James Hall: Put up more statues | Alexandra Harris: Joseph Wright’s darkness
Dinah Birch: Gwendoline Riley’s mothers | Niall Ferguson: No escape from the Great War

Divided self
Elaine Showalter on the life and art of Philip Roth
In this issue

Philip Roth gave his authorized biographer, Blake Bailey, the instruction, “I don’t want you to rehabilitate me. Just make me interesting”. That must have been one of the easier ones. Roth’s extraordinary literary output, his vendettas (“Philip could not get enough of getting even”, said his friend Benjamin Taylor), stormy marriages and “legendary sex drive” provide ample material for biographers for decades to come. Bailey, a gentle from Oklahoma and biographer of WASP alcoholics, had to bring to book one of America’s greatest writers and one of America’s greatest Jewish writers. Others chosen for the task had been discarded along the way, as Roth, like many other artists, tried to shape, if not micro-manage, his afterlife. It appears that Bailey finished the job with his integrity intact.

“I have chosen to make art of my vices rather than what I take to be my virtues”, says Nathan Zuckerman, one of the writer’s most celebrated literary avatars. In her review of Philip Roth: The Biography, Elaine Showalter praises Bailey for divulging Roth’s generosity and tender qualities too. Roth’s efforts to promote the work of eastern European writers labouring under Communist rule, such as Milan Kundera and Danilo Kiš, come in for special praise. Our reviewer also absolves Roth from the charge of misogyny that gained currency after his second wife, the English actress Claire Bloom, published her incendiary memoir, Leaving a Doll’s House. Showalter commends Bailey’s magnum opus but she suggests we must wait for a commanding assessment of Roth’s artistic achievement. In the meantime I am looking forward to re-reading my favourites.

In this art-themed issue of the TLS, Matthew Craske asks us to reconsider another great artist in his biography of Joseph Wright of Derby, reviewed here by Alexandra Harris. Wright is seen as an apostle of the enlightenment, linked to his “technologically orientated and politically progressive” friends in the Midlands group known as the Lunar Society. But the painter identified with the wild landscapes of his home, not its industrial towns. His “visual language seems to speak less of rational explanation than of enchantment and vision”.

Finally, James Hall makes the case for putting up new statues rather than tearing down old ones. He would like to see Marc Quinn’s statue of the BLM protestor Jen Reid making the Black Power salute placed opposite the bronze statue of the slaver and Bristol philanthropist Edward Colston. A Solomon come to judgment?

MARTIN IVENS
Editor

Find us on
www.the-tls.co.uk
Times Literary Supplement
@TheTLS
To buy any book featured in this week’s TLS, go to shop.the-tls.co.uk
The spoils of Portnoy
The pugnacity, libido - and generosity - of a great American novelist

ELAINE SHOWALTER

PHILIP ROTH
The biography
BLAKE BAILEY

In 2012, Philip Roth chose Blake Bailey to be his authorized biographer. Bailey had written biographies of three gentle writers - two bisexual, all alcoholics and, to some degree, literary failures. He took on something completely different with Roth, whose vices did not include drinking, was a notorious womanizer, and was widely regarded as the greatest living American novelist. Roth gave him unlimited access to his "miles of files", copious notes and 300 boxes of correspondence, memos and manuscripts at the Library of Congress. In lengthy interviews, he also gave Bailey "almost every particle of pertinent information, no matter how intimate, and let me make of it what I would (after telling me, often exhaustively, what I ought to make of it)". In late May 2018, as Roth was dying of congestive heart failure at New York-Presbyterian Hospital, Bailey was among the friends gathered at his bedside. It reminded him, he told an interviewer, of the scene in *Portnoy’s Complaint* where Roth described his father’s death, "because it was the same sort of struggle ... dying is hard work, and he was a worker" (Eric Cortellessa, *Times of Israel*, May 25, 2018).

Bailey is a worker, too. Here, only three years later, is his monumental and engrossing book, almost 900 pages. Its subtitle - the biography - asserts that it is definitive. But other contenders have already popped up. The Canadian biographer Ira Nadel's *Philip Roth: A Counterlife* takes a more contentious view. Steven J. Zipperstein, a Stanford scholar of Jewish history and culture, is writing a biography for the Yale University Press series Jewish Lives. The competition is shaping up like a Rothian metafiction, with further contributions yet to come from alter egos such as Alvin Pepler, David Kepesh, Peter Tarnopol and Moishe Pikel.

They will join several full and partial lives of Roth, including Claudia Roth Pierpont’s Roth Unbound: A writer and his books (2013); memoirs by friends Bernard Avishai, Benjamin Taylor and James Atlas; Claire Bloom’s bombshell tell-all of their failed marriage; Roth’s only writing, especially *The Facts* (1988); and novels by ex-lovers in which he is fictionalized, as the sexy writer Jack Sprat in Janet Hobhouse’s *The Furies* (1992) and the ageing, still dominating Ezra Blazer in Lisa Halliday’s affectionate, dazzling *Assymetry* (2018).

Bailey brings new information and a fresh perspective, although taking on the biography of a controversial colossus like Philip Roth had many hazards. He won nearly every literary prize except, famously, the Nobel. After his death, the BBC hailed him as "arguably the best writer not to have won the Nobel prize since Tolstoy". While he could make fun of himself - "only Henry James has written worse plays" - he was also hyper-sensitive, controlling, unforgiving to his critics and vengeful to his perceived betrayers. His closest friends deplored his "rebellious self-justification".

Nevertheless, Bailey writes, Roth “was a person toward whom it was hard not to feel tenderly”. Unexpectedly, “tender” is a word that comes up often about him in reviews, usually paired with an antonym. His work, according to the historian Ron Chernow, is a mixture of “lacering wit and indescribable tenderness” (*Philip Roth’s Best Book*, Philip Roth and his then girlfriend Barbara Sprout, at his fortieth birthday party, New York, 1973, from *Philip Roth: The biography*).

New York Times, May 25, 2018. The New Yorker editor David Remnick called him “tender and manipulative” (“The Secrets Philip Roth Didn’t Keep”, *New Yorker*, March 22, 2021). Bailey’s biography is both tender and detached. He gives all the facts and details, and most of the names. He doesn’t try to justify what is obsessive, overbearing and selfish in Roth. And overall he doesn’t moralize, he withholds judgement, and he doesn’t condemn. That leaves lots of room for readers to form their own conclusions, as well as space for others to weigh in on Roth’s self-promotion, prudishness and general arrogance.

Roth gave Bailey one major instruction: “I don’t want you to rehabilitate me. Just make me interesting”. The easy way would have been to emphasize Roth’s legendary sex drive and literary pugnacity, since, as one of the girlfriends bountifully assisted by Roth noted ruefully, “it is hard to make kindness interesting”. Nonetheless, Bailey divalues many examples of Roth’s disinterested generosity. He found doctors for ailing old friends, paid for their medical expenses and their funerals, sent cheques to their widows and children. When the writer Veronica Geng had a brain tumour, he put her up in his writing studio, hired nurses and then sorrowfully hosted her memorial dinner. He gave his house cleaner $70,000 to buy a house of her own, and found teaching jobs for needy literary refugees. In the 1970s, he travelled to Prague to meet persecuted writers and edited an important series of their works, Writers from the Other Europe. At the same time, Bailey stresses, Roth “steadily rebelled against his own rectitude”. He had an incurable case of Portnoy’s complaint: “a disorder in which strongly felt ethical and altruistic impulses are perpetually warring with extreme sexual longings, often of a perverse nature”. While Roth was the first to recognize his transgressions, he could not tolerate others charging him with antisemitism, or “any suggestion, however playful, that he didn’t like women”.

Bailey divides Roth’s life into sixty chapters in six chronological sections, plus a prologue and an epilogue. Part 1 takes Roth through his childhood, youth and literary apprenticeship. In addition to the familiar details of his relationship with his parents, Bailey tells the contrasting story of Roth’s older brother, Sandy, who tried to please his parents, married too conventionally and young, and gave up his dream of becoming an artist for decades. He traces Roth’s escape from Jewish Newark, first to college at genteele Bucknell, and then graduate school in English at the University of Chicago, where he pursued “bibliography by day, women at night”. Then Roth began to realize that, despite his efforts to sound like Henry James, in writing about Newark and Jews he would find his own voice.

In 1959, his first book *Goodbye, Columbus* launched his career overnight. Reviewing it, Saul Bellow wrote, “At twenty-six ... he performs like a virtuoso”. Kirk Douglas (in *I Am a Jew*) wrote him an early fan letter. While his short stories about Jewish manners and heretics brought on denunciations from famous rabbis and Jewish judges, the title novella won a passionate readership among young Jews.

What the Dickens?

An extensive list of major new works on the inimitable.

www.eerpublishing.com

Elaine Showalter is Professor Emerita of English at Princeton University.

© NANCY CRAMTON
women as well as men. I read it as a college freshman, identifying with his satire of Jewish suburbia and admiring the Radcliffe Jewish princess Brenda Patinkin (based on Roth’s brilliant and glamorous girlfriend of the time, Maxine Grofsky, who became the Paris editor and artistic muse of the Paris Review), and I avidly read every novel he published afterwards, although I never found another heroine I liked as much.

At the same time, Roth got disastrously involved with Margaret (Maggie) Martinson, a blonde, divorced, “pretty shiksa” with two kids he met in Chicago, who claimed that he got her pregnant and showed her a positive lab test of a urine sample she had bought from a pregnant Black woman. He promised to marry her if she would have an abortion; she lied about the abortion, pocketed his $300, and dragged him to the altar on the date of his parents’ anniversary. After three miserable years, Maggie confessed the truth, he furiously initiated a divorce, and she vowed to demand enormous alimony and destroy his life.

At this point, Roth started going three times a week to see Dr. Hans KleinSchmidt, a Freudian psychoanalyst in New York who loved celebrated and creative patients. His clientele would include Richard Avedon, Truman Capote, Leonard Bernstein, Harold Brodkey and Adam Gopnik, the last of whom noted in a New Yorker profile that he “half-expect"ed him to put up autographed glossies around the office like the ones on the wall at the Stage Deli”. Roth started writing comic stories about a “Dr Spielvogel”, but then discovered that KleinSchmidt had published a case study of him. When confronted, KleinSchmidt refused to apologize, and Roth decided to go ahead with treatment anyway, though he couldn’t fully trust KleinSchmidt again. He was stunningly rescued from the nightmare marriage by Maggie’s death in a car crash in Central Park, and got his investment in the analysis back with interest when he wrote Portnoy’s Complaint (1969). Along with its taboo-breaking language, Portnoy gave full play to Roth’s Dickensian genius for nomenclature, drawing on the comic resources of Yiddish to imagine good little Jewish losers like Ronald Nimkin or Aaron Putz.

Portnoy made Roth rich and allowed him to escape the annoyances of fame in an elegant Connecticut retreat, where he led the disciplined life of a literary monk by day, and pursued sexual pleasure with a series of young women by night. Bailey shows him at his worst in 1975 with a Penn student “deeply smitten by her famous former professor”. He braggled to a friend that he had taught her how to give “a proper blow job”, visited her home to see how New England Wasps celebrated Christmas, and then casually requested she return the keys to his apartment. “Playing Pygmalion”, he bought his girlfriend expensive clothes and haircuts, and paid off their college debts.

In the mid-1970s, Roth freed himself from the ghost of Maggie in his relationship with the English actress Claire Bloom. When they connected in 1976, it seemed like a perfect match. They divided their time between Connecticut, New York and London, where they socialized with the Pinter’s, and Roth enjoyed meeting actors, writers, artists and playwrights. They finally married in 1990. But by then he was suffering from painful ailments, and couldn’t tolerate her career, her attachment to her daughter, or living in London where he began to hear, or hallucinate, antisemitic whispers in every restaurant. After their divorce in 1995, she wrote an angry memoir, Leaving a Doll’s House (1996) which accused him of selfishness and misogyny. He spent years refuting her charges in a 295-page “Notes for My Biographer”, and paid lawyers to veto the manuscript, until his horrified friends persuaded him not to publish it.

The Bloom years were nonetheless immensely creative and mature. For the first half of his career, Roth had published a major book at ten-year intervals with ponderous or comic novels between. Then at the age of forty-six, in 1979, came The Ghost Writer, a masterpiece of theme and execution, in which he combined the shocking conception of the “Jewish saint”, Anne Frank, as a surviving object of desire, with the creation of the novelist Nathan Zuckerman as his avatar. He never again published an insignificant book, and Zuckerman became his alternative narrative self in eight more novels, up to Exit Ghost (2007).

By 1995, Roth was judging himself against the highest standard of the great modern writers he revered - James, Conrad, Dostoevsky, Kafka - as well as contemporaries like Bellow and John Updike with whom he maintained a generally friendly rivalry. When Updike playfully tried out the voice of an American-Jewish novelist in Bechs: A book (1965), Roth speculated he might write an Updikean novel - Rabbi, Run, say. Despite his continuing rage over Bloom’s highly publicized charges, he decided to “write his way out of” the quagmire, and to find a biographer who would tell his side of the story.
A round with Charles
An East German literary luminary on the Isle of Sheppey

BOYD TONKIN
THE SEA VIEW HAS ME AGAIN
Uwe Johnson in Sheerness
PATTERSON WRIGHT
733 pp. Repeater. £25.

Boyd Tonkin’s most recent book is The 100 Best Novels in Translation, 2019

What is Nietzsche’s Zarathustra?
A Philosophical Confrontation

HEINRICH MEIER
Translated by Justin Gottschalk

“Nietzsche has never been more accessible and stimulating...”—The Times Literary Supplement

The University of Chicago Press www.press.uchicago.edu
Trade Enquiries to Yale Representation Ltd. yalrep@yaleup.co.uk 020 7079 4900

Contents
From Zarathustra to Zarathustra 1
The Zarathustra aesthetic 10
The Zarathustra ethics 20
Lecture 1: The Zarathustra “spirit” 31
Lecture 2: The Zarathustra “frenzy” 49
Lecture 3: The Zarathustra “guerilla” 69
Lecture 4: The Zarathustra “story” 87
Lecture 5: The Zarathustra “story’s story” 107
Notes 114
Glossary 123
Index 127
Cloth £40.00

He selected his friend Ross Miller, but after a period of closeness, they had an acrimonious parting. It was “my third bad marriage”, he told Bailey. As Roth got older, the women got younger, and were more caregivers, chauffeuses and nurses than sexual partners. Bailey highlights Roth’s huge network of male friends, from Newark childhood buddies to his doctor in Connecticut. His closest male friends in his later years, Joel Conarroe and Benjamin Taylor, were gay, although there are no gay characters in the fiction. David Flaine said Roth was “a man completely devoid of femininity”, and that a novel about him should be called Straight Man; straight friends speculated on the paradox. Bernard Avishai thought Roth “desperately needed men he could count on to take care of him in ways that he increasingly thought women couldn’t do”. The editor Jonathan Brent went further: “He needed more emotionally from me than I could deliver... because he lives in a kind of an empty world... in some deep psychic way. And it’s an emptiness that he has cultivated very carefully.”

Roth’s last years, from 2006 to 2018, were melancholy. He had serious back problems, knee problems, heart problems. He had a psychic reaction to the sedative Halcion, became addicted to opioids, and went through an excruciating detox. Many of his friends got accustomed to taking him to the emergency room. Lisa Halliday was with him once when he was filling out the admission paperwork. The hospital needs to know, Roth explained, who to call if the end is near. If you are Jewish, they send a rabbi; if Catholic, a priest. “And if you say you’re an atheist?” Halliday asked. “They send Christopher Hitchens.”

Among the four short novels about ageing, writing, masculinity and death in an indifferent universe he published in these years, the last, Nemesis (2010), was a profound re-imagining of Camus’s The Plague as a polio epidemic and “editorial Newark” in 1944, rather than in the 1950s when it actually happened. Roth drew on Greek tragedy as well as in the story of a young Jewish athlete who escapes the war, but is struck by polio, “because this was real war, too; a war of slaughter, ruin, waste and damnation.”

In 2012 he decided to retire from writing fiction. While he enjoyed the freedom from the pressure of literary production, Roth mourned the death of his brother and his friends, and had periods of despair over his solitude and isolation. He carefully planned his death and legacies, choosing to be buried at Bard College in a scrupulously secular funeral, with an austere gravestone modelled on Camus’s. He terrified much thought about his money and possessions. The largest bequest, £2 million, and his personal library of 7,000 volumes, went to the Newark Public Library, where Neil Klugman, the narrator of Goodbye, Columbus, had worked, and Roth had discovered books. Bailey ends with an epilogue but not a conclusion. How could he summarize the irreconcilable contradictions of Roth’s life? Yet I’m disappointed not to have his opinions on some big questions. How did Roth’s Jewish identity shape him as an artist and a man? Was he a misogynist, a woman-hater? I don’t think so, although he could never quite imagine how the world looked through women’s eyes. Bailey mentions a number of Roth’s titles for abandoned books - “The Goyim”, “Jewboy” - but, tellingly, not the book from the point of view of the mythical goddess who had obscured him all his life: “The Shiksa.” Finally, what was Roth’s achievement as a writer? Perhaps Bailey didn’t think that he needed to make that case. But in this combustible moment, some reviewers have already used the unsavoury details of his life to make sweeping attacks on his art.

Is Bailey’s compassionate and comprehensive book the biography? No other biographer will have known Roth so well, had such unlimited access to his archives, had a chance to ask him rude questions, even to watch him as he lay dying. Future books will be readings of the life, interpretations, arguments. So no? He’s big enough. Bring them on.
Antisemitism in Poland

I was astonished to read Joanna Rostoprowicz Clark's letter on "Polish antisemitism and the Soviets" (March 26), in which she says on your readers an old canard about the Kielce pogrom. Clark alleges that the killing of Jews on July 4, 1946 in this Polish city was provoked by the Soviet security apparatus - a claim utterly debunked by both a thorough investigation concluded in 1997 by a public prosecutor in Poland, and by meticulous scholarship, including the most recently published definitive two-volume (1,576 pages of text, appendices and documents) of the Kielce pogrom by Professor Joanna Tokarska-Bakir (Pod Klątwą. Społeczny portret pogromu kieleckiego - Under a Curse: A social portrait of the Kielce pogrom), 2018). The Soviet propogation, Clark states, was part of a clever plot to divert attention from the Ribentrop-Molotov pact and the Katyn murders, which the Soviets feared could come out during the Nuremberg Trial. Except that the western Allies knew everything about Stalin's complicity with Hitler between 1939 and 1941, while in Nuremberg only the Nazi regime was in the dock, and any mention of putative war crimes by the Allies was basically off limits. The whole premise, therefore, of the foll of Polish antisemitism "was necessary to make Poland less sympathetic in Western eyes", and thus give Soviets a cover - is nonsense. And in the meantime, the real reason for the "provocation" was an effort at the time to prove to the world that the Jews in Poland were being gradually exterminated, but that not only Jews, but also Poles who helped Jews in hiding, were being targets of anti-Semitic attacks. The first wave of pogroms in Poland, that started in Lublin on August 10, 1944 - nine months before German capitulation - was the first in a series of pogroms that swept Poland, with Jews in the nearby town of Wolodza were being assaulted by Polish neighbours and pelted for help. From then on incidents of anti-Jewish violence are a constant theme documented in Jewish testimonies from liberated areas all over the country. Scores of Holocaust survivors were killed after they emerged from hiding. In postwar Poland, Jews could settle in rural areas once a few layers of earth were removed or remembered. He did voice his disgust with Franco's regime in his diaries, which were eventually published, but he made no public declaration in the dangerous years after the civil war. He had worked for the Franquistos during the conflict, but even he would have been risking a fate much worse than exile if he had expressed any kind of outrage.

