



Art Spiegelman & Joe Sacco: Never Again and Again

The New York Review of Books

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February 27, 2025

**James Gleick:
The Future of the Future**

**Alma Guillermoprieto:
Gabriel García Márquez on Netflix**

**Vivian Gornick:
Diana Athill's Stiff Upper Lip**

**Perry Link:
The Risks of Truth in China**

**Sigrid Nunez:
Charles Baxter's Trick-Mirror America**

**Christopher de Bellaigue:
Fighting for Democracy in Brazil**

**Michael Hofmann:
The Irresistibly Bleak Markus Werner**

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Contents

February 27, 2025

6	James Gleick
12	Vivian Gornick
15	Colin B. Bailey
18	Fred Kaplan
19	Amy Woolard
20	Michael Hofmann
21	Alma Guillermoprieto
24	Irina Dumitrescu
25	Joe Sacco and Art Spiegelman
28	Christopher Benfey
30	Anna Louie Sussman
32	Perry Link
34	Sigrid Nunez
36	Andrew Katzenstein
39	Christopher de Bellaigue
42	Letters from

The Prophet Business
A Century of Tomorrows: How Imagining the Future Shapes the Present
by Glenn Adamson

In Lieu of Love
Instead of a Letter by Diana Athill, with an afterword by Lena Dunham

A Daring Departure
Paris 1874: The Impressionist Moment an exhibition at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., September 8, 2024–January 19, 2025
Catalog of the exhibition edited by Sylvie Patry and Anne Robbins with Kimberly A. Jones and Mary Morton
Paris in Ruins: Love, War, and the Birth of Impressionism by Sebastian Smee

Rebooting the Pentagon
Unit X: How the Pentagon and Silicon Valley Are Transforming the Future of War
by Raj M. Shah and Christopher Kirchhoff

Poem

Curable or Not?

A Telenovela Macondo
One Hundred Years of Solitude a television series directed by Alex García López and Laura Mora

The Great Leap Backward
Free: Coming of Age at the End of History by Lea Ypi

Comic Strip

'A Loving Caw from a Nameless Friend'
The Letters of Emily Dickinson edited by Cristanne Miller and Domhnall Mitchell

Waiting by the Phone
The End of Love by Tamara Tenenbaum, translated from the Spanish by Carolina Parodi
The Case Against the Sexual Revolution: A New Guide to Sex in the 21st Century by Louise Perry
Rethinking Sex by Christine Emba
Bad Sex: Truth, Pleasure, and an Unfinished Revolution by Nona Willis Aronowitz

China's Counter-Histories
Sparks: China's Underground Historians and Their Battle for the Future
by Ian Johnson

A Hero for Cro-MAGA Times
Blood Test by Charles Baxter

The Impressionist
Frederick Wiseman: An American Institution a retrospective at Film at Lincoln Center, New York City
The Worlds of Wiseman a retrospective at the Gene Siskel Film Center, Chicago
Voyages of Discovery: The Cinema of Frederick Wiseman by Barry Keith Grant
Menus-Plaisirs—Les Troisgros a documentary film directed by Frederick Wiseman

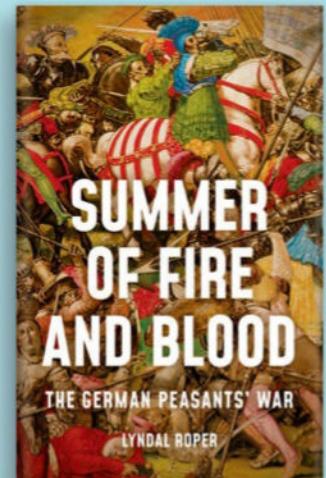
Brazil: The Threat from the Right
Michael Friedman and Jessica Riskin

