable omission in this otherwise commendable - if complex - new study to add to the library of Woolf monographs.
ACRANE BURST ONTO THE SCENE in sixth-century BC Athens like a cross between Oscar Wilde and Beyoncé. His short, witty and sexy songs were what everyone wanted to sing and quote. At symposia across the city his self-deprecating celebration of the humiliations of desire and the consolations of good wine made him a star. A string of ancient vases show images of men dressed in feminine clothes including turbans and carrying parasols performing Acraneon: it was, apparently, “a thing”. Unlike many a pop icon - or Oscar Wilde - he lasted beyond the initial flash of success. In several of his poems, he appears as an old man, still trying it on with younger women or men, with a winning mix of self-aware irony and exposed long-ing. The story goes that he died choking on a grape pip. It is most likely to be apocryphal, but it cap-tures what Acraneon meant to his public: a man who loved the pleasures of life, a minimalist, ironi-cally hoisted on the Acraneon, became hugely influential in the eighteenth century in Europe, a model of sophisticated, elegant Greek culture. Across the centuries, Acraneon has evoked the fantasy of the party you most want to be at

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Across the centuries, Acraneon has evoked the fantasy of the party you most want to be at the 550s, when he overlapped with Anacreon, but lived through the Persian wars, to die at the grand old age of 80. He was already competing in the tragic festivals. Simonides wrote poems for many of these possibilities: epigrams for inscription on stone, poems to sing at parties, elegies for public performance, and so on. He was a poet for hire who travelled the Mediterranean following commissions, and, like Anacreon, appears to have been at the court of the tyrants of the day - but he also has to written a commemorative poem for the tyrants, inscribed on their statue in the agora. If Anacreon is best known for his sexy, drunken party poems, Simonides is best known for his poetry of public celebration.

Like most students, I first read Anacreon in David Campbell’s Greek Lyric Poetry (1967), six pages of text, with seventeen pages of desperately inadequate commentary - and so no attempt at all of why the poems might have been quite such a hit. The comprehensive handbook of Hans Berndorf’s edition and commentary is embodied in its scale: two volumes of fully 875 pages. The little poem I translated above has twenty-seven pages of dense commentary; Campbell has less than two. Every scrap we know, including fragmentary commentaries on the poem, he has been able to collect, and analyse. It is not clear for whom it will be transformative to know that a decontextualized single word might mean “corinader” or “a little girl that is colour blind” - requires due dili-gence. There is, fortunately, also a huge amount of detailed scholarship on what are often very difficult sources, where poems are quoted or misquoted selectively in many later texts: the sophistication of Anacreon’s imagery and narrative, even in the briefest fragments, requires a good deal of literary sensitivity as well as scholarship to appre-ciate. Simonides’ poems, if relatively easy to use and sensible, will be a standard reference work for a long time. There are places where more cross-referencing would have helped. The poem I have translated “once again” in the poem above, is a buzz word of erotic poetry for the symposium - “here we go again” - and I counted eight significant discussions of it in the commentary - here we go again - but unless you go to the index this will not be obvious to anyone reading the dis-cussion of a single poem. There are occasions when solid became stolid, and Anacreon’s suggestiveness gets elided by itself too far for him to “com-crete”. He cannot conceive - lucky man - how drink-ing wine might be a fight against desire. He knows full well that “play with” means both to play ball and to engange or to engage in, and to find it hard to enjoy the ambiguity. Classical philol-o-gy has always wanted to pin down too sharply what is more fugitive.

Simonides, in contrast to Anacreon, has been going through a boom in scholarly attention, with important studies by Orlando Poltera, Andrej Petrovic and Richard Rawles. David Sider’s comments on a fine piece of historically based and epigraphically sensitive scholarship - looks at Simonides’ seventy extant epigrams, some probably spurious, and his fragmentary elegiac poetry. The epigrams are largely for gravestones or monuments, real or imaginary, but clearly had a wide influence and were collected and read in antiquity. It is also at a massive scale - over 450 pages of discussion of texts that together would make the slimpest of poetry volumes.