Greek independence

Malcolm Deas raises an important point about nationalism in the age of revolutions (Letters, April 2) but considers this: in the Americas, the newly independent states preserved the language - and much else - of their former masters. The Greeks never contemplated using anything other than Greek, and certainly not Turkish. It was a different case entirely.

Otters and Beavers

Of course, it's right to correct the suggestion that otters are being reintroduced to Britain (Letters, April 2) but not consider this: in the Americas, the newly independent states preserved the language - and much else - of their former masters. These otters never contemplated using anything other than Greek, and certain not Turkish. It was a different case entirely.

Environmental Bill Gates

Ann Pettifor (March 12) shouldn't complain about poor farmers paying for improved seeds because those farmers wouldn't be alive without the intellectual property of the Green Revolution. Without the protection of intellectual property, there probably wouldn't be any fewer inventions. Edison spent a good part of his time litigating to protect his inventions. Whether electric light is a good idea is no doubt debatable, but most of us depend on it as well as user-friendly micro-computers provided directly or indirectly by Bill Gates. A good eco-fan like Pettifor should recognize that poor people also damage the environment, for instance by heating and cooking with cow dung. Occupation of corporations doesn't take money from wicked rich people but rather from the places where the corporations grew and the pension funds of the companies that own them. You wouldn't have tax haven abuses if corporations weren't taxed, unless they accumulate more cash than they can invest, or if the government taxes the stockholders. Double taxation of corporations, at the corporate level and then again at the stockholders level, is inefficient. I haven't read Gates's book, but if he advances a carbon tax, birth control, rail transport and reducing meat farming, he is preaching about the best ways to reduce our suicidal consumption of fossil fuels. I also understand that Gates's investment in fertilizer and healthcare is done primarily through his foundation, which of course exists primarily to avoid taxation. Sadly he may be right that the US government doesn't invest the tax dollars as well as it might, it subsidizes air travel and corn farmers to feed cattle on a vastly greater scale, so maybe it's better to delegate this, alas, undemocratically to Gates.

There are maybe 3,000 billionaires in the world, which is far less than 1 per cent of the 7.6 billion people in the world. Cutting the cruise lines and island vacations would have a much greater effect than cutting the private jets, so we should be looking for areas where we can love without casual air travel.

J. Travis Nunn Washington, DC

Jewish, Muslim, and Christian students and faculty, professionals and scholars from around the world will gather in Jerusalem this December to celebrate the 13th Annual Jerusalem Conference on the Jewish People and the Holy Land, a forum for discussing the ongoing crisis in the region and for understanding the regional developments, recent and future initiatives, and the best course for the future of Israel and Palestine. The conference will be held at the Interdisciplinary Center, Herzliya, December 1-3, 2009. Details and registration are available at www.jerusalemconference.org. Submit your papers and join us this December in Jerusalem.

Benin and restitution

I am glad to see myself quoted in Adam Kuper's review of recent books on the art of Benin City, Nigeria (March 26). And it is true: the antiquities of West Africa, Nigeria and Mali especially are still being ripped off to feed the appetites of the art-hungry savages of the western world; but this has to happen to a process of negotiation which recognizes the rights of the people of Benin City to have access to their antiquities, as well as the need to use them as a means to attract international recognition for museums of international status that present world archaeology and art history. We know that the fact that the majority of the art works that have been sold to the West "entails" a history in which wealth was created through trans-Atlantic slavery; and this is a history that is not real - but they still need Africa.

As for Nigeria, if its museums seem neglected, this is not the fault of its state's allegedly, successive governments and art historians have not seen enough of their museums to provide them with adequate and up-to-date standards for conservation, security, climate control and professional expertise in regard to archaeology and art history. The new museum plans for Benin City should change all that.

John Picton
SOAS, University of London

Josef Pla

As an Anglo-Catalan, I was pleased to see that Joseph Pla's Ajusco de Mar has been translated into English. Lamorna Ash's review (In Brief, March 26) captures the essence of the man and his words, but Josef Pla was not forced into exile after "expressing outrage over General Franco's criminalization of the Catalan language". After the war, he decided to reside in the family's mas (farmhouse) in Palafrugell, but it was not a decision forced upon him. This was the base from which he continued to travel all around Europe (and Spain) and where he would write compulsively at everything he saw, ate, or remembered. He did voice his disgust with Franco's regime in his diaries, which were eventually published, but he made no public declaration in the dangerous years after the civil war. He had worked for the Fracostorri during the conflict, but even he would have been risking a fate much worse than exile if he had expressed any kind of outrage.

Greek independence

Malcolm Deas raises an important point about nationalism in the age of revolutions (Letters, April 2) but considers this: in the Americas, the newly independent states preserved the language - and much else - of their former masters. The Greeks never contemplated using anything other than Greek, and certainly not Turkish. It was a different case entirely.

Mark Mazover
Columbia University, NY

Otters and Beavers

Of course, it's right to correct the suggestion that otters are being reintroduced to Britain (Letters, April 2) but consider this: in the Americas, the newly independent states preserved the language - and much else - of their former masters. The Greeks never contemplated using anything other than Greek, and certainly not Turkish. It was a different case entirely.

John Barraclough
Lancaster

Environmental Bill Gates

Ann Pettifor (March 12) shouldn't complain about poor farmers paying for improved seeds because those farmers wouldn't be alive without the intellectual property of the Green Revolution. Without the protection of intellectual property, there probably wouldn't be any fewer inventions. Edison spent a good part of his time litigating to protect his inventions. Whether electric light is a good idea is no doubt debatable, but most of us depend on it as well as user-friendly micro-computers provided directly or indirectly by Bill Gates. A good eco-fan like Pettifor should recognize that poor people also damage the environment, for instance by heating and cooking with cow dung. Occupation of corporations doesn't take money from wicked rich people but rather from the places where the corporations grew and the pension funds of the companies that own them. You wouldn't have tax haven abuses if corporations weren't taxed, unless they accumulate more cash than they can invest, or if the government taxes the stockholders. Double taxation of corporations, at the corporate level and then again at the stockholders level, is inefficient. I haven't read Gates's book, but if he advances a carbon tax, birth control, rail transport and reducing meat farming, he is preaching about the best ways to reduce our suicidal consumption of fossil fuels. I also understand that Gates's investment in fertilizer and healthcare is done primarily through his foundation, which of course exists primarily to avoid taxation. Sadly he may be right that the US government doesn't invest the tax dollars as well as it might, it subsidizes air travel and corn farmers to feed cattle on a vastly greater scale, so maybe it's better to delegate this, alas, undemocratically to Gates.

There are maybe 3,000 billionaires in the world, which is far less than 1 per cent of the 7.6 billion people in the world. Cutting the cruise lines and island vacations would have a much greater effect than cutting the private jets, so we should be looking for areas where we can love without casual air travel.

J. Travis Nunn
Washington, DC

Jewish, Muslim, and Christian students and faculty, professionals and scholars from around the world will gather in Jerusalem this December to celebrate the 13th Annual Jerusalem Conference on the Jewish People and the Holy Land, a forum for discussing the ongoing crisis in the region and for understanding the regional developments, recent and future initiatives, and the best course for the future of Israel and Palestine. The conference will be held at the Interdisciplinary Center, Herzliya, December 1-3, 2009. Details and registration are available at www.jerusalemconference.org. Submit your papers and join us this December in Jerusalem.

Contact

1 London Bridge Street
London SE1 9GF
letters@the-lts.co.uk

TLS
APRIL 9, 2009

TTS

Jewish, Muslim, and Christian students and faculty, professionals and scholars from around the world will gather in Jerusalem this December to celebrate the 13th Annual Jerusalem Conference on the Jewish People and the Holy Land, a forum for discussing the ongoing crisis in the region and for understanding the regional developments, recent and future initiatives, and the best course for the future of Israel and Palestine. The conference will be held at the Interdisciplinary Center, Herzliya, December 1-3, 2009. Details and registration are available at www.jerusalemconference.org. Submit your papers and join us this December in Jerusalem.

Contact

1 London Bridge Street
London SE1 9GF
letters@the-lts.co.uk

TLS
APRIL 9, 2009
Artist of sorrows and solitudes
An optimistic enlightenment wasn’t Joseph Wright’s subject matter

ALEXANDRA HARRIS
JOSEPH WRIGHT OF DERBY
Painter of darkness
MATTHEW CRAKSE
368pp. Yale University Press. £45 (US $60).

In the early 1770s, Joseph Wright of Derby painted a series of views of forges. Large, grandly composed, and dramatic, all five are night scenes, the forge-fires alive among shadows, the mobile bodies of muscular blacksmiths silhouetted against blazing white ingots of molten iron, onlookers shield their eyes. We might admire the incongruous ecclesiastical arches that reach up into moonlit skies, seeming to confer a mysterious sanctity on the figures and flames beneath, but commentary on these pictures has tended to set their depiction of labour in the context of the Industrial Revolution. They have often been associated with the Midlands, production and commerce, the transformation of materials, the valorization of work.

Matthew Craske, in this major new book, thinks that a shift of emphasis is needed. If Wright had wanted to paint modern industry, he points out, he could have gone regularly to the large-scale ironworks at Gobowen. He adds that the mechanized tilt-hammer in “The Iron Forge Viewed from Within” (1772) is a piece of technology in use since at least the twelfth century, hardly an icon of scientific progress. His subtitle responds directly to Benedict Nicolson’s 1968 study of Wright as “Painter of Light” and sums up his thesis: Craske identifies his subject as a “Painter of Darknes”. As a child Wright paid rapt attention to the peep box shows brought to Derby by the travelling rare animal; later he would enchant children with his own dark boxes and magic lanterns. There were many kinds of popular night painting around that could produce a pleasant thrill with their alluring treatment of light flickering across faces and fabrics. Craske cites, for instance the work of Godfried Schalcken, the Dutch painter noted for his use of candlelight, who gave an illogical frisson to glowing figures in darkened private rooms. Night painting could court intimacy or impressive theatricality.

But Wright was a man of a kind of temperament that was neither, or certainly not only, a momentary spectacle delighting viewers with virtuoso painterly effects; his paintings are meditations, gradually unfolding their meanings. He brought to the hours of darkness, Craske argues, all his “restless creative intelligence”. Here is Wright the philosopher of melancholy, an artist of sorrows and solitudes. Here is an early Romantic closely engaged with cultures of sensibility, and particularly with poetry.

The word “melancholy” in the later eighteenth century encompassed a range of habits and feelings from pensiveness to fashionably cultivated gloom, from general introspection to profound grief, and it also described loosely grouped varieties of mental illness. Wright suffered from depression (probably Seasonal Affective Disorder with summer lows, as the doctor Barry Hoffbrant recently suggested in “Joseph Wright of Derby and Dr Erasmus Darwin, the artist and his physician”), and he was deeply interested, as Craske shows, in other forms of emotional “darkness”. “I have laboured under an annual malady”, the artist wrote to his friend and advisor William Hayley in 1783, “some years, four or five months at a time.” It had been going on for sixteen years, “the core” of his life, he wrote, describing with vivid simplicity how he “dragged” his way through those months without any wish to take up his pencil.

Craske looks carefully at the way Wright’s friends, patrons and public described him - the man and his pictures - and notes the frequent emphasis on sensitivity. In his “memoir” of Wright (published in the Monthly Magazine after the artist’s death in 1791), John Phillips, a Manchester manufacturer who knew Wright well, stressed his “delicate mind” and interest in the feelings of others. Hannah Wright’s 1850 memoir and biography of her uncle dwelt more on habits of reclusiveness than on brisk engagements with commerce. Hayley linked his friend’s “malady” with the strong emotions that went into his pictures, and which his works could awaken in those who grasped their power. He turned Wright’s illness into a poetic brand, publicizing him as an artist of sensibility.

But for a long time, Wright was chiefly a portraitist. He left his native Derbyshire in his teens to study in London under the portrait painter Thomas Hud-
A man who painted more cave-dwelling hermits than family science classes, more auguries of death than lamps of progress

expressly meditative, closer to the philosophical mood of Thomas Gray’s “Elegy.”

At a time when the world was convulsed by the war, his paintings of Cathedrals of the World sold again and again was that of melancholy or troubled old men, a “grand theme” in his art. He wasn’t doing it to please the market; his old men rarely sold. But on he went with them: hermits contemplating “the wreck of material ambitions”, or the elderly aching laborer in “The Old Man and Death” who drops his firewood in fright as a skeleton appears before him. These pictures are rather strenuously made to fit Crase’s reading of Wright’s anti-materialism and social conservatism. For Crase, the terror-struck wood-gatherer teaches a bracing moral lesson: that the peasant “ought not to go about barefoot and in rags.”

More immediately revealing, one of a series of striking references to contemporary funerary sculpture, is the visual comparison with Louis-François Roubillac’s monument to Lady Nuptia in Westminster Abbey. Here a desperate husband raises his hand to push back the figure of Death. Crase (who has written on William Hogarth and on monumen
tal sculpture) shows how Wright was continually drawing together sources like this – borrowing expressive poses from sculpture, or strongly charac
terized faces from old genre prints, or dramatic jux
tapositions from stage, and putting them to his own extraordinary uses.

The old men stayed unsold in the studio, but Wright knew how to attract and move an audience. Grisaille women were always a success. “The Hoeing Widows”, his most publicised pictures, shows a group of disheveled women, of course, holding both her baby and the discoloured corpse of her husband, a foot-soldier fallen in battle. Their colours are “the colours of sympathy”, enthused reviewers with tears in their eyes. Crase wants us to see how the pietà worked morally, politically, affectively, for viewers who took sentimental to be a strength.

Josiah Wedgwood, at home at Etruria Hall, surrounded himself on all sides with Wright’s afflic
ted women. He hung a whole series of them together: “The Corinthish Maid”, “Penelope Unravelling Her Web by Lamplight”, “The Lady in Milton’s Comus” (the lady “frozen by a pulse of restrained terror”), the “Hitting Widows” sitting firm in an attitude of quiet endurance. It is no surprise that Hayley, shrewdly diagnosed by Crase as having a “personal preoccupation with the sacrifices of widows”, had much to do with them: it was he who sug
gested that Wright paint the steadfast vigil of a Native American woman at the grave of her lost husband. Wright imagined her in a mountainous region with the sky a tumult of thunderstorm and, most strikingly, a volcano in mid-eruption, its fire and clouds of ash rapidly encroaching on the static mourner. Viewers were asked to take the extreme danger, feel with her, and learn her strength.

The prominent business people and gentry of the Midlands and the North did not ask for industrial scenes but for what Wright willingly offered: noble figures, extremes and landscapes of ancient decay or sublimity. The Wakefield manufacturer John Milnes built a whole new gallery to accommodate the pictures he was commissioning and buying from Wright a year after their, pictures of Mount Vesuvius, Miravan opening the tomb, the elderly prisoner from Sterne’s Sentimental Journey, the young flautist from James Beattie’s poem “The Minstrel” sitting beside his own future grave.

Wright’s identification with the Midlands and the North is consistently important in this account, and has more to do with rivers and rockfaces than with industry or urban development. Wright added “of Derby” to his name early as 1767 and kept it, even when resident elsewhere. He was taking a risk, and making a statement – about his origins, his allegian
ces, his values. Though the words “of Derby” might connote ideas of cultural life in a growing Georgian town, assembly rooms, friends’ houses, subscrip
tions and ventures, Crase demonstrates that what he really minded about was the “wild and gloomy” scenery of his rural “homeland”.

CALL FOR SESSIONS
2022 ANNUAL CONFERENCE

The Association for Art History’s 48th Annual Conference will bring together international research and critical debate about art and art’s histories.

We invite a broad and inclusive range of session proposals, across all areas of research and practice, from the classical to the contemporary, and on research that focuses on practice outside of Europe and North America.

We invite proposals that reflect broad cross-disciplinary engagement, scholarship, discourse and practice; across art, art history, curating, visual cultures, social sciences, humanities and languages. Open to all.

DATE: 6 – 8 April 2022
LOCATION: London
SESSION PROPOSAL DEADLINE: Friday 7 May 2021

Further details online forarthistory.org.uk #forarthistory2021

8

TTS

APRIL 9, 2021
As an artist drawn to the area’s rugged beauty, Wright had a significant predecessor. He would certainly have known the work of Thomas Smith of Derby (always “of Derby”) who was publishing spectacular views of local scenery when Wright was a boy. In 1743 you could buy Smith’s portfolio Eight of the Most Extraordinary Prospects in the Mountainous Parts of Derbyshire and Staffordshire, and extraordinary they certainly appeared: precipitous cliffs rising vertically over the River Dove, cascades plunging into Matlock Bath. A picturesque tour in Derbyshire looks set to retell a journey through the Alps. Inheriting this appreciation for rural drama, Wright brought to the “northern grotesque” his experience in Italy, his ambition and his melancholy.

Crask’s Wright wants to be alone in his chosen places. He liked to walk in the ruins of nearby Darley Abbey and play his cherished German flute among the broken stones. We could shift the emphasis a little and conjure different ideas of him, remembering that he had a friend who lived next to the ruins, and that “contemplative isolation” was probably not the dominant mood at home when a large family was busy growing up there. But Crask shows us how much he wanted to make space for roaming thought and to be immersed in his environment. He wanted this for the family too keenly following Rousseau, he hoped to raise “children of nature”. Crask’s very fine chapter on “The Minstrel” shows how the boy who sits gracefully with his flute in his lap and his chin in his hand is a representative of rural seclusion, harmony with nature, and the lost innocence of Britain itself.

Rural retirement, away from London coffee-houses, studios and exhibition crowds, was a purposeful declaration of the kind of artist he was. Hayley, who styled himself “the Hermit of Earlham”, encouraged this making of a private world; and he encouraged, too, Wright’s bold separation of himself from the Royal Academy. Subsumed into Hayley’s “private cult of feeling”, says Crask, “Wright was bound to put up a hostile front to the wider world”. These different kinds of aloofness - the voluntary hermit, the exile from London, the rebel from the establishment, the haunter of the night, the man struggling with his “annual malady” - are all facets of the “painter of darkness”.