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Abduweli Ayup: A Uyghur Dissident in China's Prisons
Nathan Shields: Cutting Don Giovanni Down to Size
Catherine Coleman Flowers: The Persistence of Rural Poverty
Lucy Sante: A Great Photographer of Social Life
Anna Shechtman: Leos Carax's Bad Dads
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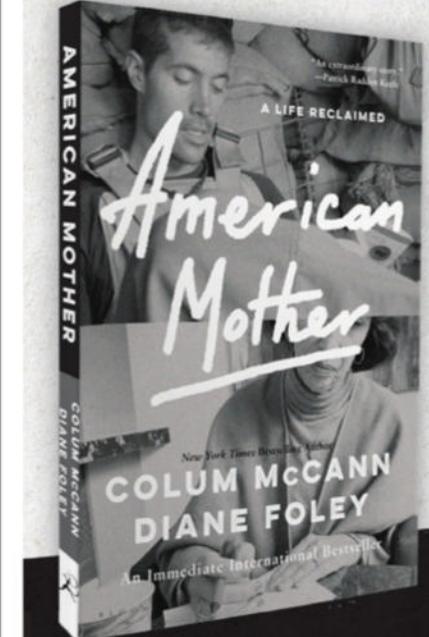
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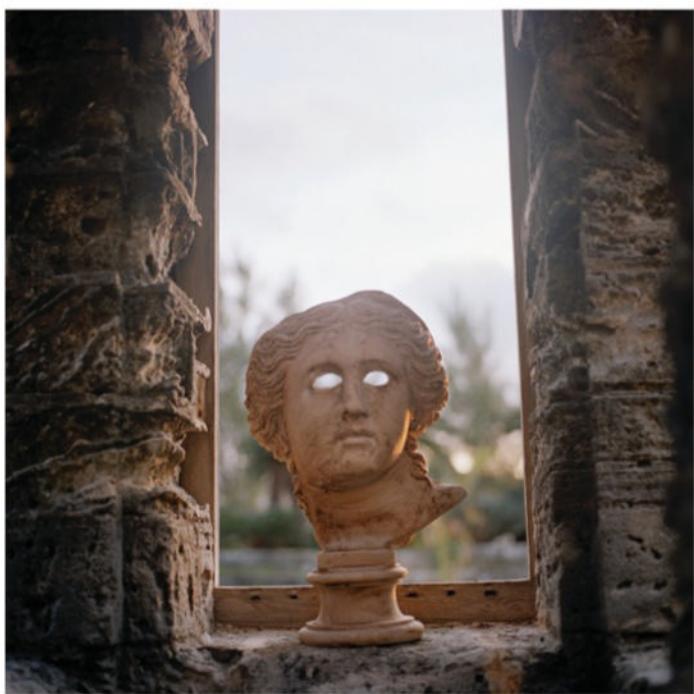
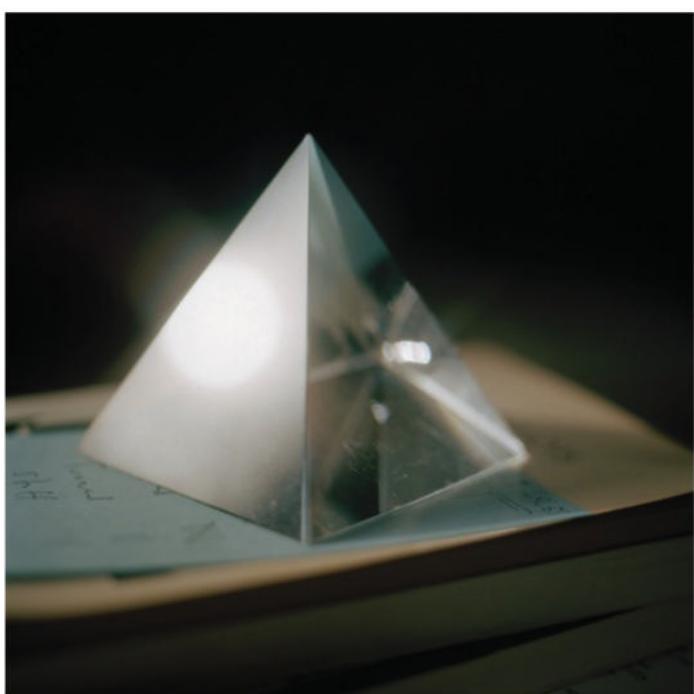
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The Prophet Business

James Gleick



Photographs by Jason Fulford

A Century of Tomorrows: How Imagining the Future Shapes the Present

by Glenn Adamson.

Bloomsbury, 336 pp., \$32.99

Invited to compose a message for posterity to be buried in a time capsule at the 1939 New York World's Fair and opened five thousand years later, Albert Einstein sounded a dour tone: "Anyone who thinks about the future must live in fear and terror."

His gloom must have disappointed the sponsor, the Westinghouse Electric Corporation, which was promoting the fair's theme, "The World of Tomorrow," alongside other paragons of American industry. The Ford Motor Company featured the road of tomorrow, the Borden Dairy Company had the dairy world of tomorrow, and, most popular of all, General Motors presented Futurama, where visitors lined up for an eighteen-minute ride on a conveyor belt across an imagined landscape said to represent the marvels to come in the year 1960. *Life* magazine said it was "full of a tanned and vigorous people, who in twenty years have learned to have fun." As they left, each visitor re-

ceived a badge that read, "I have seen the future." They really hadn't.

Einstein was thinking about the looming war, of course, as was Thomas Mann, whose time capsule message was, "We know now that the idea of the future as a 'better world' was a fallacy of the doctrine of progress." Awkward, considering that progress was on display from more than a thousand exhibitors. The whole enterprise celebrated futurity. Participants claimed to be "selling ideas," not just products. As Glenn Adamson frames it in his insightful new history, *A Century of Tomorrows*, they were engaging in a "kind of futurology." Their crystal ball was rose-colored; their vision utopian. Nowadays the utopians are, to put it mildly, out of fashion.

The World's Fair told a white story. Black Americans were invisible, implicitly omitted from the "tanned and vigorous" and explicitly excluded from the fair's workforce except as maids and porters. The white press did not remark on this, but Black organizers did, and they counterprogrammed an American Negro Exposition in Chicago, taking note of the seventy-fifth anniversary of emancipation. The

Black World's Fair, as it was known, projected a contrasting view of the future, rooted in a different knowledge of the past. Highlighting Black artists from slavery to the present, the Exhibition of the Art of the American Negro emphasized a social realism that "goes beneath the jazzy, superficial show of things," as the writer and philosopher Alain Locke put it. It represented hunger; it represented lynching. It reminded its visitors that the future is not a destination awaiting our arrival but rather, as Adamson writes, "a perpetual battlefield of ideas."

The future shown at the New York World's Fair was a future of technology as humanity's helpmeet. It embodied "the presumption that a well-designed, well-oiled machine, once up and running, cannot help but produce a better world," Adamson writes. At the alternative in Chicago, the organizers were voicing another kind of futurology, one that developed alongside mechanistic thinking, counterbalanced it, and to some extent even contradicted it. A machine is autonomous, defined by its own internal operations, self-regulating and self-propelling. Step back a bit, though, and what

looks like a marvel begins to seem monstrous.