There is no methodological discussion in either book about what should go into a commentary, and it would be easy to wonder if the balance of modern discussion to ancient is not right. But I am surprized not only by how much I enjoyed pretty well every page of these books, but also by how comforting it was to know that Oxford University Press could publish these three of the most important and mythological general reader - still publish books designed for scholars, where Greek, Latin and German are not translated, and where technical detail has its licence.
TLS CROSSWORD 1363 BY BROTEAS

ACROSS
1 Acton location with hawthorn almost completely rampant (7)
5 African leader with London University qualification, keeping quiet (7)
9 German invaders emerging from North Sea and dashing around (7, 3, 5)
10 One crying in Thomas's implied mourning for some in lines (3, 3)
11 One line in very good Burns poem (2, 1, 5)
13 Teeming city with extremely dirty quarter where children play ... (5, 5)
14 ... is the French Utopia or Neverland? (4)
16 Drags along uncivilised folk (4)
17 "Brilliant" describes a famous detective, no gent and feeling apologetic (10)
19 Remote island with hollow stones piled high (8)
20 Singer with church background getting soprano replaced by rector in Edgeworth's novel (6)
23 U.S.A. pilot's nearly crashed on ground (7, 8)
24 The French captivated in following Poe's work (7)

DOWN
1 Hotel with one pork pie possibly that may be found in the kitchen (2-3)
2 Robert Bridges poem you're sure to see in the next 24 hours (6, 9)
3 Lines featuring in at least three Agatha Christie mysteries (8)
4 "Cherish those hearts that ... thee" (Shakespeare) (4)
5 Robert Bridges poem some of you may experience before or after 2 (6, 4)
6 Chap introducing city hospital on TV? (6)
7 Ford's quote is scandalous, to damage Elizabeth's son in Shakespeare (7, 2, 6)
8 Tennyson poem that's satisfactory on romance, we hear (1, 8)
10 Poetic feature seen in Verse and Worse (5, 5)
11 London gangs run back with boxes (4, 5)
15 As true as Byronic or Greek god (8)
18 A male left inside a vessel in a Scottish ballad (3, 3)
21 Old master Lawrence, a very famous writer (5)
22 Note this special person (4)

SOLUTION TO CROSSWORD 1359
The winner of Crossword 1359 is Peter Gregson, of Backs.

The sender of the first correct solution opened on March 5, 2021, will receive a cash prize of £40. Entries should be addressed to TLS Crossword 1363, 1 London Bridge Street, London SE1 9GF. 

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How identity politics failed one particular identity

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How pleasant it is to be overtaken by events. Last week we described the precarious state of the National Library of Wales, following a decade of financial woes; on February 3, the BBC reported that the Welsh government, having previously denied that there was “extra money” available, had found the NLW £2.25 million, “to safeguard jobs and deliver new strategic priorities.”

The U-turn came after a petition calling for fair funding for the NLW had gathered more than 14,300 signatures. But apparently the library’s cause was also helped by a widely shared tweet from Phillip Pullman: “it must be saved”, the children’s author had declared. And so it was.

Two days later, Pullman was at it again. “Add your name”, he commented, referring to this time to another petition (which has been signed, at the time of writing, by 3,300 people): a petition asking Waterstones to ensure that its furloughed staff receive the minimum wage (which is now £8.72 per hour for anyone over the age of twenty-five). The Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme covers 80 per cent of furloughed employees’ wages; a senior bookseller for Waterstones could testify that, on furlough, their monthly pay had dropped to £270 below the minimum wage.

The petition’s request hardly seems outrageous, not least as we contemplate the £93 million that the hedge fund Elliott Advisors, which has owned Waterstones since 2018, just distributed between the 1,07 employees of its Mayfair office. But this is not the Waterstones way. A pay rise for its employees is due, according to the Guardian, either in April or whenever its shops can reopen. But for now, when the money is arguably most needed, the high-ups have ruled that a pay rise “would not be prudent”.