With his emphasis on particular groups of works, Crask is not trying to give a balanced summing-up. The result can feel partial and disorientating. What are we to make of the late paintings of Arkwright’s cotton mills? What about the hundreds of portraits - self-conscious Thomas Borrow, stoutly velveted William Brooke, Rushed and thoughtful Catherine Swindell - beautiful portraits that seem so dry, sano and steady? And has the story in Wright scholarship been so dire as Crask suggests? Perceptive commentators have taken Wright seriously and have not ignored the darker emotions. There have been insightful readings of his turn to poetic subjects, for instance Amina Wright’s account in Joseph Wright of Derby: Bath and Beyond (2014); in her powerful essay on the “Virgil’s Tomb” paintings, Jenny Uglow allows Wright’s interest in geology, especially volcanoes and caves, to complement his preoccupation with the “deep, underground powers of the poetic imagination”; Elizabeth Barker’s edition of Documents Relating to Joseph Wright of Derby (2009), bringing together letters, account books, client lists, is a feat of editorial judgement.

We’ll go on needing a range of Wrights, but Crask makes a distinctive contribution to the study of him. It is good to read a book so intent on its argument about a British painter, so sure that there is much at stake, so determined to break free of both neutral surveys and theoretical schemes. Thanks to the abundant images and superb production values, we can look and look again at the pictures as the text subtly colours what we see. Disagreements may surface along the way, but this intricate study leaves little doubt that Wright is not an intriguing minor artist with an attractive line in candlelit drama but among the great European painters of the eighteenth century. 

Alexandra Harris is a Professorial Fellow in English at the University of Birmingham. She is currently writing about landscape, locality and the arts.

Discover the artists that shaped the past century

Jean Dubuffet

Newly commissioned essays and photography of rarely exhibited works highlight the radicalism of Dubuffet, one of the most provocative voices of the postwar avant-garde.

Hardback I May 2021 I £39.99

Yayoi Kusama

As panoramic and fascinating as its subject, this monumental book accompanies the artist's major retrospective at the Gropius Bau.

Hardback I April 2021 I £45.00

Joseph Beuys

Explore the poster art of Beuys and discover some of the philosophies that made him one of the most influential artists of the postwar period.

Hardback I April 2021 I £29.99

Irma Stern

Drawing from letters, journals and her own travelogues, this volume traces the South African artist’s development and her continued influence on art today.

Hardback I Available now I £19.99

www.prestel.com
Prestel books are available through all good bookstores.
Sight, covet, negotiate

The fate of African sculpture

TOM PHILLIPS

BEYOND AESTHETICS
Use, abuse, and dissonance in African art traditions
WOLE SOYINKA

Few book titles fly higher than Beyond Aesthetics, a somewhat scary pairing of words that might well put off the casual scanner of a bookshop’s philosophy shelf. Quick reassurance, however, would be found by glancing at the name of the author, since that of the Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka always guarantees challenging and lively reading. The subject of these essays is the art of Africa. Yoruba by birth and spiritual inclination, Soyinka is an indefatigable collector, a revenant in the favoured cities of traders and in those streets around the Rue de Seine or Portobello Road. One of the (unfortunately greyishly printed) illustrations to the book shows the garage of his erstwhile home full of what he describes as “my extended family” of mostly Yoruba artefacts, ranging from trinkets to lifesize figures and wide-eyed ceremonial masks.

Yoruba ibeji twin figures, twentieth century

Half a century ago when I started collecting African sculpture myself, I haunted those shops and salerooms which offered such works under the heading “ethnography” or, more abusively, “primitive art”. Tribal Art (a term not much liked by African scholars) has now become the standard description. As it so happens, the first object I acquired from a trader’s stall was from the Yoruba, a modest ibeji figure (nowhere near as fine as the twin couple

Seagull Books  www.seagullbooks.org

DISTRIBUTED BY THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS • www.press.uchicago.edu • Trade Enquiries to Yale Representation Ltd. • yalerep@yaleup.co.uk • 020 7079 4900 •
Soyinka illustrates from the Harvard Museum). I soon became addicted to collecting, and all too familiar with the stages of acquisition as described in Soyinka’s pithy litany: “sight, covet, negotiate, pretend, return, reopen haggling... until purchase.”

Of all the prodigiously varied sculptures produced by the peoples of sub-Saharan Africa, those of the Yoruba are the most exuberant. Often enriched by colour (with a particular fondness for Beckett’s blue) their generosity of form gives them dramatic presence. No female figures are more emphatically motherly nor male divinities more fiercely majestic. Soyinka lovingly enumerates their roles in the theatre of Yoruba society and their potency is reflected in his own creative work. As a writer he could safely be described as a playwright of the larger-than-life.

Inevitably, any discussion of African art leads to an ever more hectic historical debate. Soyinka himself is a political realist and unlikely to be impressed by Emmanuel Macron’s naïve scheme of sending everything African back to Africa. He is equally too sophisticated to barge into the question by the all-too-customary route of instanting the looting of the Benin Bronzes by the British so-called Punitive Expedition in 1897, an ugly though untypical event. Instead he casts his accusing eye on the results of religious fanaticism in Africa as it persists today, suggesting that it would be more than justified, indeed vigorously satisfying to view the frequent sanguinary face-offs between Islam and Christianity as poetic justice, a recom pense of history on behalf of what I have described as the “invisible religions” of the world, a revenge on two of the most culpable, blood-stained religions in the history of humanity, Islam and Christianity.

I had my small glimpse of how things were when I was curating the exhibition Africa: The art of a continent at the Royal Academy (1995). Travelling in Senoufo country in a van with local friends, I was once or twice stopped at villages to be greeted by people who rushed out to offer for pennies the well-worn figurative images, and even the locks from granary doors or the tiny heddle pulleys used by weavers, that they would otherwise forfeit to the approaching punitive march of Islam. It was a small if sad reminder of accounts of similar purges in the Reformation. I have, on the other hand, relished the ironic fate of so many statues which, brought out of Africa by missionaries to demonstrate to their flocks what they would have called the savagery of heathen fetishes, have now found their way into many progressive museums to accompany the wonders of antiquity or triumphantly to hold their own among the finest icons of Christian mythology.

Given Soyinka’s wide range of connoisseurship and knowledge of contemporary critical modern trends, one might have expected the essays to refer with some sense of hope to the now numerous African artists, many of them from Nigeria, who not only take their place in the international forum of contemporary art but often employ the imagery of their heritage in their work. But the bad news at home continues to mount. With one emphatic exception, Soyinka perseveres with his catalogue of the tragic fates of traditional sculpture, finally mentioning the claim of puritanical Christian fanatics in the Mbaise region of south-east Nigeria to have burned down a hundred shrines and their boast that they will destroy hundreds more “to cleanse the land.”

The exception is a sudden departure from the fate of shrine figures to what, for Soyinka, seems to embody the degradation of culture itself. His new topic is Nollywood, the name adopted by Nigerian cinema in imitation of India’s Bollywood. Fond as he is of the odd, often jesting expletive, his anger now drives him to what typesetters call an interrobang. “****wood!!!!”, he shouts as he begins his attack on its outsize “pulp surreal” cinematic horrors. I have not seen the films that come out of Nollywood (nor those that come out of Ghana’s equivalent, the unfortunately self-styled Gollywood), but I am tempted to take Soyinka’s rather hardline evaluation on trust.

Soyinka (now in his mid-eighties) is happily still a believer as much in action as he is in speech. His recent years have been devoted to developing that once well-stocked garage into what is becoming a richly endowed museum. Situated in the beautiful forest grove near where he was born in Abozukara, this treasure house of appropriate reaproposition, glimpses of which can be seen online, is his practical answer to some of the questions his book asks. Nonetheless, I am still somewhat perturbed by the title, though it makes me ponder Wittgenstein’s assertion that ethics and aesthetics are one and the same thing. In the arena of art, the conflicts Soyinka brings to our notice would seem to defy any clear resolution. We should yield perhaps to the Yoruba deity Ewu, who faces both forwards and backwards in time and presides over the random factors in human affairs.

Inevitably, any discussion of African art leads to an ever more hectic historical debate.

Tom Phillips RA is best known for his treated book, A Humument.

JOHN CRAXTON
A LIFE OF GIFTS

BY IAN COLLINS

Uplifting and engaging, this story recounts the life and career of rebellious 20th-century British artist John Craxton.

“You can live a charmed life if you are charming, and Craxton was charming. He showed me that to live the life of an artist was possible and even pleasurable.” – Tacita Dean

“This authoritative and entertaining book restores John Craxton to the place he clearly deserves in the history of twentieth-century English art.” – Hilary Spurling

Order your copy online or ask for it at your favourite local bookshop
May 2021 | Hardback | Illustrated throughout | £25.00

Dark Toys
Surrealism and the Culture of Childhood
David Hopkins
The first scholarly account of surrealism and post-surrealist engagements with the culture of childhood, this volume places toys, children’s book illustration, and other ephemera alongside key 20th-century artworks.

Hardcover £40.00
73 colour + 41 b/w illustrations

Nature Inside
Plants and Flowers in the Modern Interior
Penny Sparke
‘At the heart of this beautifully produced and scholarly book is the exploration of our long, and often complex, relationship with indoor plants, from exotic specimens extravagantly displayed in specially commissioned buildings, to the tasteful touches of greeneries adding background texture to decorative interiors. I found it completely fascinating.’ – Monty Don
Hardcover £40.00 | 120 colour + b/w illus.

Craxtton artwork image © John Craxton Estate. All Rights Reserved, DACS.
At the mercy of the public

Is it necessary to kill some statues, or could we add to them?

JAMES HALL

The contentious statues that have been in the news recently are the products of statuernania, the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century craze for erecting statues of mostly male worthies in public locations. The term was first coined in France in 1851, and the fashion reached its apogee in the years before the First World War. Some revealing statistics have been compiled for Paris. They show that the peak years of statuemania were between 1870 and 1940. Two hundred and seventeen statues to grands hommes were erected, which works out at about three per annum. The most prolific decade was 1900-10, with fifty-one statues. This does not include sculpture in cemeteries or on buildings. The numbers are likely to be proportionate in other European countries and their colonies, as well as in the Americas. These often disruptive landmarks gave a sense of place to new as well as old urban settings. Different aspects of history, culture and identity were foregrounded as never before, and no longer were statues only erected to rulers and generals. Rank-and-file soldiers, writers, philosophers, actors, artists, scientists, medics, bureaucrats, politicians and philanthropists were celebrated, including many local heroes. Statuernania was not just the art form of nationalism and imperialism; it was the art form of democracy.

The Crimean Guards Memorial in Waterloo Place, at the junction of Pall Mall and Regent Street in the heart of London’s Clubland, is a good example. It also demonstrates how monuments, like buildings, often evolve. When first erected in 1861, it comprised John Bell’s female personification of “Honour”, with bronze relief statues of sombre grenadier guardsmen on the pedestal. It was reconfigured in 1914, moved back to become the apex of a triangle incorporating two more statues. Arthur George Walker’s “Florence Nightingale” (1914) depicts the nurse and health reformer as the “Lady with the Lamp”, pacing the Crimean wards at night (she had a Turkish “fanoos” lamp rather than a spotted oil lamp). John Foley’s “Sidney Herbert” (1867), in deep thinker pose, was relocated to Waterloo Place in 1914 from a position outside the War Office. Herbert was Nightingale’s political patron and an army health reformer who had been Secretary of War (1852-4) during the Crimean War (1853-6). The conflict was fought against Russia by a coalition of Britain, France and the Ottoman Empire. The statue of “Honour” was renamed “Victory” in 1914, presumably acknowledging the success of health reform rather than a revisionist view of a war notorious for the ill-fated Charge of the Light Brigade and the high number of deaths from disease. By depicting foot soldiers, and in classic “mourner” pose, the memorial started a trend of downbeat, officer-free war memorials that would culminate in those erected after the two world wars.

It has long been hard to persuade people to take the products of statuernania seriously and uncontentiously. In 1923, Les Nouvelles Littéraires conducted a survey: “Is it necessary to kill some statues?” The Nazis would oblige by melting down seventy-five Parisian statues — many of which celebrated free-thinkers and the French Republic during the occupation, with much of the bronze being sent to the Nazis’ Polycritus, Arno Breker. The artistic value of most individual statues may be low, but the same could be said for most of the buildings lining our most important city streets. And the cumulative impact of these buildings, and of the statues that punctuate them, can be both distinctive and memorable. In relation to aesthetics, cultural history and urban consciousness, statuernania is more avant-garde than not.

Some of the blame for the overwhelmingly bad press lies at the feet of the French poet and essayist Charles Baudelaire (1821-67). The reputation of nineteenth-century sculpture prior to Rodin has been badly, even irreparably damaged by Baudelaire’s review of the Paris Salon of 1846, “Why Sculpture is Boring”. The essay is endlessly quoted and usually concurred with. Yet it is very much a period piece, and it needs to be reassessed both in relation to its own era and to Baudelaire’s evolving views on sculpture.

The ostentatious yet peculiar racism of Baudelaire’s 1846 essay is rarely discussed or thought through. According to the poet, sculpture was invented by Carilhes [Caribbeans] in the night of time; the making of fetishes, he insists, long preceded the discovery of painting, which involves “profound thought”. He repeats the word Carilhes five times, so that it becomes a synonym for sculptors. Sculpture, Baudelaire believes, comes much closer to nature, so that “even today our peasants, who are enchanted by the sight of an ingeniously turned fragment of wood or stone, will nevertheless remain unmoved before the most beautiful painting. Here we have a singular mystery which one does not touch with the fingers.”

Baudelaire’s belief that sculpture was invented before painting, and is therefore more primitive, was an idea that emerged in the second half of the eighteenth century, initially without derogatory implications. It was a by-product of the cult of childhood. Children, rather than the creator (god who might be a painter, sculptor or both), became the prototypical first craftspeople.

There are several strands to Baudelaire’s association of Carilhes with sculpture, and they give great resonance to his new coinage. Firstly, there is the issue of slavery. Slavery was only officially abolished in France’s colonies in 1849, and in the Caribbean territories were over 70,000 slaves of African descent on the plantations of Martinique alone (Black Lives Matter protests on the island have resulted in the destruction of two colonial era statues). For Baudelaire, sculptors are effective slaves because of what he perceives to be sculpture’s subordination to, and dependence on, architecture and painting which is “despotical”. Sculpture ought therefore to be a “humble viceroyate” — serving art..."
supporters of slavery. Most of the statues that have been torn down and removed during the Black Lives Matter protests were worked on by sculptors. Another salient factor is that the Caribbean was the source of the finest mahogany (Swietenia mahagoni), a dark brown hardwood perfect for cabinet-making and decorative carving, though by Baudelaire's time deforestation, and an increase in sugar plantations, meant supplies had dwindled. The association of the Caribbean with mahogany fitted Baudelaire's fantasy of peasants "enchanted by the sight of an ingeniously turned fragment of wood".

It was not just bronze or mahogany sculpture that could look black. Pollution from soot meant that the stone in the public realm soon became black - as old photographs lucidly reveal. Marble sculpture kept indoors was also vulnerable to atmospheric pollution, soot from fireplaces, tobacco and lamps like the one that Florence Nightingale is holding. It was the fashion in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries to view sculpture by torchlight. The ancient Romans had slaves to wash their sculptures and stucco decoration after banquets, but pollution became far worse after the industrial revolution. The gleaming white plaster models displayed at the Paris Salon and in sculptor's studios existed in a short-lived state of cleanliness. A later cleaning controver-

sery at the British Museum involving the Elgin Marbles in the 1930s was born out of an attempt to "restore" them to a pristine "studio" state.

The two colonial statues of Martinique pulled down by the Ligue de Défense Noire Africaine (LDNA/Black African Defence League) on May 22, 2020 were made from white marble which looks more like photographic darkroom over-exposure on many occasions. The statues depicted Josephine de Beauharnais (1763-1814) and the politician Victor Scholeucher (1804-93). The future wife of Napoleon, and one of the heroes of the French Revolution, was born in Martinique into a family of sugar plantation owners. Vital Dub-

ray's statue was installed in 1859, commissioned by Josephine's grandson Emperor Napoleon III. It was moved to a less conspicuous location in a park in 1974, depainted in 1991 and left headless. Josephine almost certainly encouraged Napoleon in 1802 to revive the 1749 law ending slavery which had been implemented during the French Revolution. Marquet de Vasselet's statue of Scholeucher, erected in 1904 in front of the Palais de Justice, was targeted because although he drafted the 1848 bill ending slavery, enacted into law on 24 January, compensation was paid to owners rather than slaves. President Macron expressed his dismay because he claimed in an ironic echo of Donald Trump's campaign slogan - "that Scholeucher has made the great thing!

No one would say that statuenmania made any city great; but it certainly made them more interesting. When Baudelaire came to review the Salon of 1859, two years after publishing "the Les Fleurs du mal", he had been bitten by the statuenmania bug, and had almost completely changed his mind. By now far more statues had been erected, and Baudelaire's own aesthetic had embraced mystery, darkness, surprise revelations and sudden encounters. His essay of 1859 has a separate section on the imagina-

tion. The art that was invented in the night of time had become far more appealing and relevant. He repeats his old criticisms, but with less conviction. He no longer uses the term Carabes. Sculpture is a "strange art", whose roots disappear into the darkness of time", but even in "primitive ages" it was "producing works which cause the civilized mind to marvel!" For Baudelaire, modern statues and tomb figures, swathed in smog, spectral moon-
light and street lighting, are magnificent phantoms that disrupt our sense of time, churches, cemeteries, roads, parks, prompting innumerable epiphanies:

You are passing through a great city which has grown old in civilisation - one of those cities which barbour the most important archives of universal life - and your eyes are drawn upwards, to the stars; for in the public squares, at the corners of the crossways, stand motionless figures, larger than those which pass at their feet, repeating to you the

"I do not think we should be selectively airbrushing those archives; we should be expanding them in order to offer counterweights to the prejudices and cruelties of the past."

This is an edited version of a chapter from Topping Statues: Papers from the 2020 PSSA webinar, to be published this month

Now online
THE FORTNIGHTLY REVIEW
John Matthias
Peter Taylor in Triple Vision
Alan Wall
Representation in Millimetres
Simon Collings
Gianfranco Rosi’s Marginalia
Bruce Kinzer
John Fowles, Gent.
John Taylor
Philippe Jaccottet
Victor Bruno
Art and Innocence
Ian Gardner
The Robots of Amazon

Maria Jastrzębska
Rupert N. Loydell
Kimberly Campanello

Newest from Odd Volumes
ALAN WALL
MIDNIGHT OF THE SUBLIME
Essays and Reviews

www.fortnightlyreview.co.uk

The FORTNIGHTLY REVIEW
John Matthias
Peter Taylor in Triple Vision
Alan Wall
Representation in Millimetres
Simon Collings
Gianfranco Rosi’s Marginalia
Bruce Kinzer
John Fowles, Gent.
John Taylor
Philippe Jaccottet
Victor Bruno
Art and Innocence
Ian Gardner
The Robots of Amazon

Maria Jastrzębska
Rupert N. Loydell
Kimberly Campanello

Newest from Odd Volumes
ALAN WALL
MIDNIGHT OF THE SUBLIME
Essays and Reviews

www.fortnightlyreview.co.uk
Selling out the home
How rising house prices ruin our cities

DIANA DARKE
BUILDING FOR HOPE
Towards an architecture of belonging
MARWA AL-SABOUNI
224pp. Thames and Hudson. £20.