Writing the future's story in advance has never seemed more precarious. In a roiling present, dread and unease have dimmed the utopian spirit. Obsessed as we are with peering ahead, we've seen visions of the future fragment and transform overnight. "We need to examine not just the emotions that accompany the future as a cultural form," the anthropologist Arjun Appadurai has written, "but the sensations that it produces: awe, vertigo, excitement, disorientation."

Adamson takes that to heart. He is a former director of the Museum of Arts and Design in New York City who usually identifies himself more as a curator than as a historian, and *A Century of Tomorrows* is a departure for him. His previous book, *Craft: An American History* (2021), examined (and subverted) the conventional distinction between *artisan* and *artist*; like this book, it told an eclectic and not always linear story.* Cultural ferment, political upheavals, spiritual awakenings and reawakenings have all relied on visions of the future. Adamson connects techno-optimism to the psychedelic enchantments of the Sixties and the Afrofuturism of the Nineties, all with their prophets and prophecies. He leaps freely among scientific, religious, and fantastical modes of forecasting—which influenced one another more than their practitioners realized. None of the futurologists has a claim to certainty. The futures they describe are products of collective imagination, continually regenerated and revised. They matter because they reshape the present.

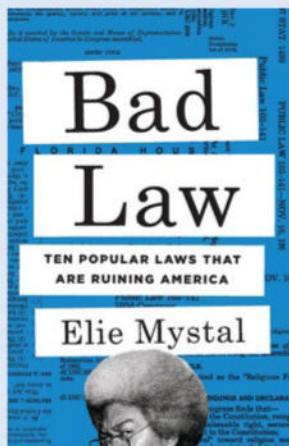
So *A Century of Tomorrows* is not an examination of The Future; it is an examination of examinations of the future. Adamson tells a story about a special class of storytellers, the future-telling people: "We can call them *futurologists*: those who peer ahead and attempt to discern what is to come." There have always been futurologists of one kind or another, which already says something about humanity. In ancient times they were oracles, prophets, soothsayers, and astrologers. They discovered the future in entrails and tea leaves. No matter how often they were discredited, the need remained.

Our own futurologists predict election results and hurricanes. They augment imagination with science, which makes them respectable. They accept uncertainty and model probabilities. The pace of modern life makes their work lucrative and necessary. Every major corporation employs futurologists, whether they call them market researchers, trend analysts, or cool hunters. Science fiction writers are futurologists, too—often running ahead of the scientists. Which forecasters to trust, which to follow, is the special challenge of our time.

"Futurology," with its pretentious suffix, is a relatively new coinage. The OED credits Aldous Huxley in 1946; Huxley probably meant the word as

*See Susan Tallman's review in these pages, August 19, 2021.

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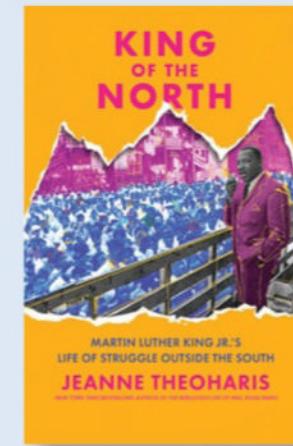
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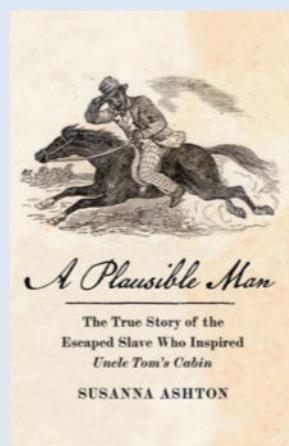
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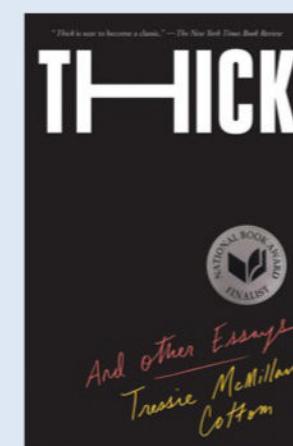
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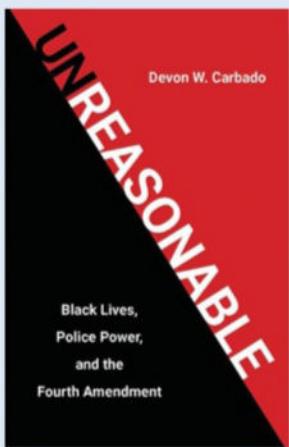
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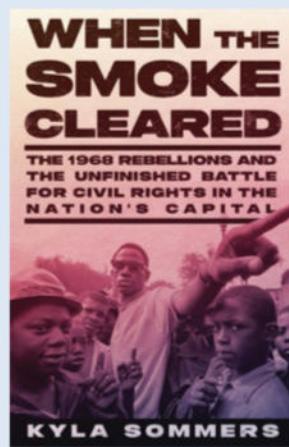
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ironically as he did the book title *Brave New World*. When H. G. Wells invented time machines a half-century earlier, he considered his own interest in futurity to be exceptional. Most people, he told the luminaries of the Royal Institution in 1902, never even think about the future—except “as a sort of blank non-existence upon which the advancing present will presently write events.” A relative stasis had been the norm for previous generations. Science was changing that, bringing an awareness of geological layering and biological evolution, driving faster technological change and speeding the pace of life itself.