In The Bookseller’s Vale (2020), Martin Latham tells some treasured stories of Waterstones past – or Waterstone’s, indeed, as the chain was formerly known. The Cheltenham branch’s staff are “a crew of baroque eccentricity, who stocked it with an almost Alexandrian completeness.” “Travel, I remember, had three books on the island of St Helena.” At Canterbury, in the Classics section, a woman had a heart attack, was resuscitated and, as she was wheeled out to her ambulance, was heard to remark, “I do love it here ... it would have been a great place to go”.

And then there was the young graduate hired to run the fiction section. He “engaged in long conversations with most customers,” and his name was David Mitchell.

As Latham points out, Mitchell’s novels now have a “permanent place” on the shelves of the shop where he once worked.

Talk with a former employee of the chain – one who worked there for fourteen years, before the great pandemic struck, that is – and some less glorious memories emerge. We hear of experienced but “increasingly disgruntled” staff being left, or being shunted from one branch to another, sometimes just to stand at an alien till for a few hours, the cost of London transport eating into a day’s pay, of short-term contracts and holiday regulations that would alienate anyone minded to regard bookselling as a sort of career; of junior booksellers having to substitute for cleaners and security staff. Would you miss your bus home because you cared about your job? “People would have done that” for the old Waterstone’s, our former bookselling friend reckons. Perhaps the next David Mitchell has already left the building.

It was subsequently replaced with an estate agent, and briefly re-emerged in Earl’s Court as Turn the Page. We thought it had gone for good, but pictured above is one sign of its latest incarnation: our copy of Clochermel by Gabriel Chevallier.

This volume is no rarity, we confess. In 1933, a year after this satiric publication in French, the TLS could report that Clochermel was selling “at a rate of 2,300 copies a week”; and that, “strangely enough, it must be admitted”, the first half of the book contained “many good laughs”, which were then let down by the “inferior” second half. Its popularity, nonetheless, gave rise to the term clochermelaise - for the story concerns a row over the installation of a public convenience in proximity to the village church of Clochermel-En-Beaujolais, and such a coinage, denoting storms in pancrachian teacups, is too good to resist. There were sequels and adaptations - still, we suspect, the term could be applied more frequently today than it is.

Purchased for £2 on Instagram, via mybackpages, London, we admit - our decent copy of Clochermel was delivered by the bookseller in person, to our door.

A literary journalist must sometimes accept defeat in the face of the book publicists’ eloquence. In the case of Arch Hades, a twenty-eight-year-old poet “with more than a million followers on Instagram alone”, we have nothing to add to the laudations heaped upon his young head by not one but two publicists in their recent dispatches. “She’s the glamorous daughter of a huge social media following who has turned the world of romantic poetry on its head”, they tell us, in unison. Hades’s new book, Fool’s Gold, is “set to become one of the UK’s most gifted Valentine’s Day items”. It is “saturated with romantic musings and verses offering insights to [sic] modern day dating, heartbreak and redemption”.

At the risk of contracting Instgram-itis and preferring to think of that social networking platform in relation to the endless search for secondhand books - we were compelled to find out what it felt like to have the world of romantic poetry turned on its head.

Fragile hearts, they often break But heal with perseverance And their pain, they soon forget Fragile, yet resilient Reading that quatrain, which is called “Hearts”, prompted as many people to hit the “like” button on Instagram as “signed” the NLW petition. The same goes for “Emotional labour”:

It’s an unseen burden, doing the labour twice While you’re dismayed (about your mistake) I have to go on being nice ...

You’re blind to how stifling this is There’s no room for my reaction here I have to sit with what you gave

Suppressing the urge to do a little emotional labour of our own, we hope that any reader who has decided to make a gift of Fool’s Gold (Austin Macauley, £9.99 for Valentine’s Day will be kind enough to let us know if anybody was blinded, or indeed stifled, as a result. There is no room for our reaction here.

S

How identity politics failed one particular identity.