The serving Prime Minister of New Zealand, the former governor of the Bank of England and an architect turned author/philosopher living in Syria would not normally find themselves mentioned on the same page. Yet they share a vision. They want nothing less than a new world order based on values, not profit.

Carney's new book, *Value(s): Building a better world for all*, advocates “a new international architecture” serving “the needs of the many, not the few”. Jacinda Ardern, elected on a promise of affordable housing, has ordered her country’s central bank to stabilize house prices, now embarrassingly beyond the reach of the middle class. It is a global problem. The research firm Numbeo surveyed 502 international cities and found that 90 per cent of homes were “unaffordable”, defined as more than three times median family income.

Unlike as it may seem, Syria’s capital Damascus is also in that club of unaffordable cities. Marwa al-Sabouni tells us Damascus real estate in 2010 was the eighth most expensive in the world, after Hong Kong, Tokyo, London, Moscow, Dubai, Bombay and Paris. Small wonder that even before the war over 40 per cent of Syrians lived in “informal settlements” round the edges of the cities. That figure has risen to 60 per cent because the Syrian government destroyed so much housing in the suburbs where “social injustice and decay began”. Then, in 2016, it introduced Law No.10 to confiscate the land and sell it off to property developers, always “the same handful of people”. Al-Sabouni cites the example of Marota City, once home to thousands of low-income Sunni Muslim families, now destined to become high rises and shopping malls. She calls it “Vanity Damascus ... an expression of emptiness and loss of meaning ... a manifestation of inequality”.

The ten-year anniversary of Syria’s forgotten, unresolved war forms a fitting moment for the publication of this, al-Sabouni’s second book, offering a crumb of hope not just for Syria, but for the world, on how to build a better future through inclusive residential architecture. Few indeed are the authors still writing from inside Syria and even fewer are those attempting to remain positive in the face of the grim statistics piling up - 90 per cent of the population live today below the poverty line, over 55 per cent have been displaced from their homes. Millions are stuck as refugees outside the country, fearful of return.

Al-Sabouni herself is no stranger to fear. She lives it every day, so deeply that her book is framed in five chapters, each of them titled with what she calls the five primeval fears - death, need, treachery, loneliness and boredom. Together with her fellow-architect husband and two young children, she stayed in her small flat in Homs throughout the war, miraculously escaping destruction from the aerial bombardment that flattened so much of the city - Homs, like Hama before it in 1982, was severely punished by the Syrian government for its role as “Capital of the Revolution”.

Before writing her first book *The Battle for Home* in the thick of Syria’s war, al-Sabouni had barely travelled beyond Syria. The runaway success of that book brought invitations to speak all over the world. At events in Europe she was often asked by audiences how she felt, coming from war-torn Syria, “in the face of European prosperity and grandeur”. It was a question that perplexed her, just as her answer perplexed them, when she replied that she saw neither prosperity nor grandeur in Europe. “What I do see”, she told them, “frightens me and makes my heart sink, because it looks like the other side of the mirror - it looks like the future that awaits us in the reconstruction of Syria, which seems as dark as war.”

Such a statement, coming in the opening pages,

‘an insightful guide to the artistry of William Blake ... Whittaker makes a strong case for why Blake remains “one of the greatest poets and artists ever to have lived in the British Isles.”’
– Publishers Weekly
9781789142877 | £25

‘A stunning book about a stunning artist. To follow Michael Fried through this book is to learn to see the paintings of Savoldo in a new way.’
– Anthony Grafton,
Princeton University
9781789143195 | £40

www.reaktionbooks.co.uk
is designed as a warning. “For a long time,” she writes, triumphant colonial powers dictated the rules of the game, but now the natural consequences of their actions are spreading beyond containment. The colonialism that created empires and left behind hellholes has led to its own accord to globalization. The same structures that were eroded in defeated colonies are now collapsing in the home territories of former colonial powers, swept away by global forces that no one knows how to contain.

The book is a powerfully argued analysis of how we in the so-called “developed” world are slowly but surely destroying our societies by selling out our homes, our natural habitats, to big business elites - factory owners and property developers - who have no interest in us or our needs. She has watched it happen in Homs, and has witnessed the same thing underway in other cities during her travels post-2016, drawing on examples from Detroit, Dubai, Beirut, Oxford, Bristol, London, Melbourne and Helsinki. The root cause of the problem, she observes, is the profit motive leading in turn to mass production. The post-Second World War building boom brought quantity at the expense of quality, leading inexorably to the “Factory City”, as she calls it, which then strangles itself, “suffocating in abundance”. Like Homs, Syria’s industrial city, Detroit lost its social fabric to factories. The wealthy owners of the factories climbed up and the masses went down.

A particular strength of the book is how al-Sabouni explains the social cohesion of Syria before the Factory City mentality took hold. She examines how a city must evolve around “meaningful trade”, giving proper quality of life, where neighbours are integrated, where everyone has a stake, with no one left behind. For this to happen, property prices must be stable, something that was achieved in Ottoman times through the institution of the waqf (religious trusts) which prevented land profiteering since it was held in perpetuity for the common good, and secondly through the use of miri (state-owned) land leased to farmers for agricultural production. In the past, she explains, Syrian cities evolved through a core of forty occupations, based on crafts and skills acquired over generations, passed down through apprenticeships, creating a resilient social fabric. It is the model she advocates, since there was no mass unemployment as a result. The city grew organically, weaving its own social fabric. Homs was once the centre of Syria’s textile industry, thanks not to factories but to household looms, boasting over 10,000 in the late nineteenth century when Damascus had just 2,500.

Sectarianism is often cited in western sources as a reason for wars in the Middle East, yet al-Sabouni calls it merely a symptom, never the cause. Foreign missionaries privileged their own economic opportunities into power networks, causing indigenous Orthodox Christians to convert to Catholicism in order to gain economic benefits hard to attain otherwise. Credit was prohibited under Islam so Christians and Jews became the creditors and controlled the markets. European merchandise was promoted over local produce, disturbing the local balance of the communities, leading to “special relationships” with Christians and Jews in Greater Syria at the expense of the majority Muslim population.

Many of Al-Sabouni’s arguments strike a particular chord now, during the Coronavirus pandemic, given that the world watched overcrowded, under-funded urban cities turn into Covid-19 hotspots where households had neither the space to allow social distancing nor the income to afford the costs of quarantining. She criticizes the skyscraper with its isolating flats as “the most treacherous of all buildings” and highlights how, in the reconstruction of Beirut in the 1990s, the old centre was sold to get-rich-quick property developers. “High-end business and modern galleries are the mark of a city that has kicked out its residents and replaced them with

“Damascus real estate in 2010 was the eighth most expensive in the world, after Hong Kong, Tokyo, London, Moscow, Dubai, Bombay and Paris. Property investment is an “unproductive, sterile form of trade”, she explains, describing how truly ethical trade is distributed from the bottom up, spread over many layers of society, where small businesses and crafts can thrive, the opposite of the Factory model, “where trade hovers over the heads of the people, mass-produced, exploitative and for the benefit of the few”. Even in the Old City of Damascus, in the Hamrawi neighbourhood round the Umayyad Mosque, she describes how a gentrification horror story has unfolded, aimed at attracting tourists, robbing the nearby souks of meaning. So-called “liberalization” led to greed, a creeping disease that eats away at societies. She reminds us of the fate of the Ghouta orchards that surrounded Damascus before the First World War. Once an ancient paradise, the city’s refuge and lung, watered by the historic River Barada, the Ghouta today has become “a graveyard of private factories” while the Barada has turned into “a stream of rubbish and wastewater”.

This book serves as a warning to us all, that the choices of greedy investors, as reflected in the Dubai-style architecture of recent decades, are putting us on a path to destruction, turning property into nothing more than “investment”, divorced from places of shelter and safety where communities can thrive. At stake is our very future. ■
NEW & FORTHCOMING

Art and Curiosity Cabinets of the Late Renaissance
A Contribution to the History of Collecting
Julius von Schlosser
Edited by Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann
Translation by Jonathan Brawer
For the first time, the pioneering book that launched the study of art and curiosity cabinets is available in English.

Mario Giacomelli
Figure/Ground
Virginia Heckert
Spanning the full range of the artist’s career, this publication celebrates the work of one of Italy’s foremost photographers of the twentieth century.

Samuel van Hoogstraten’s Introduction to the Academy of Painting; or, The Visible World
Samuel van Hoogstraten
Edited by Celeste Braccini
Translation by Jaap Jacoba
A unique seventeenth-century account of painting as it was practiced, taught, and discussed during a period of extraordinary artistic and intellectual ferment in the Netherlands.

L.A. Graffiti Black Book
David Brozman
This collection of unique works by 101 Los Angeles graffiti and tattoo artists represents an unprecedented collaboration across the city’s diverse artistic landscape.

Visualizing Empire
Africa, Europe, and the Politics of Representation
Edited by Rebecca Peabody, Steven Nelson, and Dominic Thomas
An exploration of how an official French visual culture normalized France’s colonial project and exposed citizens and subjects to racialized ideas of life in the empire.

Under Discussion
The Encyclopedic Museum
Edited by Donatien Grau
Nearly thirty interviews with some of the world’s most prominent thinkers and prominent arts leaders on the past, present, and future of the encyclopedic museum.

Getty Publications
getty.edu/publications
The world from a child’s-eye level

New Italian film: Sons, daughters, Dottiressas and directors

ADAM MARS-JONES

CINEMA MADE IN ITALY
MUBI, April 16-29

ITALIAN CINEMA has a track record of films with young protagonists, from the eight-year-old Bruno of Vittorio de Sica’s Bicycle Thieves (1948) to eight-year-old Salvatore in Giuseppe Tornatore’s inexplicably beloved Cinema Paradiso from 1988, and two films in this year’s digital festival Cinema Made in Italy develop this tradition in rewarding ways. Valerio (Mattia Garaci) in Claudio Noce’s third feature Padrenostro is ten, old enough to feel the stirrings of independence without having any real possibility of life outside the home. He wants to be big and strong, though his adored father tells him not to be in too much of a hurry - as long as he’s less than a metre and a half tall doesn’t he get into the football free? To give him pleasure his father also tells him he’s as heavy as lead, though he’s distinctly underweight. It’s the period setting of the film that could reasonably be called leaden, 1976 being in the middle of the “anni di piombo”, years of political turmoil and domestic terrorism.

Early in the film Valerio’s father is ambushed and wounded as he sets off for work. One of his attackers dies in the street. Valerio saw more of what happened than his parents suspect, but since they keep him in the dark on principle there is nothing that might help him keep his emotions in proportion, whatever that might mean. The camera shows us the world from a child’s eye level, as it did in Gabriele Salvatore’s I’m Not Scared, also set in the 1970s, and the viewer knows no more than Valerio does - presumably his father is a high-ranking judge. Soon after the attack, Valerio is befriended by a streetwise older boy called Christian (he’s fourteen), who mocks him for his innocence and encourages him to break the rules.

The device of the imaginary friend (whether attached to a child or an adult) is an infuriating recurring element in cinema, ineradicable because it compensates for the greatest weakness of the medium, the impossibility of photographing thought. So much easier to stage a non-existent conversation than to make the attempt to get inside a character’s head, there where literature slides so easily. The device isn’t always made plain, as it is in Fight Club and A Beautiful Mind, and can find a place even in the art film. How many viewers of Terrence Malick’s exquisite A Hidden Life have asked themselves if it was any more likely that the Nazis would provide a condemned prisoner with a cellmate (an old friend, too, as luck would have it) than that they would ask him what he wanted for his last

FESTIVAL-FRESH FILMS EXCLUSIVELY ON MUBI
16-29 APRIL

HIDDEN AWAY
THE TIES
PADRENOSTRO
THE PREDATORS
THOU SHALT NOT HATE
LIFE AS A B-MOVIE:
PIERO VVARELLI
FORTUNA – THE GIRL
AND THE GIANTS
EVERYTHING’S GONNA
BE ALRIGHT

CINEMA MADE IN ITALY

© BRANZELI SCAPA
meal? Pancakes? Of course. Syrup and butter? Valerio has already been shown taking food from the table for the benefit of an invisible person in the attic-level storage room he has annexed as a playroom. To make the device even more transparent, Christian vanishes with great suddenness as soon as anyone else comes near, yet somehow turns up in Calabria when Valerio’s parents go to the family home there to recover an unlikely journey for a Roman urchin to make. It’s a pleasure to report, though, that there is some double-bluff at work here, with the two sets of conventions (that Christian is invisible except to Valerio and that the camera stays within the limits of the heroine’s world) breaking down at the film’s halfway point. Mania Garaci’s face is wonderfully permeable to feeling, clouding instantly when her dark-haired father looks warmly on this strange new friend who does—it’s true—look much more like family than Valerio does. Valerio’s grandparents say admiringly he keeps getting blonder and blonder.

Adults’ faces, even Italian ones, clench round their emotions, and when Valerio’s father realizes how much danger he is in (though being shot might have given him a clue) the director resorts to the formula, rather too familiar from television, of having the actor adopt a thoughtful expression for a very long time, while music on the soundtrack does the expressive heavy lifting.

Fortuna, Nicolangelo Gelormini’s highly impressive debut film, is stylized to a point that makes Padrenostro seem raw (though that film’s art direction was pervasive) yet manages to keep the viewer feeling remarkably free and unmanipulated. The young heroine, played by Cristina Magnotti with the gravity of Lewis Carroll’s Alice, seems to occupy two realities, though the physical setting (an apartment block in Naples) is the same. In one life she is called Fortuna and her father is in prison. In the other she is Nancy and lives with both parents. Disconcertingly, Fortuna’s unstable mother is played by the actress (Pina Turco) who - through the looking-glass as it were - plays Nancy’s child psychologist. There’s a continuity of character, though. This Dottoressa’s approach to her work is remarkably slapdash, since she spends all her time in sessions texting while Nancy does draw. Conversely, Fortuna’s very caring psychologist (Valeria Golino) becomes Nancy’s tenderly concerned mother, in a way that might suggest wish fulfillment, if Nancy’s world didn’t contain its own threats.

This is a puzzle picture in which competing realities overlap and supersede each other, fit company for, say, Donnie Darko or David Lynch’s Lost Highway, but infinitely cooler in tone. The setting may nominally be Naples, but Gelormini has gone very much against the grain in his depiction of a city whose reputation is for noise,(simplicity and overcrowding. This Naples is all harmonized colour and precise alignment. The tableaux of architecture are reminiscent of Paolo Sorrentino’s The Family Friend, set in the Mussolini-built city of Latina, a shabby offshoot of Rome, which may be more than coincidental given that Gelormini has served in the past as Sorrentino’s assistant director. The strongest flavour of Naples in the film is not visual but aural, in the form of the thick dialect spoken by Maria, an elderly neighbour in both realities. Her first speech compares youth to a ditch you fall into — you wait for someone to pull you out but nobody comes. This may be her sunniest moment in the film.

What ensures that Fortuna casts a spell is Gelormini’s absolute control of every aspect, formal and technical, from decor and performances to an 80s-styled soundtrack somehow wrong for the characters but right for the film. At a couple of moments he throws off a ripple of film language that keeps the whole project energized, stopping it from becoming fixed and glossy. On the roof of the apartment building, for instance, a young boy who prefers to play with girls has been bullied and pushed over. His knee is grazed. One of his playmates manages to get a circle round the injury with nail polish, saying firmly “The pain stays inside this circle” as she does so. The image of the circle being drawn round the knee is managed in two brief shots while the camera draws sharply back, and yes, circles are hardly an irrelevant image, but why this should be so magical in visual terms is hard to say.

On the same roof, a group of men embark on a trampoline. One of them says that of course there should be children. There’s a sound of running footsteps, and they look up, desconcerted, to where a boy in a green dress is sprinting towards them. He jumps over the camera in slow motion, and by the time he has landed on the trampoline the carnival is in full swing. This certainly shows that the editing scheme was in place in advance of the filming, but in other hands such evidence of forethought could seem overcontrolled rather than exhilarating. At the end of the film, after nearly ninety minutes of formalist tour de force, Fortuna insists on its origins in a squallid news item. It’s possible that on second viewing the film would reveal itself as having found a brilliantly oblique way of tackling difficult subject matter. On a first viewing, though, it’s as if Last Year in Marienbad had turned out, in its last minutes, into an indictment of corruption in casinos.

The only documentary in the Cinema Made in Italy season, Life as a B-Movie, is a slightly baffling tribute to the director Piero Vivarelli, unsure whether to treat him as a social pioneer, an artist or a terrible warning, by Fabrizio Laurenti and Niccolò Vivarelli (the latter may not be a disinterested party). It doesn’t take much digging to uncover the contradictions. Vivarelli was able to call on Mussolini’s son Romano for help with film funding, on the basis of their shared experiences in the war, but was also the only Italian member of the Cuban Communist Party, friendly with Castro and fitted on the island wherever he went.

Vivarelli started off in the music business, understanding that film audiences of the 1950s needed both a crooner and a pelvis thruster (preferably not the same person) to satisfy their appetites. He never left it. In the 1970s he was able to persuade Led Zeppelin’s manager that an Italian tour would be a good idea by bringing £20,000 to London in a briefcase, though the executive who filled the briefcase had never heard of the band. Vivarelli made films in just about every genre, even politically committed drama with East Zone, West Zone (1962), made in Berlin just as the Wall was going up and having some documentary value as a result, though it ended up banned in both East and West Germany. More characteristic were cheerfully tr sly entertainments like the secret agent caper Mister X (1967)
and the rejuvenation-formula fantasy Satanik (1968). Vivarelli used the name Donald Murray on Mister X, to match the dusty London location footage with which the film starts.

Vivarelli’s strongest claim to fame may be his contribution to the script of the 1966 spaghetti Western Django. He had signed a contract to do a rewrite before he learned that the “re” in “rewrite” was silent. All that existed – though it was enough to make a producer commit funding – was the opening image of a man carrying a saddle and dragging a coffin on a rope behind him.