Just a few years before Wells, a Massachusetts journalist, Edward Bellamy, conjured a utopian future in his novel *Looking Backward: 2000–1887*. Its hero sleeps into the future Rip Van Winkle-style and finds that hunger, war, poverty, and unemployment have been abolished. Money is obsolete; every man and woman is issued a “credit card” sufficient to their needs. Manufactured goods flow out from a central warehouse through pneumatic tubes. Likewise, musical entertainment comes to every home by way of electric wires (a mind-boggling new technology when Bellamy was writing). Everyone belongs to “a vast industrial partnership, as large as the nation, as large as humanity”—“the sole employer, the final monopoly in which all previous and lesser monopolies were swallowed up.” Utopia is notably rigid and rule-bound; nothing changes; progress is complete, because perfection has been attained. Everyone seems content. As a huge international best seller, *Look-*

ing Backward inspired politicians and activists. Bellamyites formed Bellamy Clubs across the United States.

Previous fictional utopias had been displaced not in time but in space; Thomas More’s original (*Utopia*, 1516) was a remote island in the New World. Placing utopia in the future may seem obvious now, but it was Bellamy’s innovation. “This resulted in a sort of temporal montage,” Adamson writes,

in which an actual present and an imagined future come in and out of focus. The future could now be conceptualized as a shifting landscape, with multiple time horizons interacting with one another.

Time travel did that, too.

Leaving aside fortune tellers and charlatans, the business of prophecy had long belonged to religion, organized and otherwise. The first modern futurologists set themselves up as secular prophets, asserting a rational claim to truth. Since the future arrives piecemeal, they had to earn credibility. What first brought data-driven predictions into daily life was weather forecasting, a scientific innovation of the nineteenth century (messaging by telegraph was a prerequisite). Adamson notes that the basic conceptual breakthrough was a trick: “The future was contained within the present. That is, a lot of tomorrow’s weather is already here today; it’s just somewhere else, usually a little farther west.” Like all futurology, meteorology was, and is, notoriously error-prone, but even probabilistic weather forecasts had great value, so



national governments, starting with Britain, established weather bureaus, and newspapers began printing forecasts. “Older vernacular methods—almanacs, moon observation, fingers held up to the wind—were rendered useless,” Adamson writes. “It must have seemed like magic.”

Where else could the magic be deployed? One domain was marketing—specifically, advertising—which relied on increasingly sophisticated ideas about predicting consumers’ desires before the consumers had formed them. Fashion changed like the seasons, with occasional storms. The pioneering J. Walter Thompson agency, which at the turn of the century placed more than half the advertising in the US, declared in 1909 that “the chief work of civilization is to eliminate chance, and that can only be done by foreseeing and planning.” Industrial designers like Norman Bel Geddes, who later created the Futurama pavilion for General Motors, advised corporations to “modernize” their products, streamline them, not only to embrace the new age but to drive it forward. So-called color forecasters, described by Adamson as another “emergent profession of futurologists,” did the same for fashion and home furnishing. In the Twenties and beyond, Margaret Hayden Rorke’s influential Textile Color Card Association predicted what colors would come into fashion—standardized them and promoted them—not just for the clothing trades but also for automobile design and the nascent movie business. They were creating “a new idea of futurology itself,” Adamson writes, “recasting it as a job for skilled technicians.” Never mind that their prophecies were self-fulfilling.

These future-tellers reveled in change for the sake of change, the faster the better. “To-day, speed is the cry of our era, and greater speed one of the goals of to-morrow,” said Bel Geddes. Knowingly or not, he was echoing Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, the Italian proto-fascist who declared in his 1909 “Manifesto of Futurism,” “We affirm that the world’s magnificence has been enriched by a new beauty: the beauty of speed.” He specifically meant racing cars, which he fetishized. Futurism inspired counterparts in other countries, avant-gardes looking only forward, never back, striding into the future by freeing themselves from the past. “We are on the extreme promontory of ages!” Marinetti said. “Why look back since we must break down the mysterious doors of Impossibility?” His was typical of the seething political movements born in the young century: not just reactions to the past but theories of the future.

The extreme case was the one in Russia. The Bolsheviks’ revolution in 1917 was a gong heard around the globe, announcing that the future—revelation and transformation all at once—had arrived. “All Russia plunging dizzily into the unknown and terrible future” was John Reed’s description in *Ten Days That Shook the World*. After a trip there in 1919 the muckraker Lincoln Steffens famously declared, “I have seen the future and it works.” To produce the future in orderly fashion, the Soviet regime embarked on a series of five-year plans, one after another, national and centralized much like the all-powerful state corporation of *Looking Backward*. All necessary data ran through Central Statistical Directorate.

The illusion of perfect forecasting and perfect control led to catastrophe: forced industrialization and collectivization caused one of the century’s most deadly famines, which killed five million or more in Ukraine, Kazakhstan, and elsewhere. Afterward the linguistic theorist Roman Jakobson, one of the original Russian Futurists, wrote: “We lived too much for the future, thought about it, believed in it; the news of the day—sufficient unto itself—no longer existed for us.” The Kremlin did not lose faith in the power of five-year plans, however. Their use spread to other countries and continued in the Soviet Union through the 1980s, the future perpetually arriving and receding on a five-year schedule.

This represented a fatally monolithic brand of forecasting, blind to the diversity and complexity of real societies. “Prophetic futurology is like a lens,” Adamson writes, “bringing some things into intense focus and clarity while distorting others, and dramatically limiting the field of view. It’s for good reason that crystal balls are standard tools for fortune tellers.” Nonetheless, futurologists only gained in influence as the century continued. Frank Lloyd Wright promised a version of utopia by dubbing his small private homes “Usonian.” The techno-optimist Buckminster Fuller called his (imagined) houses “Dymaxion” and branded himself as the kind of visionary futurist that appealed to early computer pioneers. Futurologists’ statistical methods got better; in the computer era, they developed formidable technical powers; and they seemed to see what ordinary pundits could not.