Contributors interviewed for Life as a B-Movie make some startling claims, such as that Antonioni’s films would not have been possible without Vivarelli’s, which turns out only to mean that without the profits of disreputable films producers could never have taken a chance on artistically adventurous projects. There’s also the suggestion that Vivarelli was in some profound way the product of his home town, Siena. This seems entirely wrong, since his career movement was first to Rome and then to any sunny location abroad. If he had a part in creating any genre then it was the “erotic-exotic”. Many directors make films by the seat of their pants, Vivarelli made them by the front of his (the Italian term for this is “spinta libidica”). It was a rare female lead who didn’t end up in his bed, though even in his prime his attractiveness was modest. He expected his wife to accept the steady stream of “fiancés” passing through, though perhaps the late Marquess of Bath’s term “wifelots” is a better word, however creepy, since divorce was not legal in Italy.

One woman who bore him a son had no alternative but to let him bring up the boy, since otherwise she risked losing custody of her daughter. Vivarelli was disappointed that the boy, Oliviero, wasn’t as dark-skinned as he had hoped, a slightly unusual version of racism but no less toxic to the person disapproved of. Oliviero only learned at the age of twenty-seven, from a family friend, that his mother wasn’t the woman who had brought him up. More love seems to have flowed towards another son, Alessandro, whose early death from drugs Vivarelli felt some guilt for. How is a son to learn boundaries from a father who doesn’t know what they are?

The best comment on the director in the film comes from Pupi Avati, who worked for nothing on Vivarelli’s sets during holidays from his job as a frozen-fish salesman in Bologna (it’s wonderful to hear the trade name “Findus” in Italian dialogue). Avati, who later made successful horror thrillers strongly rooted in his native Emilia-Romagna, reports that he wasn’t often allowed to get close to filming, but when he did, he realized that directing was one of the easiest things in the world.

Adam Mars-Jones’s new novel Batlava Lake will be published in June.
Let’s keep things separate

Baffled disaffection in a mother-daughter relationship

DINAH BIRCH

MY PHANTOMS

GWENDOLINE RILEY


GWENDOLINE RILEY’S MORDANT FICTION has won many admirers, and they will not be disappointed by this new novel. Her distinctive first-person voice, uncompromising and clear, is once more telling a story of baffled disaffection. Here again are the everyday settings - the cafes, flats, streets and shops where people fail to understand themselves, or to communicate with others. The pleasures of inventive plot are not in evidence. Instead, the exercise of exact observation, and an extraordinarily accurate ear for the rhythms of dialogue, seize the reader’s attention. Riley misses nothing, and her icy evocations of dysfunction and distress are unforgettable.

These strengths will be familiar to Riley’s fans, but this novel is not simply a re-enactment of her previous books. The hard-drinking and unsettled young women of her early work have evolved into the grown-up Bridget, who has a stable relationship with a sensible partner, and lives in a pleasant flat with their rescue cat. Her partner is called John; their cat is Puss. Nothing to see here. The prevailing focus is not on Bridget’s connection with Hen, her disappointed mother, and on the deeply embedded reasons for their difficult history.

Riley’s readers have met versions of Hen before - notably in First Love (TLS, February 3, 2017), her intense portrait of a poisoned marriage. Neve, the writer at the centre of that earlier story, also has a problematic mother, ageing and unloved. This woman’s tiresomely ineffectual attempts to make a new life for herself after the failure of her second marriage are a continuation of the stubborn refusal to confront reality that corroded Neve’s girlhood.

“Time doesn’t help. You forget, for years, even, but it’s still there. A zone of feeling. A cold shade.” Neve’s helplessness in the face of her mother’s struggles both exacerbates and explains her failure to confront her husband’s spite. Peripheral in First Love, this paralysis has become the central theme of Bridget’s narrative in My Phantoms.

Bridget had been holding Hen at arm’s length, content to limit their unsatisfactory communications to occasional texts and emails, and a grim birthday dinner every year. Hen distorts herself from solitude with a frantic and futile social calendar - an unending round of exhibitions, meetings of the Victorian Society, or gatherings of the Wine Circle. This is of limited help. Her energy falters as she grows older, and her health begins to fail. An injury leaves her housebound: “I do feel I’m going a bit mad,” she said. “But I feel that anything, anyway, even when I’m out every night”.

An annual encounter is no longer enough. Hen wants to meet John, and to draw closer to Bridget’s life. For Bridget, this is an impossible challenge. Having resisted her mother’s “horrible persistence” all her life, she cannot build a new framework for affection. She reluctantly offers a measure of practical support as Hen slides into infirmity, but the old barriers are not to be dismantled.

Riley published an award-winning debut novel, Cold Water (2002), when she was just twenty-three. Now she is no longer a wunderkind, and this book is grounded in the sadness of longer experience. The tone of Bridget’s account has also shifted from the quasi-comic exaggeration that coloured Neve’s encounters with her mother in First Love. Hen’s defenceless vulnerability emerges more clearly, and Bridget’s edged memories of her valiantly useless gestures of defiance are punctuated with moments of profound pathos. Bridget recalls the builders who retiled her mother’s bathroom taking cynical advantage of Hen’s need to be liked. They have cracked the cistern:

“No, Hen, as far as I’m concerned, that was broken before we started this job.”

“Oh, OK,” she said. I heard her say it. I was standing by my bedroom door. She spoke happily. As if she’d been enchanted.

Throughout the dissection of a mother-daughter relationship in First Love, as in each of Riley’s previous six books, the reader’s sympathy is unequivocally with the narrator. This is still largely true in My Phantoms, as Bridget contends with Hen’s frustrating obduracy. But Bridget is often cold and more than a little judgemental; and something of a dissatisfied new mother. Her writing - begins to appear between her perspective and that of the reader. Hen is eager to visit Bridget’s newly purchased flat, and to meet John. Bridget resolutely refuses. She wants to “keep things separate”, and when the visit finally occurs, it is predictably awkward. But it hardly seems reasonable that the lonely Hen should so firmly be denied her small solace. This thought eventually occurs to Bridget: “The stupid thing was, now I came to it, I realized I didn’t much care any more if they met. What did it matter?”

Intermittently, Bridget comes to see that her dealings with her mother have not always been generous. Her insistence on building compartments in her life, keeping things separate, has been both necessary and obstructive. Readers are still on her side, for she tells her story with such lucidity that it is hard not to delight in her piercing gaze. But we are also conscious of an element of self-justification hidden in the twists and turns of Bridget’s story. She is partly responsible for the failures described in the novel. Her mother is infuriating, but she is also brave and loyal. No one is wholly to be blamed; no one is without fault. Finally, what remains is an overwhelming sense of empathy for the phantoms that haunt Bridget’s life, a gathering of pitiful ghosts that can never be exorcized.

What have we done?

A tender, unflinching account of the travails of fatherhood

DAVID ANNAND

A LIE SOMEONE TOLD YOU ABOUT YOURSELF

PETER HO DAVIES


IN THE ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS of this wry and tender work of autofiction Peter Ho Davies uses a line from Lorrie Moore as a sort of disclaimer: “This story has a relationship to real life like that of a coin to a heart”. And so we’ll never exactly know how much of Ho Davies himself there is in his unnamed narrator - who is, like the author, a teacher of creative writing based in the US - but, with its finely observed details and candid emotional clarity, A Lie Someone Told You About Yourself certainly reads like a book written by someone with first-hand experience of the events described.

The narrative starts with a terrible decision that needs to be made. The narrator’s wife is pregnant and the scan results come back suggesting that all is not right with their unborn child: there may be, though it is not certain, foetal abnormalities. They opt for an abortion and try again, this time successfully. Nine months later they drive home with the baby at twenty minutes per hour, “the solemn speed of a funeral cortège”. “What have we done?”, whispers the new mother.

Ho Davies is very funny about the travails of early parenthood: the unsupportive grandparents, the parasitic “baby-industrial complex” and its $500 jogging buggies, the sea of plastic that invades the house - and, more than anything else, the treadmills. The father reminds the mother that boredom is good for writers, that it stimulates the imagination. “Bored is daysdream”, the mother replies. “Bored adults just masturbate.”

Beneath the mordant humour lurks the father’s hugely conflicted feelings about the abortion: great sadness and shame, and also a kind of defiance. He tries to find some resolution in volunteering at an abortion clinic. But really the only absolution can come from being a good father to his living child, and this too is complicated by an anxiety about whether or not the boy is on the autistic spectrum.

As the narrator tells his students, one of the gifts of the story is the cover it provides. “A story can be 1% true and 99% made up, or 99% true and 1% made up, and the reader won’t know the difference, the writer doesn’t have to declare. It means he can tell the truth and take the fifth simultaneously.” Peter Ho Davies has taken full advantage of this to write a funny, tender and unflinchingly honest account of fatherhood, of the ways it can wound you and confound you, but also of its potential for transcendent, transformative joy.
Spring is over
A novel of lost letters to the disrupted and displaced

HOUMAN BAREKAT

VOICES OF THE LOST
HODA BARAKAT
Translated by Marilyn Booth

This year marks the tenth anniversary of the Arab Spring uprisings, making the English translation of Voices of the Lost, by the Lebanese author Hoda Barakat, aptly timed. The novel, which won the 2019 International Prize for Arabic Fiction, comprises a series of letters by Arab migrants and exiles whose lives have been disrupted by political upheaval. Offloading their woes on to parents, siblings and estranged lovers, they recount tales of violence, personal turmoil and economic hardship. Each letter is binned or mislaid, and chance upon by a later narrator; none of them reaches its intended recipient – a very literal metaphor for the disconnection wrought by displacement.

In one letter, a man tells his mother about how he became a suicide bomber. After being brutalized and sexually abused by police thugs, he turned police informant in order to be spared further harm; he then became a torturer himself. Cruelty, he explains, is addictive: “Feeling pumped up by your own strength and audacity and the absolute power you have over people isn’t just a nice little luxury you can take or leave... It grows into something you have to have, without even being aware of it”. He asks his mother to forgive him, insisting he had no real choice. Elsewhere, a gay man reproaches his father for his homophobic megalomania, a sex worker is raped by a punter, and a drug addict apologizes unconvincingly to his ex-girlfriend for his jealous rages. He explains he became a peddler because “the labour market we knew had dried up... Little by little, the only choices were cocaine or the Islamists... I was more comfortable with the first option”.

The prevailing register is one of earnest solloquy, as Barakat’s weary and broken narrators lament the vicissitudes of fate. Plainly rhetorical questions abound. One character, helpfully explaining the gist of the novel, asks: “How well can we ever know people who have lived through civil wars?” Another wonders: “is it life itself that does, or poverty?” The novel’s closing words are: “Who knows?” All this solemn soul-searching leaves little room for wit or mirth, though there are a few moments of dark glee when one character, a woman in her fifties at the end of her tether, tells an old lover that she nearly bought a new mattress, but was put off by the length of the warranty.

I was not interested in spending a huge sum of money on a bed that would still be in excellent condition long after my death... I would be like having someone crudely you, telling you as he did so that this cross was made of the highest quality wood or that he was using only the most dependably rust-free nails.

At times the second-person voice feels overly self-aware, as though the author is anxious to account for the novel’s emphasis on interiority: one narrator remarks: “Here I am again, spouting nonsense”. “If I go on talking to myself like this, I really will begin to look mad”, writes another. Marilyn Booth’s translation reads smoothly, but some stylistic tics just don’t travel well, a line such as “Life unleashes its storms on us and we are no more than feathers whirling in hurricane winds” sounds corny in English but is perfectly fine in literary Arabic, where such flourishes are part of the fabric.

A tendency towards lurid overkill undermines the novel’s credibility: the male characters read like stock types - a rogue’s gallery of philanderers, wife-beaters, bullies and rapists – and some of the plotlines would not look out of place in a made-for-TV thriller. (“My sister robbed me... she forged some papers and sold the house... And she stole from the woman she was working for, after killing her.”) Barakat made her name as a writer in 1980s Beirut, so she knows a thing or two about civil strife and its aftermath; but she has lived in Paris since 1989, and it would appear that the intervening decades have put a distance between her and her subject matter. Perhaps, after a certain amount of time has elapsed, one ceases to be an exile and becomes, simply, a foreigner.

To write or not to write?
Hamletian procrastination in a magic realist deathbed drama

JUDE COOK

ZABOR, OR THE PSALMS
KAMEL DAOU

Translated by Emma Ramadan

The first novel by the Algerian journalist and author of The Manhunt Investigation (2018; Mœursnull, contre-enquête, 2013), this was a transfixing bar-room monologue addressed to an invisible interlocutor, delivered by the brother of the unnamed Arab killed in Albert Camus’s The Stranger: a narrative device that itself alluded to Camus’s The Fall. A damning indictment of post-colonial Algeria, Daoud’s debut was always going to be a hard act to follow. In his second novel, Zabor, or the Psalms (Zabor ou Les Psalms, 2017), the reader is pinned down again by another beguiling, imparting voice. Thankfully, the effect is no less exhilarating, though this time the characterization is rich with pathos, the lyrical prose as expansive as a Mediterranean sunset.

The book’s narrator, Zabor (literally “the Holy Book of David”, or the Psalms in Arabic), is a pariah in the Algerian village of Aboukir. At nearly thirty, he is single, still a virgin and uncircumcised, and, most egregiously for his largely literate neighbours, a writer. What is more, he discovers early on that his writing has special powers - the ability to extend the lives of his fellow villagers: “If I forgot someone, they would die the next day... People have tried prayer, medicine, magic... Writing is the only effective cure... against death”. The author of a dozen imaginary novels before his fourteenth birthday, he calculates that he now owns 5,436 notebooks - so many that he is in the habit of going out at night to bury stacks of them.

The magic realist conceit of writing’s restorative powers is something Daoud explores to the full in passages of luminous vitality, strikingly rendered into English by Emma Ramadan: When I wanted to, I held the entire village like a translucent marble, backlit between my index finger and my thumb. Pen in hand, I could make miracles and heal illness with the titles of books I had never written.

Zabor’s gift becomes a curse when he uses it to save his cruel and estranged father via his writing, forcing him into a Hamletian procrastination; a deathbed drama unfolds over the entire length of the novel while Zabor’s life story is relayed in flashbacks and italicized notebook entries. His bedridden father, once a rich and respected butcher, “had become a fistful of flesh in the rumpled hand of the sheet. The storks of death were there”. Yet when Zabor sets with him, “he feels less pity than “a desire for vengeance or murder”.

The text that informs all of Zabor’s writing is the Qur’an. It is an influence that he first acknowledges as blasphemous when his aunt, Hadjira, who brings him up after his father’s abandonment of the family and his mother’s death in childbirth, takes him to a madrasa as a boy. The talks who teach him sense his impiety, yet his gift convinces some that he “must have been sent by God to honour the Book, to be its guardian till the Last Judgement”. Eventually, Zabor becomes sick, “hollowed out by an endless poly-seny”. He simultaneously wants his father to die and “to survive, to bear witness to my strength, my gift, for him to recognise me”.

A novel of ideas, as well as a searching exploration of a tortured, and tortured, father-son relationship, Zabor is most notable for its case of language, its unimpeded poetic voice, which sings of a young man’s journey to become himself. Its persuasiveness only wobbles when our hero becomes obsessed with Robinson Crusoe: specifically, the “third character” on the island, the potto Pol, whom Crusoe teaches to write. Zabor becomes his “disciple... The bird soon embodied my terrible fate and that of the entire village”. This seems somewhat tenuous, even if in keeping with the exuberant, fabular tone of the novel.

As with Daoud’s debut, this performative voice intimates its own unreliability while asking us to trust it implicitly. In The Manhunt Investigation, the digged silence of the narrator’s interlocutor set up an intolerable but pleasurable tension, reminiscent of Mohsin Hamid’s The Reluctant Fundamentalist (itself also inspired by The Fall). Meursnull’s narrator wanted to “take the stones from the old houses the colonists left behind... and build my own house, my own language”. In Zabor, or the Psalms, Kamel Daoud completes this work of linguistic reconstruction.

Quarr Abbey Book Bindery
Quarr Abbey book bindery is a traditional craft bindery, where as far as possible, everything is done by hand according to traditional methods, and every attempt is made to find the most appropriate and highest quality materials for each commission. Originally in main purpose was to look after the extensive library at Quarr Abbey but now takes commissions to undertake

Repairs Restoration
Journal binding
Custom built books
Contact for further information Tel 01983 882420 ext. 211 Or email bindery@quarr.org
Godfather of populism
The rabid reign of Horatio Bottomley

NEIL BERRY

U n November 14, 1919, a year after the Armistice that ended the First World War, D. H. Lawrence took a train from London to the English south coast, boarded a ship for France and bade his native land a bilious goodbye. With his wife Frieda, who had gone on ahead of him, he was to embark on a life of wandering, and become the sort of peripatetic human excoriator by Britain’s former prime minister, Theresa May, as a “citizen of nowhere”. It is true that he never ceased to feel English to the core - in an age when “England” served as a byword for “Britain” in its multinational totality, he cried that he was “English, English, English in the teeth of England, English in the teeth of all the world”. Yet current manifestations of ethno-nationalism would surely have nauseated him. Although far from denying Germany culpability for the First World War, he believed it sprang no less from the spiritual degeneracy of his own people. Sailing away on a winter’s day, he pictured England as an “ash-grey” country sinking slowly into the sea. And he had evolved a particular, implacable loathing for a certain xenophobic super-patriot who had gained great personal popularity by demonizing the Germans: Horatio Bottomley.

Barely remembered now, Bottomley (1860-1933) was the archetypal British demagogue, the godfather of today’s anglophobic populists. Only one person looked larger in British public life during the war: David Lloyd George, the Welsh Liberal politician who, in 1916, became prime minister of Britain’s wartime national government. To Lawrence, Bottomley and Lloyd George were “thievish mountebanks’. While both projected themselves as humbly born tribunes of the people, Lawrence believed that their elevation spelled the debasement of democracy: “Bottomley’s enemy, the campaign of the ‘finer in spirit’ by the ‘mean and paltry in spirit’.

A businessman who became Liberal MP for Hackney South, Bottomley was chiefly known as the editor of John Bull, the chauvinistic weekly that aimed at working men who liked beer and sport and sweepstake tickets. Born in east London but brought up in a Birmingham orphanage, he styled himself as the “MP for the man in the street”. While he did demonstrably assist the hard-pressed, the only cause he consistently championed was his own.

When it came to fusing self-advertisement with the pursuit of profit, he has had few rivals, Journalism and politics aside, he was known as an owner of racehorses, as a trader in publishing companies and gold mines, and as a self-educated lawyer who repeatedly conducted his own defence in potentially ruinous law suits. A born orator, Bottomley won liberal actions galore against people who claimed he had swindled them. Prior to 1914, the public knew him as a shady middle-aged showman with a penchant for champagne and glamorous women. But the war changed everything. After initially misjudging the bellicose public mood, he stepped forward as the embodiment of the British bulldog spirit. On platforms all over Britain, as well as in his paper, he celebrated the war as the “Dawn of Britain’s greatest glory”. It was a holy crusade, a chance to demonstrate that “we, the British empire, are the chosen ones”. Fired by emotions for which Bottomley charged a sizeable fee, great numbers of young men went to fight on the Western Front; sales of John Bull soared.