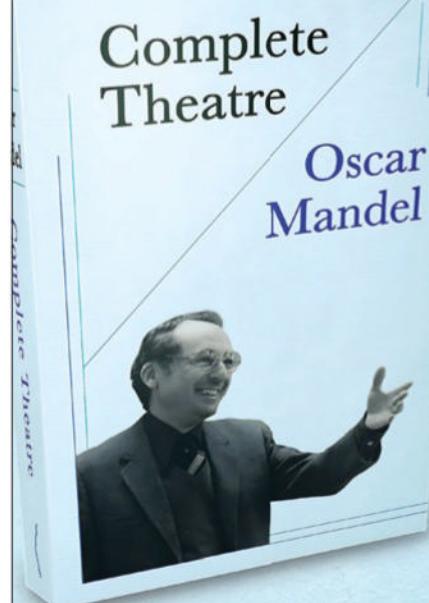
Scientific forecasting reaches its ultimate perfection only in fiction—notably Isaac Asimov’s *Foundation* novels, in which a mathematical system called “psychohistory” reduces human behavior to equations—as if human behavior obeyed laws analogous to the laws of physics, as if human interactions could be modeled like atomic interactions. Nonfictional social scientists aspired to that. The Harvard sociology professor Daniel Bell foresaw a “post-industrial society” led, for better and for worse, by technical elites, and attempted to systematize different forecasting methods in his 1964 essay “Twelve Modes of Prediction.” A less obvious futurologist, Adamson suggests, was Robert McNamara, the president of Ford who got his start as one of the “whiz kids” of the company’s Statistical Control group. Then, as secretary of defense, he applied his predictive methods to the United States, relying heavily on

I love to read a good play, sitting by the fire in my slippers.
The director (myself) is a genius, the acting is superb, I gratefully catch every word of the dialogue, and I can even stop to think it over. —G. B. SHAW

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

I Modern settings
3 Living-Room With 6 Oppressions
23 Honest Urubamba
57 Water From an Italian Pump
83 How Alootook Came to Dance a Gavotte
131 A Splitting Headache
159 The Fatal French Dentist: a heart-rending tragedy
177 Professor Snaffle’s Polypon: an extravaganza
221 A Beautiful Investment: a script for stage and screen
243 The One Who Didn’t Die
II Historical settings
259 The Rebels of Nantucket: a romantic comedy of the American Revolution
345 Sigismund, Prince of Poland
395 General Audax: a Play in Seven Scenes Concerning the Roman Invasions of Spain
III Classical settings
437 Amphitryon (after Molière)
469 The Summoning of Philoctetes
497 Agamemnon Triumphant
IV Biblical settings
527 And the Lord God Planted a Garden
561 An Unpleasantness in Jerusalem
V Imaginary settings
579 Prince Poupon Needs a Wife (after Marivaux)
623 The Virgin and the Unicorn: a fable with song and dance
661 The Peddler, the Friar and the Witch
VI Fables
687 The Kukkurik Fables: 43 mini-plays
758 Appendix: Table of plays translated by the author



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the systems analysts of the RAND Corporation. His forecasts and theirs led to disaster in the Vietnam War, but the RAND Corporation is bigger than ever. Its new area of interest is artificial intelligence.

The current proliferation of future-telling—a glut, even—is a special case of information overload. Bombed as we are with forecasts, the problem is knowing which to believe. The twenty-first century has seen growing distrust of prophets, the technocratic along with the spiritual. In the run-up to the election last year, journalists, who by now should know better, yet again treated political polls as actual news about the future. This always fickle branch of futurology dominated the news for a year until its inevitable crashing end on election night. All the forecasts of pollsters and pundits came with a hard sell-by date; some guessed right and some guessed wrong; and their collective value fell to zero the Day After. The effort would have been better spent understanding the present.

On the other hand, in the realm of climate science, unjustified mistrust has undermined what should have been a triumph of computer-modeled prognostication. The most alarming climate forecasts have proved right, again and again. Much of the doubt was politically motivated, generated by petroleum interests, but not all. Some skeptics remembered the wave of overpopulation panic that spread in the Sixties and Seventies, epitomized in the many-year best seller *The Popula-*

tion Bomb (1968; written by the Stanford University scholars Paul and Anne Ehrlich, though credited only to Paul). Most of the organized environmental movement accepted its thesis and promulgated it: that exponential population growth would inevitably doom humanity to global starvation. “The battle to feed humanity is already lost,” they wrote, when the world population was three billion. They recommended that governments urgently reduce their nations’ birth rates, to return the population to two billion or less. It’s eight billion now, and the worst driver of starvation and poverty is economic inequality, not a lack of resources.

In 1970 another influential best seller was *Future Shock* (written by Alvin and Heidi Toffler and credited to Alvin). The title catchphrase encouraged panic about change itself, especially technological change, which was causing “shattering stress and disorientation.” Their brand of futurology did not age well. Like the Ehrlichs, writes Adamson, “the Tofflers made breathtakingly bold predictions on the basis of selective anecdotes and wholly imaginary scenarios.” They proposed immediately training “cadres of young people” for relocation to colonies under the ocean and in outer space. Still, the stress and disorientation were real enough. Twelve years after *Future Shock* came *Megatrends: Ten New Directions Transforming Our Lives*, by John (and Doris) Naisbitt, a pastiche of then-current thinking about globalization, decentralization, networking, and related buzzwords. It predicted the auspicious rise of a booming postindustrial economy and

sold 14 million copies. Adamson calls it “a truly bad book,” significant mainly for encouraging “many other equally dumbed-down books about the future...a publishing phenomenon that continues to this day.”