The cover of Bottomley’s paper bore an image of the roving, ruddy-faced Englishman of folklore who aroused mirth with his blunt common sense and surly patriotism. As a real-life John Bull, Bottomley was suitably stout, but his own patriotism was no laughing matter. In concert with Lord Northcliffe, the owner of The Times and the Daily Mail, he vilified Germans as “Germsnus”, directing particular venom at Germans living in Britain. When Lloyd George supplanted the Liberal prime minister, Herbert Asquith, no one endorsed more keenly the new leader’s pledge to deliver Germany a “knock-out blow”. Bottomley also backed him when Lloyd George rebuffed the “peace without victory” mooted by President Woodrow Wilson. Perhaps above all through the column he wrote for the hugely popular Sunday Pictorial, Bottomley made himself a power in the land, notwithstanding that he had been disqualified as an MP by an episode of bankruptcy. Such was his talismanic significance that Lloyd George had turned to him to rekindle the patriotism of mutinous shipbuilders. With a sense of himself as prime minister-in-waiting, Bottomley rallied against out-of-touch politicians. What he wanted to see was a “business government” committed to “decision and promptitude”. But vengeance came first. Days before the Armistice, at a mass gathering in London’s Royal Albert Hall, he echoed the common cries, “Hang the Kaiser” and “Make Germany Pay”, and served notice on Lloyd George that a “weak peace” was anathema to the British people.

The most chivalrous British leader could hardly have ignored the vindictive public mood. But Lloyd George was no such leader. With retention of power paramount priority, he matched Bottomley and Northcliffe in the virulence of his Germanophobia. In December 1918, he called an election and fought a campaign that mingled promises of “homes fit for heroes” with vows to “search German pockets for the last farthing”. The election is remembered as the “coupon election” because Lloyd George signed letters of endorsement for candidates standing specifically for the continuation of a national government led by him, the “man who won the war”. The consequences for the Liberal Party, still led by Asquith, were dire. Despised as unpatriotic fascists, their candidates were decimated. A notable feature of the election was that it enfranchised women over thirty and all men over twenty-one, but many yet to be demobilized servicemen were not registered to vote - a circumstance highly convenient to Lloyd George. Like the rest of the political establishment, he feared that soldiers and sailors might vote for Ramsay MacDonald’s rising Labour Party. What exacerbated this fear was the Labour Party’s rapport with revolutionary Russia, the suspicion that MacDonald was a crypto-Bolshevik. Lloyd George’s then Liberal colleague, Winston Churchill, warned of the “fool baboonery of Bolshevism”, while Bottomley implicated the Labour leader in an international conspiracy of Bolshevik Jews, calling him “MacDonaldstein”.

On a low turnout, Lloyd George won a landslide victory and found himself presiding over a Conservative-dominated government and a parliament packed with Conservative businessmen. In the withering words of the Tories’ future leader, the gentlemanly Stanley Baldwin, they were “hard-faced men who trudged as though they had done very well out of the war”. Prominent among the non-Conservatives was Bottomley, re-elected to his old London seat as an Independent (having been discharged from his bankruptcy). As the editor of John Bull, sólen with champagne as he insisted that Germany be stripped bare and void contempt for Woodrow Wilson’s proposed League of Nations, which he denounced as the parliament its trunculent British tone. A wit dubbed it “Bottomley’s Pit”.

With its cynicism and inordinate volatility, the era when Horatio Bottomley flourished can seem like a distant world. Yet the long episode of the Great War and its aftermath is more immediate than we care to admit. Europe from fascism and went on to establish a welfare state and national health service has shaped modern British identity. But no such satisfying national narrative has flowed from the upshot of the earlier war. In truth, the rejoicing inspired by the Armistice proved ephemeral - and so did the gratification afforded by the punitive Treaty of Versailles that Lord George signed in June 1919. For all that other parts of Europe faced greater adversity, the condition of Britain was parlous. The economy was broken, there was universal grief, rampant industrial unrest, a multitude of disoriented ex-servicemen, many wounded in mind and body. There was also the Spanish flu, the epidemic that, in Britain as in countries everywhere, ultimately extinguished far more lives than the war did. It was against this background of woe that Bottomley reached his apogee as a manipulator of mass emotion, promoting himself as the “prophet of the common man”. When, in 1919, he launched his Victory Bond Club, many handed him their money. Turning a blind eye to his record of chicanery, they believed that Bottomley was helping them to profit themselves and their country. Lawrence wondered how anyone who witnessed Bottomley’s rabid reign could ever again think that in a time of crisis a people can govern itself. Among writers and intellectuals his revulsion against the “bloated ignobility of John Bull” was widely shared. A decade later Lloyd George fled the country that he “loved so bitterly”, John Maynard Keynes published The Economic Consequences of the Peace, a denunciation of the Treaty of Versailles that was also an eloquent defence of statesmen who had capitulated to mob passions. Keynes argued that together with the uncompromising French prime minister, Georges Clemenceau, Lloyd George had “embraced Woodrow Wilson’s policy of revenge” with the potential to precipitate universal ruin. Yet with its vituperation of peacemakers motivated by “senseless greed”, the book enjoyed great favour in Germany, prompting the likes of Bottomley to add his voice to the chorus of pain.

As a real-life John Bull, Bottomley was suitably stout, but his patriotism was no laughing matter

The careers of Northcliffe and Lloyd George also came to a sudden end in 1922. The megalomaniacal, often less baron died in August of that year. Two months later, mired in scandal over his brazen sale of honours, Lloyd George experienced a living death when he was forced from office, never to regain it. It is strange perhaps that more has not been made of the affinity that Lawrence discerned between Lloyd George and Bottomley. Similarly libidinous (the Welsh Wizard's other nickname was “the Goat”), both were insatiable outsiders who, with no initial advantages, rose to the top in a class-ridden society. Equally were they alike as patriots who trumpeted their loyalty to the British empire while comporting themselves as enemies of privilege. It is true that Lloyd George far surpassed Bottomley as a fighter for social justice; before 1914, he introduced national insurance and old age pensions, and during the 1920s he strove to repair his reputation as a genuine progressive. Yet liberal opinion never forgave him for the damage he did to the liberal cause. Here was a self-vaulting “man of the people” who had courted plutocrats and acquired a vast personal fund from dark sources. Here was a sometime pacifist who had enforced conscription, become a swaggering imperial warlord and deployed the brutal ex-soldiers, the veterans, to discriminate against the nationalists. It could be said that Lloyd George and Bottomley were in many ways fit objects of Lawrence's disdain.

"FMY thoughts", intoned Bottomley as he received judgment, "are not for myself but for England." Yet while his bombast endured, he came out of jail a physically diminished old man and following an abortive attempt to succeed as a political leader, his critical hall turn died in poverty in 1933. It was ten years after the Second World War that Julian Symons published what remains the best account of his life. Symons wrote his book in 1951, thanks to the post-1945 Labour Government, had undergone an epoch-making transformation. In this new Britain, the state was offering unprecedented provision for the needy, the ill and the old, and Winston Churchill, despite being voted out of office in 1945, had succeeded to the title of “man who won the war.” Though not forgotten, Bottom- ley, in common with the whole of the Labour war, had been summarily forgotten. Shortly before VE Day - was associated now with the ill-justified triumphalism of 1918. Yet no small part of the explanation for Churchill’s rejection was that he too was associated with the sequel to the earlier conflict, a time when, having suffered much, British people were rewarded with empty promises and further hardship: it was Churchill, after all, who in 1923 had made the rich poorer and the poor poorer by restoring the British economy to the gold standard. The latter-day British fixation with remem- bering the Second World War has not extended to recalling what many who lived through it remembered. Britons in 1945 may have been exulting in the defeat of Hitler, but they were also saying “never again” to the whole era that stretched back to the Armistice. If the Great Depression of the 1930s was an unhappy collective memory, so was the aftermath of the First World War, when a riven and traumatized country fell prey to self-serving rattle-rousers.

Julian Symons's biography was reviewed by J. B. Priestley, who had observed Bottomley's rise and fall and felt sorry for him to D. H. Lawrence did. Priestley cited a pair of leading historians who appeared confident that British political culture was too mature and pragmatic to permit a recrudescence of the Bottomley phenomenon. Priestley was not so sure. At the dawn of the great insidious new manifestations of demagoguery and wondered if the next Bottomley might curry popularity through participation in a television parlour game. What he did most seem to have noticed was that ordinary people had enthroned a professional liar, who they'd watched their rulers do exactly the same. Bottomley's career cast a "cheeless light" on British democracy.

Niall Ferguson is the Milbank Family Senior Fellow at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University, and a senior faculty fellow of the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs at Harvard University. His new book, Doom: The politics of catastrophe, is published next month.
1916. Yes, Zelikow argues, it really was. But the man who failed to pick it up was Woodrow Wilson. There was a real opportunity for peace in 1916 Zelikow convincingly establishes. In December 1915, David Lloyd George - then Minister for Munitions - told the editor of the Manchester Guardian that “it was nonsense to talk about ‘crushing’ Germany; it was neither possible, nor desirable. The best thing that could happen would be when the two sides were seen to be evenly matched America should step in and impose terms on both”. Reginald McKenna, who had succeeded Lloyd George as Chancellor of the Exchequer, regarded Britain’s financial position with mounting anxiety. As early as the summer of 1915, he warned his colleagues on the Cabinet’s War Committee: “Britain could ... risk bankruptcy by trying to do too much”. Lord Kitchener, the illustrious Minister for War, agreed. If the offensives of 1916 produced no “final decision”, he told his War Committee colleagues on January 13, 1916, Britain would face “the exhaustion of her resources”. In May 1916, even before the disastrous failure of the Somme, McKenna prophesied that Britain was “likely ... to face the last quarter of the calendar year without any resources in sight”.

All the combatant states were by this time feeling the weight of waging a two-front war, as the nation was in history. In August 1916, the French president, Raymond Poincaré, confided in King George V that France wished to “bring the war to a conclusion as soon as possible”, without the mediation of France from being remote from the fray, many of the key decision-makers had relatives in the trenches, as Zelikow reminds us. The Marquess of Lansdowne, minister without portfolio in Asquith’s cabinet, had lost one of his sons at Ypres in 1914. The eldest son of the prime minister, Herbert Asquith, was killed on September 15, 1916. The secretary of the War Committee, Maurice Hankey, lost his brother at around the same time.

Moreover, the outlines of a compromise peace were not difficult to discern. True, there were radical nationalists and gun-ho militarists in all countries who had compiled irreconcilable wish-lists of territorial gains. But in the spring of 1916 those people were not in power. On the British side, the sine qua non of peace for the Liberal-led coalition was the restoration of Belgian neutrality. Germany’s violation of the 1839 treaty had been their official casus belli, after all. But the German Chancellor, Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg, was quite prepared to agree to that ahead of any peace conference. He was even open to returning part of Alsace-Lorraine back to France in return for cessions in the mineral-rich Saar-Lor-Lux area. He had rather grandiose ambitions in Russia’s Baltic provinces. (So it was quite true, as Ambassador Bernstein claimed, that such a peace would “leave the map of Europe pretty much as it was before the war”. Speaking in the Reichstag, Bethmann not only publicly disclaimed any intention to annex Belgium; he also committed Germany to joining any postwar League of Nations that Wilson might propose.

There were precedents. Another American president, Theodore Roosevelt, had successfully brokered peace between Russia and Japan in Portsmouth, Maine, in the summer of 1905. The Germans frequently cited the Peace of Hubertusburg in 1763 as an example of strategic compromise: with Prussia near the end of its resources, Frederick the Great had made a peace with Austria in which both sides renounced their wartime conquests. As Wilson himself noted, “If once they stop fighting and begin to parley, they will never begin fighting again”. That was probably right, though it had not been true in the last comparably global conflict between revolutionary France and its foes.

As Lansdowne put it, “The responsibility of those who needlessly prolong such a war is not less than that of those who needlessly provoked it”. But who should bear that responsibility? Zelikow mainly blames Wilson. “In the failure to make peace at the most opportune moment”, he writes, “no one failed, and failed the world, more than President Wilson. His was the most consequential diplomatic failure in the history of the United States.” But this was not a failure of the idealism with which Wilson is often associated. Rather, Zelikow argues, he failed in terms of his own proclaimed pragmatism - “because he simply did not know how to do it... he did not know what he did not know”.

We can understand Wilson’s desire to get the 1916 election behind him before launching his peace initiative; it was scarcely a vote-winning issue. Less easy to fathom is why Wilson felt financially compelled to appeal to the combatants. As Zelikow puts it, “Wilson did not quite know how to get diplomatic negotiations for a peace conference underway”. He does not even seem clearly to have understood the difference between an armistice and a peace treaty, nor the crucial need for preliminary negotiations to set up the peace conference in between the two. When the time came to make his big pitch for peace, on December 18, Wilson omitted to call explicitly for a peace conference. “It was as if a big gun had slowly been wheeled into position, watched with great anticipa- tion”, writes Zelikow. “The layward was pulled. There was a great exhalation... of air. It was a misfire.”

Yet perhaps Wilson’s biggest blunder was to entrust the execution of his peacemaking strategy to Edward House, his closest confidant. The son of a Texas businessman, House was one of those wealthy Americans who like to divide their time between New York and Old England. “Colonel House” was no soldier; the governor of Texas had given him the honorary rank of lieutenants colonel in 1893. Nor was he in Wilson’s intellectual league. Zelikow has fun with House’s anonymous 1912 novel, Philip Dru: Administrator, a story of tomorrow, 1920-1935, which inspired Walter Lippmann’s 1928 further, 1928. “The imagination is that of a romantic boy of 14 who dreams of what he would do if he had supreme power and nobody objected”. And yet Wilson found House indispensable, as a sounding board (he knew how to listen), a counsellor and an emissary.

The problem was that House’s strategic objective was fundamentally at odds with his boss’s. Wilson fancied himself the peacemaker. The anglophile President Woodrow Wilson addressing a joint session of the US Congress on April 2, 1917, to call for a declaration of war against Germany

House, like Wilson’s Secretary of State Robert Lansing, saw the peace initiative as the necessary prelude to American entry into the war on the Entente side. “If my plan was adopted”, House explained to Sir Edward Grey, the British foreign secretary, in February 1916, “I believed it would inevitably lead to an alliance between the United States and Great Britain, France, and Italy, the democracies of the world.” Note “any plan”.

Worse, when the moment of truth came after Wilson’s successful re-election campaign, House began to fantasize that, if Germany accepted American mediation but the Entente powers refused, Britain might go to war against America. During a White House dinner in December, House warned the secretary of the navy, Josephus Daniels, that Britain (and Japan) “could put us out of business just as rapidly as they could march through the country – we should be so helpless to resist them as Belgium and Serbia were to resist the Germans”. Incredibly, as Zelikow shows, House repeatedly misrepresented Wilson’s position in his communications to key players on both sides. Wilson knew House’s mind was “not of the first class”. And yet the president entrusted the most important diplomatic initiative of his career, and perhaps of American history, to this duplicitous Texan dilettante.

Another villain of this piece (and peace) was Lloyd George. But though the British thought the war was causing, the Welsh wizard nevertheless could not resist the political opportunity that Asquith’s exhaustion (exacerbated by his son’s death) presented. In letters, and in press conferences, Lloyd George broke ranks by giving an interview to the American journalist Roy Howard, head of the United Press news service, in which he declared: “Britain has only begun to fight”. To McKenna this seemed “sheer lunacy”. From a diplomatic point of view, it was. From a political point of view, it aligned Lloyd George with the more belligerent Conservatives and their Fleet Street cheerleaders, who thirsted to be rid of Asquith. That Lloyd George’s private views were the diametrical opposite of this public declarations makes his behaviour all the more shocking. “It is too late to do anything”, he told his mistress Frances Stevenson in November. “The Germans are cleverer than we ... and they deserve to win.” But Lloyd George plainly thought it worth risking national economic disaster to get himself to the top of the greasy pole (a calculation that other ambitious men have been known to make). By the time the Germans had declared their willingness to talk peace on December 15, and Wilson had issued his much-repeated statement on December 26, six days later, Lloyd George was prime minister and the key proponents of peace in London - Grey and Lansdowne - were out. The Welshman was now free to dismiss American offers of mediation as reflecting the influence of “pro-German Jews” who had decided to Wilson’s campaign, not to mention “German, pacifist and Irish influence”. Suddenly the radical firebrand who, just seven years before, had precipitated a constitut
Battle lines drawn
How a military historian's trilogy begins in familiar territory

GARY SHEFFIELD
THE WESTERN FRONT
A history of the First World War
NICK LLOYD
657pp. Viking. £25.

There was more to the First World War than the Western Front. During the centenary years of 2014-2018, military historians attempted to point out this out to the wider public, with patchy results. The trenches in France and Flanders continue to dominate the British public memory of 1914-18. This means that Nick Lloyd’s new book, the first of three on the war, is likely to find a receptive readership.

Lloyd sets out his stall early on. This book is an unabashed “narrative history”. He has deliberately avoided “abstract theorising or lengthy commentaries on differing interpretations”. Instead he has told a story, inviting readers to “form their own judgements”. This is a distinct change of direction for an author whose three previous books on Western Front battles - Loos (1915), Passchendaele (1917) and the Hundred Days (1918) - were analytical and thesis-driven. This time, Lloyd has written a very different sort of book, with clearly stated and understandable reasons for this, including the opportunity to connect with a non-specialist audience. Nonetheless, it does mean that The Western Front is a very different set of standards from his previous works. Take, for instance, Lloyd’s account of the Battle of Mons, the first major action fought by the British Expeditionary Force, on August 23, 1914. Lloyd covers this in a single page. This was a relatively small action among many others, some of which were arguably of greater significance; so at one level, this is an understandable choice. But it is also a surprising one. A fair chunk of the book’s potential audience is British, and for most anglophones, even outside the UK, Mons is probably the most famous battle of 1914. It has been much mythologized as a great British victory, especially by British writers. In recent years this has prompted a backlash. Terence Zuber’s book The Mons Myth (2010) contained the strongest critique of the BEF’s, it was too severe, in my view. Nothing of this debate is reflected in Lloyd’s book, a work which will be read by a large lay audience. As an educator, I cannot but help think this is a huge oversight.

The very act of selecting material is, of course, a form of interpretation. In Lloyd’s account of the British Army’s planning of the Battle of the Somme, he points the finger of blame at General Douglas Haig for the failure on July 1, 1916. This is an unassailable position to take, but, as I argued in my biography of Haig, while he undoubtedly deserves some of the blame, the reality was much more complex, and, frankly, more interesting. The commander of Fourth Army, General Sir Henry Rawlinson, bears a considerable share of the responsibility for the failure on July 1, 1916, especially for his refusal to allow the initial success in the southern sector. Nowhere does Lloyd acknowledge this debate. There is not even a “for an alternative view, see...” type of footnote. I would have liked to have seen him to bridge my argument and explain why he rejects it in favour of the mainstream view. By giving the impression that this view is uncontested, he tells only one side of the story.

Nick Lloyd is a talented historian, and there is much to admire in this book. It is solidly based on recent scholarship and primary sources. He gives a very clear description of the various phases of the Western Front fighting. These were complex operations, and so this is no small achievement. Moreover, Lloyd has a good eye for a quotation. He neatly captures the problems of inexperienced American units in the night fighting in 1918, by quoting a young Doughboy who viewed the carnage: “They’d pushed in with the same spirit as Pickett’s brigade at Gettysburg and with about the same results”. Lloyd deserves plaudits for avoiding an anglocentric view. The German Army gets good coverage, and, building on the work of scholars such as Elizabeth Greenhalgh and Robert Doughty, the French Army gets its due. All in all, Lloyd shows, bore the burden of the fighting on the Western Front between August 1914 and July 1916 and played an extremely significant role.

In many ways, The Western Front is an impressive achievement. It will, I am sure, become the standard narrative account, and deserves a wide readership. But I was left wishing that the author had been more ambitious.
Guilty of quiet Catholic devotion

John Heywood: singer, playwright, poet and political exile

LAURA HACKETT
Comedy and survival in Tudor England
GREG WALKER
496pp. Oxford University Press. £65.

On hearing the name John Heywood, Greg Walker admits, even literary scholars might be stumped. But Heywood’s obscurity in our time stands in direct contrast to his popularity in his own, when he was known throughout England as a merry entertainer, a playwright, poet and lyricist. Walker seeks to address this disparity, but he does more than that, using Heywood’s career, which spanned five monarchs and several religious upheavals, as a lens through which to view one of the most turbulent periods of English history.

Sometimes bad things happen to good writers.

If you are a professionally published writer in need of financial support, we could help.

Established by writers for writers, the Royal Literary Fund could offer you financial support during hard times. Writing may be a solitary process, but you are not alone. Visit www.rlf.org.uk today to find out if you are eligible.

Laura Hackett has an MSt in English 1550–1700 from the University of Oxford. She works in communications.

Walker argues that a simple song entitled ‘Be Merry, Friends’ works in the same way that ‘Always look on the bright side of life’ does in Monty Python’s Life of Brian.

Born around 1496 into a devout Catholic community, Heywood initially found employment as a singer in the court of Henry VIII, but soon left to pursue a career as a playwright. Heywood’s plays were often dramatized debates, but Walker argues that they weren’t just polished entertainment for the educated; they commented on the political events of the day. Gentleness and Nobility, for example, is on the surface a debate about the most noble profession, but the ploughman character voices a number of systemic problems in Tudor society, and a philosopher figure concludes that rulers should change laws which aren’t fit for purpose. Walker presents this play in the context of the fall of Cardinal Wolsey and the election of his replacement (Heywood’s wife’s uncle, Sir Thomas More), arguing that it was written in anticipation of the new parliament, which had the power to effect such change. It is never clear which character speaks Heywood’s views: is he the conservative knight, the successful merchant, the radical ploughman, the moderate philosopher, or a mixture of all four?

Despite his subtlety, Henry’s split with the Catholic Church made life difficult for Heywood as it did for many others, and, after producing seven plays in quick succession, he suddenly stopped and instead began writing songs for St Paul’s Cathedral. The lyrics seem unremarkable and strangely optimistic given the religious persecution this community was facing, but therein lies their power. Walker argues that a simple song entitled “Be Merry, Friends” works in the same way that “Always look on the bright side of life” does in Monty Python’s Life of Brian – it’s an ironically inadequate response to the horrors of Thomas More’s execution and a traditional community in crisis.

Carried away by describing the political and religious upheavals of the time, Walker seems occasionally to forget about Heywood, but man and history collide with force when he is accused of treason and sentenced to death: guilty, it seems, of continued quiet devotion. Unlike More, however, Heywood agreed on the way to the scaffold to recant and affirm the King’s supremacy. Pardoned, he became more popular than ever, publishing several editions of proverbs, and after the succession of the Catholic Mary Tudor he was welcomed at Court.

Now that he was relatively secure, Heywood’s work, consisting mainly of patriotic poems and ballads, became noticeably less interesting. As a consequence, so does Walker’s. He acknowledges this, considering potential tediousness a price worth paying for detailed analysis of political references in Heywood’s obscure allegorical poem “The Spider and the Fly”. I’m not sure I agree, but his final three chapters more than make up for the slog of those on Mary’s reign: Walker’s description of the end of Heywood’s life is surprisingly moving.

With the accession of the Protestant Elizabeth I, things went downhill very quickly for Heywood and his associates. But his loyalty to England was such that he did not follow his friends into exile for nearly six years, and when he did flee to the Low Countries (first to Mechelen, and then with the Jesuits in Antwerp), things only got worse. Heywood’s lands in England were forfeited, and his relatives at home died or were imprisoned. As he got older, he was taken in by the Jesuits, but religious persecution led to further travails on the Continent. Tragically, his son Ellis died before him; the heartbroken eighty-year-old followed him soon after.

When we consider Heywood as a political writer and not merely an entertainer, as Walker does, his sorry end prompts more sympathy. We are forced to question the value of his approach – moderation and accommodation did not save him in the end. With a nod to our own increasingly polarized political landscape, Walker confirms the relevance of this little-known playwright, convincingly revealing him to be an object of interest for historians and literary scholars alike. This important groundwork done, however, I wonder what scope there is for reading Heywood’s work as contemporary audiences did - not for primarily political reasons, but for fun.■
Making of a poet
The early years of John Milton

ROBERTA KLIMENT

POET OF REVOLUTION
The making of John Milton
NICHOLAS MCDOWELL


In his determined focus on the intellectual underpinnings, rather than the contingent circumstances, of Milton’s early works, Mc Dowell manages to shine new light even on some of the best-troddden territory. By adding hitherto unsuspected source material for Milton’s memorial poem “On Shakespeare”, for instance, he produces the best robust yet of the long-held critical suspicion that there must be some- thing subversive and possibly anti-Shakespearean in the poem’s lines: “Then thou [Shakespeare], our fancy of itself beweaving, / Dost make us marble with too much conceiving”, Mc Dowell finds a source for these lines in Spenser’s “Hymn of Heavenly Beauty”, which describes those lucky enough to see the face of the Sapience herself:
Whereof such wondrous pleasures they conceive, And sweet contentment, that it doth bereave Their soul of sense, through infinite delight, And them transport from flesh into the sprite. While this possible Spenserian intertext does not, to my mind, totally neutralize “On Shakespeare’s” rather fearsome vision of the reader being turned to stone, it certainly (at least by association) brings into play a more optimistic interpretation, in which Shakespeare’s imaginative powers are powerful enough to help his readers ascend the Chain of Being from flesh to sprite.

This may seem fanciful, but Mc Dowell’s book does an excellent job of mapping the persistence, through- out Milton’s early work and into his later composi- tions, of a genuine belief in “the capacity of human beings to make themselves more divine through the attainment of virtuous knowledge”. This is one explanation for Milton’s particular interest in the poetry and the intellectual history of the Italian humanists, where this preoccupation was an article of faith. Mc Dowell is as forensic on Milton’s Italianism as on the other aspects of his intellectual development. He shows in specific ways in which Giovanni Boccac- cio’s Life of Dante fed into Milton’s idea of the poet’s role in society. Though Dante himself was Catholic, his denunciations of papal corruption already made him controversial: appealing to Dante in particular must also have been Boccaccio’s description of Dante as ascetic in his habits, tireless in his private studies, heedless of any physical discomforts, until “some accessory whom della divina essenza quello che per un membro ignato e quia se ne può com- prendere” (he came to know as much of the essence of the divine ... as can here be understood by human intellect).

And if this was the theory, then Milton’s travels to Italy in 1638-39 were the practice. In an especially meticulous section of his book, Mc Dowell examines the influence of Boccaccio’s poetry on the growth of the scholarly academies of Florence, Venice, Rome and Naples. He takes more or less at face value the apparently enthusiastic reception of Milton by his hosts, several of whom wrote glowing encomia to their English visitor; and he is disinclined to ques- tion, though some have, the truth of Milton’s account of having met Galileo while in Florence. (In Areopagitica, 1644, his defence of press freedom, Milton wrote: “I found and visited the famous Galileo grown old, a prisoner to the Inquisition, for thinking in Astronomy otherwise than the Franciscan and Dominican licensers thought.”) Again, more impor- tant than whether this meeting really happened is its obvious symbolic significance for Milton, observing, as he saw it, a sometime nation of great thinkers now “by diverse corruptors, - a ruinous example, to be avoided by the English at all costs.” Mc Dowell’s book draws to a close with a reading of Milton’s prose polemics of the early 1640s, which have always struck scholars as curiously literary, as being ani- mated by a similar spirit of freedom of inquiry, and the transformative power of poetry, more than con- viction in this or that religious minutia. And in an epilogue looking ahead at the progress of that belief system towards its supposed apogee, we are given to understand that the second volume of this tour de force - a biography that is also a calm, evidentiary denunciation of the biographical fallacy, will be every bit as imaginative and informative as the first.

Milton in these early years, as Mc Dowell notes, wants us to identify him with the humanist ideal of the universal man’

Robert Kliment is a Leverhulme Early Career Fellow at King’s College London

© WALTER PETERS
APRIL 9, 2021

TL5 27
REACHING BEYOND THOUGHT

ROMAN STORIES FROM THE CITY OF GOD
Sketches and chronicles of Rome 1915-1966
PIER PAOLO PASOLINI
Edited by Walter Siti
Translated by Marina Harss

Though Pier Paolo Pasolini was born in Bologna (1922), Rome was the city where the writer-director in him was born. It provided him with material for the novel that made him famous, Ragazzi di vita (1955), and for his first, great Roman film, Accattone (1961). It was on his return to Rome, too, that in November 1975 Pasolini was found beaten to death and run over by his own Alfa Romeo. An assignation with a rent boy named Pino (“Joe the Toad”) Pelosi had gone murderously wrong. Pasolini was fifty-three.

Stories from the City of God gathers much of the Roman fiction and journalism that Pasolini wrote between 1950 and 1966. It was indelibly linked to the post-Second World War generation of Italian writers. As Belli chronicled the lives of tavern boys and petty thieves in Rome’s Trastevere district, so Pasolini chronicled the hard sharp edges and prostitutes of sub-proletarian Testaccio, Ostia and Porta Portese. With Caraggavacceverismo he conjured an urban underworld. In a magazine article from 1952, “Rome and Giuseppe Belli”, Pasolini considers the “Bellian types” who inhabit the outskirts of Rome, the suburbs. In 1995 as Storia della città di Dio, was dense with romanescan dialect words and expressions. Marina Harss, in her sensitive translation, is attuned to the Roman slang and rough grain of the original. Also included are ideas for documentary films, drafts for short stories, and a number of newspaper polemics. The screen adaptation of La ricotta, Pasolini’s thirty-five-minute episode in the collaborative film Riso Pag (1962), is a welcome addition. With its earthy romanescan dialogue, the film unfurls on the bleak periphery of Rome where an American director (played by Orson Welles) is shooting a lurid and fundamentally shallow film about the Passion.

Many of the Roman sketches are richly sensuous “the graveyard fragrance” of chrysanthemums, the “blindingly blue” sea at Terracina - but Pasolini’s Rome was not an aesthete’s fantasy. It was a real place recorded down to its tram numbers (“Half asleep, Molibardon boarded the #13 tram”), and Pasolini had a cartographer’s eye for the correct street name. Harris vividly renders the Roman outskirts with their ancient aqueducts, baroque gateways and junk yards sprouting papies. Today, Pasolini’s Rome - a characteristic pasticcio of the poetic and the squallid - has all but disappeared. Rome was transformed by the “economic miracle” of the late 1960s and early 70s, when the trappings of American-style consumerism flooded the lives of the Roman underclass. Stories from the City of God opens a window on to a strange lost world.

IAN THOMSON

ESSAYS IN THE LAND OF THE CYCLOPS

KARL OVE RNAUSGAARD
Translated by Martin Aitken

“Every time I see a woman”, Karl Ove Knausgaard said in an interview in 2014, “I think, How would it be to have sex with her...? We are, This is wrong... but it’s not like that. I am just describing life.” Whether or not you see this as a radical act of taboo-busting, it’s a typical example of Knausgaard’s approach “say it, you know. As it is”. Hence his magnum opus, the six-book, 4,000-page autobiographical section My Struggle (Min Kamp) in the original Norwegian, which mined his family life in such close detail that several family members on his father’s side attempted to stop its publication of the first novel in the series, branding it “full of insinuations, untruths, false personal characteristics and disclosures”.

There is very little in this new book of Knausgaard’s essays, In the Land of the Cyclops, likely to arouse such a height of feeling. Knausgaard is clearly an obsessive thinker, and he touches on everything from bodily horror in the artworks of Cindy Sherman to nihilism in Knut Hamann’s oeuvre and the ontology of the human neck. One of the more successful essays is “Fate”, which combines a lucid commentary on the notion of fate in Icelandic sagas with a compelling narrative frame about an ominous dream he once had. It describes that fate as itself in the world of dreams, which are “an expression of what the body has taken in through the senses but which has never reached consciousness”. It is a virtuoso performance: informative, gripping and slightly unhinged.

Other moments inspire less confidence in the reader. An essay on Michel Houellebecq’s novel Submission begins with the “small confession” that Knausgaard has “never read” Houellebecq. In a piece on the photographer Francesca Woodman, who died by suicide at the age of twenty-two, Knausgaard admits that when he first heard Woodman’s story he “imagined a Sarah Kane kind of universe, dark, chaotic and ugly”, and his “interest evaporated.” The intended arc of this essay is one of a sceptic who finally sees the light at an exhibition of Woodman’s work, but Knausgaard’s conversion to Woodman-worship is explained by needless loquacity and banal truisms. “Woodman’s pictures broke free of both social and intellectual constraints”, he tells us. Monet and his contemporaries fill us “with the sense of what it means to be alive, but also the sense of what it means not to be alive”.

As a whole, this collection feels far too diffuse for the reader to assemble a solid Knausgaardian position on anything. There are a few welcome moments where he名气s his colours to the mast. “Free-dom is the reason I write, and the reason literature exists”; the goal of a writer should be to “make writing a conceivable beyond thought”. But these are scraps of clarity in a disjointed, knotty assemblage that leaves you wishing he stuck by his principles a little more, and said it, you know, as it is.

MICHAEL DELGADO

NORWEGIAN FICTION

LONG LIVE THE POST HORN!
VIGDIS HJORTH
Translated by Charlotte Barslund

It takes confidence to write about something as undramatic as the postal service - a confidence that struts across the page in Vigdis Hjorth’s most recent novel to appear in English. The Norwegian writer has published more than twenty works of fiction, among them Will and Testament (2010), a prickly account of abuse that caused a stir because of its autobiographical undertones. Long Live the Post Horn! traces six months in the life of a thirty-five-year-old mail consultant, Ellinor - a “peripheral, fossilised figure” searching for a stir of her own.

When we first meet her, Ellinor is leafing through an old diary in her flat in Oslo and lamenting its lack of substance. “It was all about nothing” she tells her journal, “and here I was.” She yearns for more but lacks direction - “I was a letter with an incomplete address, a letter with no contents.” She tries but fails to feel: when her solemn boyfriend gives her a ring, she notices it doesn’t match her others; when her sister Margrethe miscarries, her thoughts turn to green tea. She is stuck in a rut - “there were dreams and all the variations in my days, of course, but nothing major”.

A sense of direction arrives in the form of the Norway-Ellinor Post and Communications Union, one of Ellinor’s clients, which is fighting against the implementation of an EU directive that is sure to increase the cost of sending mail and cut the salaries of those delivering it. When a co-worker vanishes, it is up to Ellinor to ensure that the issue is raised at the Labour Party Annual Conference. “Finally something has happened.”

Chloé Ashby

THE MAYA

TIME AMONG THE MAYA
Travels in Belize, Guatemala and Mexico
RONALD WRIGHT

As Wright interweaves his memoirs with lively academic discussions, he brings life to often turgid scholarly work, underscoring the importance of the long prehistory and history of the Maya. He sheds no light on ancient Maya chronology, regional geography, historical explorations and field work, and adds some new commentary of his own. He meets with scholars and government agencies as well as insightful locals, from taxi drivers to passengers on buses, along the way. He recognizes that the striking success of the Maya can provide lessons for today. Hiding in plain sight, they adapted to changes in the landscape. In colonial times, the voice of...
KINGS
RICHARD III
A failed king?
ROSEMARY HORIZZ

Over the centuries since his death at the Battle of Bosworth on August 22, 1485, Richard III’s reputation has run the gamut from devious, child-murdering monster who would stop at nothing to gain the throne, to principled, selfless lord, forced reluctantly to accept power for the good of the realm. In her lucid survey of Richard’s life and reign for the Penguin Monarchs series, Rosemary Horrox states that no historian now takes the monstrous version seriously. Rather, she explains that there is a trace of it in modern academic discussions of Richard nonetheless, in the way that these revolve around two competing interpretations of his actions. Was Richard a villain, driven by his own ruthless ambition? Or was he the victim of a deterring political situation?

In describing the circumstances of Richard’s accession to the throne, Horrox outlines the fierce debate surrounding the question by which he moved from protector to the young Edward V to declaring himself rightful king. For example, she highlights Richard’s self-presentation as the guarantor of good rule and moral probity, carefully positioning his own actions as a defence of the kingdom against the regal pretensions of Edward IV’s widow Elizabeth Woodville and her family. On the most notorious issue of all, Horrox is representative of mainstream academic opinion when she states: “That Richard was responsible for the death of his nephews was basically proven by the coroner at the time and is still much the most likely scenario”.

Horrox convincingly argues that Richard’s eventual downfall was not a revival of the Wars of the Roses, as has often been claimed. Instead “It was more truly a violent splintering of the House of York... Simply put, the former servants of Edward IV rejected his brother’s seizure of power”. She concludes her engaging survey by returning to the villain or victim controversy, astutely summing up this most controversial and intriguing of kings thus: “However one choses to interpret his actions, he can with justice be seen as a failed king, who in the end destroyed whatever it was that he had sought to rescue and preserve, losing his crown, and his life in the process”.

Horrox’s judicious exploration of these debates testifies to her role as a leading authority on Richard and the political culture within which he operated. She has an enviable ability to condense key events and concepts into a readable account which manages to be both pithy and conceptually rich, giving readers the tools to make their own choices of interpretation about Richard.

Katherine J. Lewis

FILM-MAKERS
CHASING THE LIGHT
How I fought my way into Hollywood
OLIVER STONE
368pp. Monoray. £25.