None of them, as of 1990, could see the thing that was about to happen: the emergence of a notional place, distinct from the “real world,” where some approximation of all humanity would meet and interact at light speed,



with instantaneous access to some approximation of all human knowledge. Science fiction writers saw that first. William Gibson, in *Neuromancer* (1984), dubbed it “cyberspace” and “the matrix”: “bright lattices of logic unfolding across that colorless void.” It hadn’t quite arrived, and he idealized it: “a vast thing, beyond knowing, a sea of information coded in spiral and pheromone, infinite intricacy that only the body, in its strong blind way, could ever read.” Many spend time there now, living in a mode of continuous connection afforded by “phones” that are not really phones.

In science fiction, of course, the denizens of cyberspace include not only humans but “artificial” intelligences, and here they come. The AIs are not only the new favorite topic for prognosticators, they are also seen as potential replacements. It’s all too tempting to approach them as oracles in themselves: our new blind seers.

Alan Turing predicted in 1950 that the advent of thinking machines was near. Ever since, some scientists have endeavored to create them while also warning of the day they would render humans superfluous. Before they eliminate us, they might merely imitate us, as “replicants” do in Philip K. Dick’s *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968) and Ridley Scott’s brilliant adaptation, *Blade Runner* (1982). Even the replicants don’t know for sure whether they are human or machine. The possibility of confusing one with the other has been a fear since Turing made it the linchpin of his famous test for intelligence. It’s a live problem now, as generative AI writes student essays and ersatz books, and AI-powered bots mingle with the humans on social media.

The most alarming prognosis for artificial intelligence is the one known as the Singularity. That’s when AI becomes self-aware and self-sustaining—a powerful new life-form—and human history ends. AI takes control, and we are supplanted or exterminated (take your pick). The idea of the Singularity, with a capital S, was first popularized by the science fiction writer Vernor Vinge in 1993: “It is a point where our old models must be discarded and a new reality rules.... The passing of humankind from center stage.” He expected the moment to come between 2005 and 2030. Tech people loved it. The self-described futurist Ray Kurzweil promoted the idea in *The Singularity Is*

Near (2005), declaring confidently, “I set the date for the Singularity—representing a profound and disruptive transformation in human capability—as 2045.” For Kurzweil, the Singularity was good news: a version of immortality, humanity transcended. He organized a series of yearly “Singularity Summits” and has now produced a sequel, *The Singularity Is Nearer*, published last June. He doesn’t think much of plain, unaugmented humans: “We are far from optimal, especially with regard to thinking.”

This is futurology at its silliest. At least the Singularity would mean the end of futurology, as Adamson notes:

The Singularity is like an astronomical black hole, swallowing all possibility of future speculation into its gravitational field. When we are surpassed by AIs, the veil will descend...and the machines will sit in judgment over us, new Gods that we ourselves have enthroned.

Others have mocked the Singularity as “the Nerd Rapture.” The resemblance to Christian eschatology is unmistakable—worshipers drawn to the promise of end times, the zero hour, the Last Judgment. Both Raptures imply a moral reckoning: the chosen move on while the rest are left behind. Both also represent a form of escapism. Why worry about earthly problems like climate change and economic inequality when superhumans are about to achieve immortal transcendence?

The reliable forecast about computing machines is that they get better, faster, and smaller. Otherwise, the industry that makes them has been notably poor at predicting the future of its own products. Intelligence itself remains slippery and ill-defined; entrepreneurs are prone to hype, and humans have a known tendency to anthropomorphize shiny objects, particularly when we can talk to them. But it’s no use asking OpenAI’s ChatGPT, Google’s Gemini, or the one actually named Oracle AI to tell us what the future will bring. They don’t even have knowledge of the present; they have only reams of preexisting text and algorithms for manipulating and rearranging it.

Adamson, having exposed various strains of failed futurology, suggests nonetheless that we will and should continue to make our best guesses, competing with one another, always remembering that every prediction is a statement about the present: “They can’t be constructed so as to cancel one another out, but must be mutually legible and compatible. This, it seems to me, is the work that futurology still has before it.”

For the last fourteen years, Wikipedia has included a forward-looking entry titled “Timeline of the Far Future,” continually growing. At present it begins, “While the future cannot be predicted with certainty, present understanding in various scientific fields allows for the prediction of some far-future events, if only in the broadest outline.” The project is understood to be provisional and in flux. An editor responsible for one recent addition justified it with the comment, “Adds a bit of hope.” A different editor deleted it a few seconds later. ●

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In Lieu of Love

Vivian Gornick

Instead of a Letter

by Diana Athill, with
an afterword by Lena Dunham.
New York Review Books,
232 pp., \$16.95 (paper)