Ever the provocateur, the film director Oliver Stone has written his memoir, Chasing the Light, as if it were the biography of one of the heroes of his films. Stone vividly recollects his early comfortable life, in Manhattan and Connecticut, before it was disrupted by his parents’ divorce (this father was a GI turned stockbroker and his mother a glamorous Frenchwoman). Stone’s decision as a young man to volunteer for the infantry in Vietnam would prove to be life-altering. The war shaped his film-making persona, as well as his ideological theories on American history and international affairs. It makes interesting reading after a decade in which he has been dismissed as a useful idiot for Vladimir Putin and Hugo Chávez.

Yet Stone only glancingly describes that time in his book. Instead, he goes on to describe his down-and-up period in New York after Vietnam and his successes in Hollywood in the 1980s, which culminated in his winning a Best Picture Academy award for Platoon. Film-making evidently offered him a chance to forge a counternarrative to the traumas of war. His screenplay for Brian DePalma’s Scarface, for example, absorbed and expressed Cuban immigrant energies as it portrayed the story of a Marielito’s advance through crime, the film offering a distorted version of the popular notion of the American Dream.

Stone recalls the famous people he worked with, and even those he almost worked with, while settling a few scores along the way. He also remains aware of the good fortune that has attended him: how he had his father to turn him out when he was arrested on charges of smuggling at the Mexican border; how his teacher at New York University, Martin Scorsese, sang him out for his potential. Great mentors and collaborators have certainly played a part in his story, from his apprenticeship to the great British screenwriter and playwright Robert Bolt, to his later work with the cinematographer Robert Richardson, whom he invited to win, both of whom helped him make his polemics of the 1990s, JFK and Natural Born Killers. But the operatic and blunted-instrument mythology that surrounds his work was all Oliver Stone; and his approach to this autobiography is no different.

Shwan Zaid

JEISH HISTORY
RESCUING THE SURVIVING SOULS
ADAM TELLER

In 1648 Ukraine erupted. For almost a century Poland had ruled this lightly populated territory, and its magnates had leased the management of their vast estates to a growing population of Jews. When the martial Cossacks, under Bohdan Khmelnytsky, turned on their Polish overlords, many Ukrainian peasants enthusiastically joined them, directing much of their violence against the magnates’ more vulnerable agents. The slaughter of Jews during the Khmelnytsky Uprising (1648-54), luridly recorded in survivor chronicles, has been inscribed into Jewish memory as a massacre of major proportions.

In the postwar decades these victims were widely estimated at 100,000 or more. Recent Israeli scholarship suggests that the total Jewish population in Ukraine at the start of the uprising was about 40,000, of whom almost half perished, either at the hands of Khmelnytsky’s bands or from the diseases and starvation that followed. Many - probably most - of the rest were taken captive or fled. These migrations and their longer-term impact are the focus of Adam Teller’s richly detailed, fluent and innovative study, Rescue the Surviving Souls. Most refugees initially headed either westwards to Poland or northwards to Lithuania, where local Jewish communities assisted them as best they could. War soon struck again, however. Russian armies, with Cossack support, made deep incursions into Lithuania in 1655, while in the same year Sweden invaded Poland. Fighting continued in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth until 1667, generating further waves of migration.

Several thousand Jews were captured by Khmelnytsky’s allies the Crimean Tatars, to be trafficked for sale in the slave markets of Istanbul. The capture of, usually, Ukrainian peasants for sale into slavery, is a major theme of the Tatar economy, in which Crimean Jews were also active slave traders. Teller documents the strenuous efforts of the Jews of Istanbul to redeem these slaves, and the contributions of communities in Italy to their ransom. The enduring impact of the Ukrainian crisis, he argues, was to deepen the inter-connectedness of European Jewry. Fundraising efforts brought together communities across great distances, Local interactions between Jews from different traditions also intensified, as refugees from Poland settled across Germany, in Amsterdam and beyond. Teller tries - perhaps too hard to depict the psychological suffering of these refugees and captives. “Trauma” is a keyword of his study, and more than once he suggests the possibility of post-traumatic stress disorder. These migrations took place through a time of intense violence across East-Central Europe. The ‘Thirty Years’ War (1618-48) cost two million lives, and the wars in Poland-Lithuania about 3 million. Jewish experiences should be set in this broader context. Teller endorses, tentatively, a model that proposes the “plural-race conception” of the Jewish past. Misery at this time, however, was far from a Jewish monopoly. Adam Sutcliffe

their resistance was heard in the courts where community leaders were repeatedly tried for ignoring directives to, for example, forgo keeping community chests. Their canny defence in these cases was that the Spanish knew how stupid they were.

Sometimes their resistance went further. The early Yucatec governor Tomas Medel prohibited fields and orchards in towns, enforcing compliance with Spanish sensibilities, legislating that they would be burnt. These home gardens remain an important source of sustenance for the Maya, as argued in The Modern Maya (2012) by Macduff Everton, which Wright cites in his afterward. Recent research has even found that the Maya milpa-forest-garden cycle could help reduce global temperatures.

In 1648 Ukraine erupted. For almost a century Poland had ruled this lightly populated territory, and its magnates had leased the management of their vast estates to a growing population of Jews. When the martial Cossacks, under Bohdan Khmelnytsky, turned on their Polish overlords, many Ukrainian peasants enthusiastically joined them, directing much of their violence against the magnates’ more vulnerable agents. The slaughter of Jews during the Khmelnytsky Uprising (1648-54), luridly recorded in survivor chronicles, has been inscribed into Jewish memory as a massacre of major proportions.

In the postwar decades these victims were widely estimated at 100,000 or more. Recent Israeli scholarship suggests that the total Jewish population in Ukraine at the start of the uprising was about 40,000, of whom almost half perished, either at the hands of Khmelnytsky’s bands or from the diseases and starvation that followed. Many - probably most - of the rest were taken captive or fled. These migrations and their longer-term impact are the focus of Adam Teller’s richly detailed, fluent and innovative study, Rescue the Surviving Souls. Most refugees initially headed either westwards to Poland or northwards to Lithuania, where local Jewish communities assisted them as best they could. War soon struck again, however. Russian armies, with Cossack support, made deep incursions into Lithuania in 1655, while in the same year Sweden invaded Poland. Fighting continued in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth until 1667, generating further waves of migration.

Several thousand Jews were captured by Khmelnytsky’s allies the Crimean Tatars, to be trafficked for sale in the slave markets of Istanbul. The capture of, usually, Ukrainian peasants for sale into slavery, is a major theme of the Tatar economy, in which Crimean Jews were also active slave traders. Teller documents the strenuous efforts of the Jews of Istanbul to redeem these slaves, and the contributions of communities in Italy to their ransom. The enduring impact of the Ukrainian crisis, he argues, was to deepen the inter-connectedness of European Jewry. Fundraising efforts brought together communities across great distances, Local interactions between Jews from different traditions also intensified, as refugees from Poland settled across Germany, in Amsterdam and beyond. Teller tries - perhaps too hard to depict the psychological suffering of these refugees and captives. “Trauma” is a keyword of his study, and more than once he suggests the possibility of post-traumatic stress disorder. These migrations took place through a time of intense violence across East-Central Europe. The ’Thirty Years’ War (1618-48) cost two million lives, and the wars in Poland-Lithuania about 3 million. Jewish experiences should be set in this broader context. Teller endorses, tentatively, a model that proposes the “plural-race conception” of the Jewish past. Misery at this time, however, was far from a Jewish monopoly. Adam Sutcliffe
Benefit fraud?

How American welfare reform has hurt the poor

FRAN BIGMAN

INVISIBLE AMERICANS
The tragic cost of child poverty
JEFF MADRICK

WELFARE DOESN'T WORK
The promises of basic income for a failed American safety net
LEAH HAMILTON

In 1970, Johnny Cash visited the White House to talk about prison reform with President Nixon, who suggested he play a few songs first. Nixon requested the current hit by Guy Drake, “Welfare Cadillac (sic),” a satirical ballad about a welfare recipient with ten children who lives large on government handouts (“These other folks are the tools / They’re working and paying taxes”). Cash instead sang his own song, “Man in Black,” written for “the poor and beaten down.” At the time, sympathetic sentiments, which had inspired systemic reforms such as Roosevelt’s New Deal and Lyndon B. Johnson’s War on Poverty, were being edged out by a re-emergence of more punitive attitudes towards the poor.

Both Jeff Madrick, in Invisible Americans, and Leah Hamilton, in Welfare Doesn’t Work, trace the history of welfare reform over the next few decades, as increasing globalization and the fall of unions made working life still more precarious. The names of successive government programmes tell a story: Gerald Ford instituted the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC); Reagan, who spun false anecdotes about “welfare queens” and seemed to believe that direct cash aid subsidized family breakdown, cut the budget for Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) and pushed his Greater Opportunities through Work (GROW); Bill Clinton pursued his pledge to “end welfare as we know it” by passing the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act in 1996, which changed AFDC into Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and instituted a five-year lifetime limit on federal benefits. Unlike AFDC, TANF is not an entitlement programme, meaning that aid isn’t guaranteed to those who need it. Instead, states get a fixed amount of money every year, even if the economy flounders, and less than a quarter reaches families in the form of cash grants. Many states require the applicant to be in work, no matter the exorbitant cost of childcare.

The dwindling of cash aid and a shift to work-dependent policies have been disastrous, according to both authors, who synthesize existing studies to put forth proposals. “There is almost no welfare as we once knew it in America”, argues Madrick. The “invisible Americans” of his title number beyond the US’s 13 million officially poor children, nearly one in five; poverty is deliberately underestimated, he says, and the real figure is close to 22 million, or around one in three. There was no official poverty line in America until 1969, he points out, when one was devised based on outdated assumptions such as the nineteenth-century idea that a family needs only three times its food budget to survive. The Official Poverty Measure hasn’t been updated since. Much of Madrick’s book is made up of facts and figures, but he also emphasizes individual stories, such as that of the teenager in Texas who developed a black ring around her neck, a sign of early-onset diabetes, as a result of poor nutrition. Hamilton traces much the same history but makes a more radical argument: that welfare in the West was never about providing people with a genuine safety net. Instead, she maintains, the powerful have provided just enough subsistence to forestall revolt. The four most common jobs for welfare recipients are in fast food, childcare, home health and part-time in college facilities - much-needed jobs, but precarious ones. Many low-income families say they are “hustling backwards”, because when they accept promotions or take on extra work, they end up losing welfare income and becoming worse off financially.

The authors agree on the economic urgency of ending child poverty: the US’s GDP is $1 trillion lower than it could be as a result of child poverty - more than 5 percent. While Madrick argues for “monthly, substantial, and unconditional cash allowances for all children” in order to provide not just subsistence but freedom from the lifelong damage that poverty-induced stress can cause, Hamilton calls for a universal basic income (UBI). Only this seems likely to overcome what Madrick describes as American society’s “mean-spirited and destructive prejudice against the poor, underlined by racism”. Even though only about 13 percent of the American population is Black, many Americans believe that most poor people in America are Black: actually, there are twice as many poor white Americans. A study in 1999 showed that people with this belief are also more likely to blame “lack of effort” on the individual’s part than “circumstances beyond their control.”

People tend to credit themselves with industriousness but see laziness in others. When Hamilton asks low-wage workers if they think UBI would affect people, many reply disappointingly, saying things such as, “Why would you need to work if you already have money? Duh”. They insist, however, that they would invest in their education, find more fulfilling work, start a small business, pay debts. Hamilton stresses that past experiments with UBI, including in the US and Canada in the 1970s, have shown that people do use the income wisely. She argues that guaranteed income for adults as well as children could give workers better bargaining power, support those who contribute unpaid care work to the economy (mostly women), decrease intimate partner violence because people are more likely to have the resources to leave abusive relationships, and give people more power over their own lives – a supposed aim of the Republican Party.

The first few years of Donald Trump’s presidency saw a flurry of books about basic income, from the Democratic presidential candidate Andrew Yang’s The War on Normal People (2018) to the Facebook co-founder Chris Hughes’s Fair Shot: Rethinking Inequality and how we earn (2018), both of which argued for direct cash assistance for individuals. On the brink of a new financial crisis, as Covid-19 makes employment increasingly insecure and inequality starker, pro-guaranteed income arguments such as Madrick’s and Hamilton’s are especially urgent.

Fran Bigman is an associate editor at Guernica
Poetic justice

In March, the Princeton PhD student William Stell asked, in a tweet, “What’s the most memorable comment a professor has written in the margins of one of your papers?” In response, John Haffenden confided that Richard Ellmann often “wrote against a paragraph or sentence: ask. There was no further mark to indicate what he found awkward”; and Jeremy Noel-Tod disclosed that he’d once been translated by a tutor thus: “Noel-Tod – Christmas Death.”

Droll comments in most essays’ margins will be lost to time, but any true apostle of apostils knows that there are other curiosities available: the long-lined, if illicit annotations in library books. We have sought to identify – with help, perhaps, from the well-manicured manicules of the now-famous Oxford University Marginalia Facebook group – some cursive classics.

Livid quibbles over pre-existing marginalia (“it’s impossible to read when some idiot has scrabbled their furious bleatings all over the book”; “never mind, you probably all left years ago and are now balding and middle-aged”) amuse by their own paradox. Raw parps of bafflement (Wordsworth’s line “Upon my right hand was a single sheep” in the 1905 Prelude prompts the devastatingly polite enquiry, “I am sorry?”) and lewd rage are welcome – likewise, well-intentioned efforts to deter all future readers (take tranquilizers before tackling this), advises one victim of Baudrillard’s Fatal Strategies). Augmenting hostilely dull chapter titles, turning them into instalments in a children’s book series, is fun as well: sign us up to review Harry Potter and the Role of Accounting in Public Expenditure and Monetary Policy in the First Century AD Roman Empire and its inevitable sequel, Harry Potter and the Aggregate-Psychological Theories of Revolution.

Our choice of the lot, though, is the near-liturgical reiteration of (and variation on) a line in a Bodleian Libraries copy of T. S. Eliot’s Four Quartets (1966) by Carl Adolf Bodehnk. An early, helpful reader pencilled, on page thirty-nine, an Eliot quotation: “It is possibly worth being aware that quotations are often inaccurate.” Beneath this opener, a permanent, facsimile facsimile ensues, in spite of the librarians’ and one interventionist reader’s endeavours to shush the worst of it:

2: It is possibly worth being aware that other people have eyes in their head.
3: [erased]
4: [erased]
5: Sexist
6: Who’s for a drink?

7: [erased]
8: It is possibly worth being aware that people should not define books.
9: [redacted]
10: It is possibly worth being aware that there are many things more important than this and, quite possibly, you should replace this book on the shelf and have some fun instead.
11: It is possibly worth being aware that we wouldn’t have to define books if “Four Quartets” wasn’t so obscure that we can’t write an essay on it.
12: It is possible that you are right.

(For more on Eliot’s inaccurate quotations, see NB, April 2.) Naturally, Eliot too was a sometimes histrionic annotator. In a copy of Husserl’s Logical Investigations now held at the London Library, he scribbled, “What the devil does this mean?”

From vinegar corregenda and addenda to good, clean vandal-

ism. On a lecture theatre desk in the St Cross Building in Oxford, you will find the following graffiti: “I love Heaney”; “me too”; “me three”; round the corner in Rare Books Room One, the “Twentieth Century Poetry Reading Group” once met to whomp and weep, in too-unstudied words, at Heaney’s eloquence. Yet just that earthed, prehensile accu-

racy may be what will someday make his language seem opaque: when it came to “The Under-
ground” (from Station Island, 1984), no one could say just how a flower “jammed with crimson looked.”

The riddle unravelled, or was forgot, until we came upon From Agergrass to Yellow Boots: A Glossary of Seamus Heaney’s hearth language (2020). It isn’t Heaney’s Heaney that’s a dialect poet; compared to William Barnes (Dorset), or Hugh MacDiar-

mid (Scots), or even Liz Berry (Black Country), he paints himself as quite plain-talking. But here Maura John-

ston shows how many words in Heaney’s work are threatened by obscurity or have a fine South Derry brogue. “The point about dialect or hearth language”, Heaney is quoted as saying in Stepping Stones, “is its complete propriety to the speaker and his or her voice.”

If you would like, us, to help preserve that for the future Heaney reader, you had better know your neb from your bleb, your foof from your drouth, your hob-socket from your glar, your wood-kerne from your gombeen-man. Ask: do the stubbed lugs of a sack mean any-

thing to you; and was there Easter water, last weekend, on your side of the house? Now, hold your wheesht – we must do our station.

There are many fertile insights in Ms Johnston’s helpful gloss. “Flax produces a little blue flower”, we hunger-eyed urbanites learn, “and in the heyday of flax growing in Ireland there were so many fields of it that people said it was as if the sky had fallen.” “Japped”, by the way, means “splashed”. From Agergrass to Yellow Boots is out with Collimse Press for £10.

H eaney and Ted Hughes often collaborated, and one hitherto uncharted shared aspect of their creative work will be divulged this summer in the TLS. Something we missed, though, in the carnage of late 2020 was that Hughes’s fullfi-

nous Crow was set loose fifty years ago. To our grim joy, we were invited recently to a Ted Hughes Society event on Crow – which gives us an excuse to talk about it now, and Crow a chance to fly “the black flag of himself” once more.

Like most contemporary seminars, this was conducted over Zoom, with lots of accidental mutter.

Thomas Lask wrote in the New York Times in 1971 that Crow is “darkness made visible”, and Katherine Robinson here said that it is also “speechlessness made audible”; appropriately, after quoting “God spoke Crow” from Crow’s Theology, the theologian Malcolm Guite, berthed by low bandwidth, was visibly darkened and his audio cut out. “Malcolm speaks void”, said Terry Gifford gleefully.

The wide, the unseen was vitally ecstatic. Alice Oswald men-

tioned Crow’s profane and guttural “jumpen unmusic” and the sense in which, for Hughes, the “syntax took the place of metre”, and Marina Warner called Crow Hughes’ stab-

bing at the “cult of the quotidian”. Mark Cocker noted that although the UK is the twentieth-ninth, most denatured country in the world, its populace of corvids (say-

ning nothing of another, almost homophonic word) has boomed. “But who is stronger than Death? / Me, evidently. // Pass, Crow.”

The infinite, tolerant event chair, Mark Wormald, brought up ‘Glee-

wit’, the student poet-critic Hughes invented while at university in 1953. For “Gleewit” wrote that “in a bar-

arously new age, verse has to find a speech of childhood, the brutality of the dicht”. Presumably he would have always been a fan of the taboo and gibbous, ice-cream guzzling, “Mamma”-crying Crow; the TLS, though, crowed that Crow was mainly a device for Hughes to “unload his obsessions without requiring that he test them out, in any precise way, against reality” (January 8, 1971). And today we gaze after it, speechless with admi-

ration, flying this black-and-white (and read all over, we must hope) flag of ourselves.

C. R.