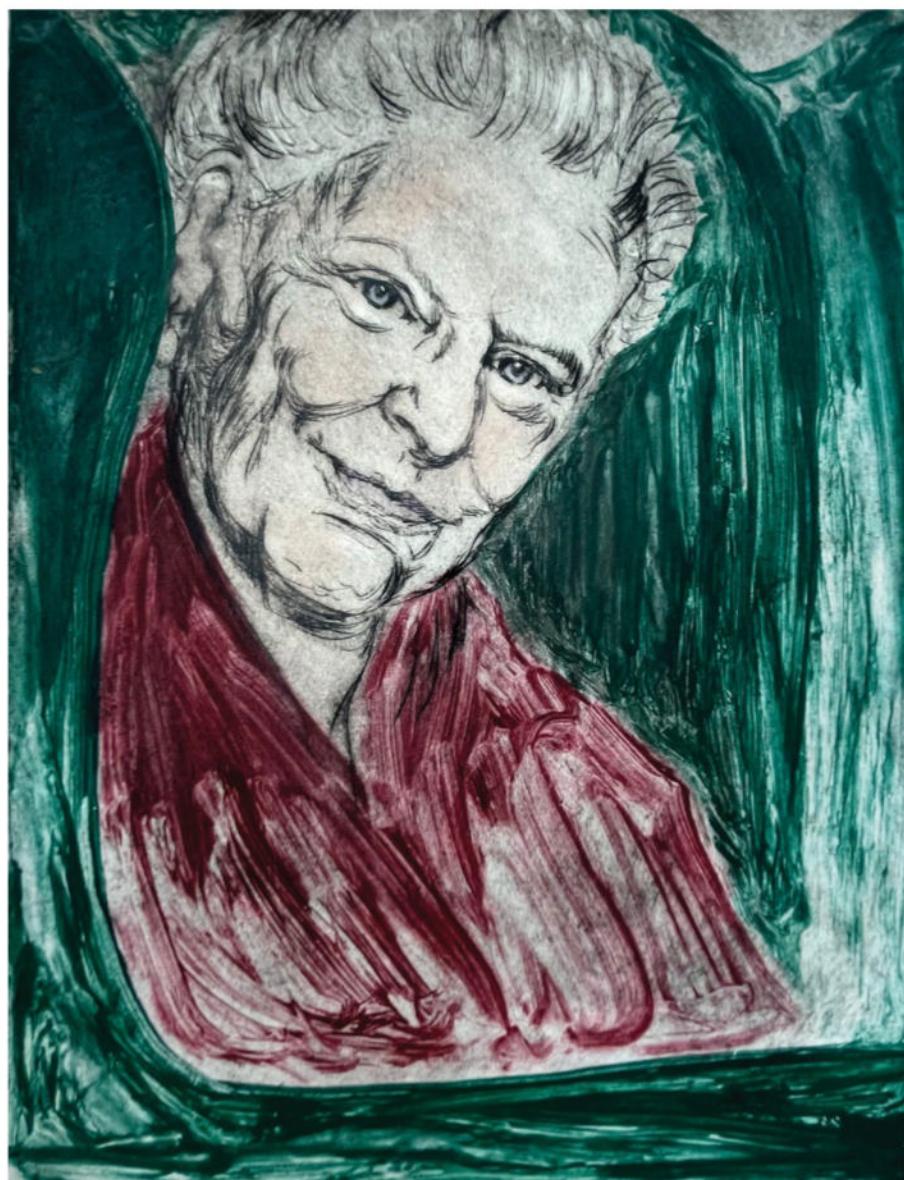
In 1962, when she was in her mid-forties and one of the best-known book editors in the English-speaking world, Diana Athill published *Instead of a Letter*, the first of the nine memoirs she would write before her death in 2019, at the age of 101. It is to my mind the only one of the lot that is fully realized.

Athill was born in 1917 into an upper-middle-class English family and raised on their country estate in Norfolk, amid a crowd of relatives about whom she either speaks well or remains silent. In just one regard does she pass judgment. Though most members of the family had neither power nor money, what they did have—in spades—were the smugness and arrogance of class certainty. They all knew they were the best, which meant that everyone not like them was more than slightly unreal. As Athill herself developed into a genuine liberal who nonetheless loved her relatives unreservedly, she is to be commended for firmly condemning the odiousness of her family's prejudices.

When Diana was fifteen years old an exciting young man whom she calls Paul came to the estate as a tutor to her younger brother, Andrew. She instantly fell in love with him and, in time, he with her. When she was seventeen they became engaged to be married. But before this would come her university degree. She always counted a happy childhood as her first formative experience, and her years at Oxford as her second. "I owe to Oxford," she writes in *Instead of a Letter*, "much of the stability and resilience which enabled me, later, to live through twenty years of unhappiness without coming to dislike life."

In 1939, during her final year, Paul, who had joined the Royal Air Force, was posted abroad to Egypt. The plan was for Diana to join him upon graduation, when they would marry and live happily ever after. For a few months there was a great deal of ardent letter writing between them, after which the unthinkable happened: Paul, suddenly and without explanation, stopped writing. Diana sent him letter after letter, begging for a response. None came. She never saw him again. Two years later she received a formal letter pleading for his release from their engagement—he wished to marry someone else. He was later killed in the war, but his death did nothing to relieve the pain of his desertion. This was her third formative experience, and without question the most consequential.

For Athill, the essence of a woman's identity—of femaleness itself, in fact—turned on the achievements of marriage and motherhood. Growing up, as she did, among innumerable female relatives—mother, grandmother, aunts, cousins—all of whom saw themselves first and foremost as mothers and wives, she saw



Diana Athill; illustration by Gaby Wood

no other identity as remotely possible, much less acceptable. When Paul jilted her—and especially in the way he jilted her—she concluded not that he had done something unconscionable but that she was at fault. The loss of self-confidence was profound. She felt herself a failure at life; not only would she be alone forever, but this was a destiny she deserved. "I was a lively girl only in my capacity as a female, and once I was wounded in that capacity I became, to face the truth, dull," she writes. Decades later it occurs to her that perhaps it was her "absolute acceptance" of her own in-born deficiency, rather than Paul's, "which put the seal on my loneliness for so much of my life."

She went permanently off love: never again would she risk the kind of rejection that told her she was not a real woman. Sex was a different matter. She didn't go looking for men, but if they turned up she slept with them.

For the next forty years Diana Athill would experience sex without love in abundance. She never describes what it was like to make love, but she does tell us, with somewhat jarring equanimity, that when the sex wasn't good it was a disappointment to be endured without complaint, whereas when it was good it was cheering. Now there's a word for sex only an upper-class Brit could have written. It tells you, the reader, something important: its author is prepared to let you in and, at the same time, keep you at bay.

The narrator of the Athill memoirs is an observant but not especially introspective woman; psychological acuity is not the name of her game. What she does give us, however, are moments of emotional shrewdness, dotting the text with bits of insight and wisdom useful or amusing to the reader. In just *Instead of A Letter* we get, on the insult of her fiancé's desertion, "The humiliations of grief are revolting"; on her parents' unhappy marriage, "To be constantly loved and desired by someone whose touch is repulsive to you is a profound outrage"; on the lapses in her education, "I do not regret knowing nothing about mathematics, but I am sorry that I [developed a] block about Latin, and I believe that it could have been undermined" by better teaching; on her years at school in the 1930s, "I went up to Oxford...and I did not join the Communist Party" because "I was lazy." (This last references the years when droves of Oxbridge students arrived at school and almost immediately joined the party.)

Upon graduation Diana went down to London, got a low-level wartime job as a researcher at the BBC, and met André Deutsch, a Hungarian Jew who had fled Budapest in 1939 and was bent on becoming a publisher. Their friendship survived a brief, lackluster affair, and in 1952 they opened a publishing house that bore Deutsch's name. Here Athill discovered her métier. Over the next forty years she

became the celebrated editor of some of the most important writers of the twentieth century, among them V.S. Naipaul, Jean Rhys, Norman Mailer, John Updike, Margaret Atwood, and Wole Soyinka.

The memoir that gives us a detailed account of Athill's working life is *Stet: An Editor's Life*, published in 2000. Here we learn that the indisputable figure at the center of André Deutsch Ltd. was Deutsch himself. Diana makes clear that from the start she avoided the business end of the firm and was happy editing. We never learn anything about the work itself—how she taught herself to do it or how she learned that she was good at it—but she does tell us, all too cursorily, that she was treated as a second-class citizen at the firm, a situation she had long looked upon with "a sort of amused resignation." Despite her title of founding director, she routinely received less office space, less money, less intellectual regard than her male counterparts. It is only now that she is thinking seriously about all that:

I have been asked by younger women how I brought myself to accept this situation so calmly, and I suppose that part of the answer must be conditioning.... Many women of my age must remember how...you actually saw yourself...as men saw you, so you knew what would happen if you became assertive and behaved in a way which men thought tiresome and ridiculous. Grotesquely, you would start to look tiresome and ridiculous in your own eyes. Even now I would rather turn and walk away than risk my voice going shrill and my face going red as I slither into the sickening humiliation of undercutting my own justified anger by my own idiotic ineptitude.

The burden of this passage lies with "even now." So much in these memoirs hangs on that: words written by a woman who throughout her life dreaded risking censure, which is why her books describe but do not probe her innermost experience. They also account for the failure of nerve that left her feeling dull and emptied out for so many years after Paul's defection, in some important way unfitting herself to connect with the world at large:

Of social life I had, and still have, almost none.... People who have more than three or four friends whom they wish to see often, who come and go to dinner parties and so on with a wide circle of acquaintances whose company they enjoy although they do not know them very well, fill me with envious admiration.

In the winter of 1958, for no apparent reason, Athill found herself writing a story, then another, and yet another. That spring she submitted one of these short fictions to a newspaper competition, and to her amazement it won

first prize. Apparently she was a writer! A kind of shock wave went through her. Certainly there was pleasure and pride in this, but, remarkably, there was also happiness. For the first time in nearly twenty years, the emptiness within began to evaporate.

And just as suddenly, *Instead of a Letter*, the book we are reading, comes brilliantly into focus. The organizing principle of the memoir clarifies. We see the through line that has been running just beneath the surface of the narrative. All along an inner life has slowly been cohering. As in a novel, we have been traveling with the protagonist as she moves steadily toward the moment when she becomes herself.

In 1962, *Instead of a Letter* was published to rave reviews. Five years later Athill produced a novel, which, along with a story collection she published earlier in 1962, received only a respectable amount of attention. It would be twenty-four years before a second memoir, *After a Funeral*, emerged from Athill's pen, this one demonstrating conclusively that personal narrative was the genre in which she excelled.

The great appeal of Athill's memoir writing can be traced to the clarity of its sentences and the distinctiveness of its tone of voice: upper-class buoyancy. Together these elements achieve an openness of spirit; their author looks with good-natured forbearance on everyone and everything that comes her way. There is a moment in *Stet* that exemplifies this posture.

Diana has become acquainted with the Irish writer Molly Keane and obviously wishes the acquaintanceship to evolve into a friendship, but Keane does not pick up the ball. Instead of feeling rebuffed, as many others might, Diana speculates that Keane must be among those astonishingly busy people who feel "almost regretful on recognizing exceptionally congenial qualities in a newly met person, because one knows one no longer has the energy to clear an adequate space for them." It isn't honesty that compels Athill to tell this story so much as a preoccupation with accuracy. She not only wants to get the experience down, she wants to get it down *right*. That is the operative need driving her work, opening it to a degree of frankness that fills thousands of Athill readers with respect and admiration—even when the subject of one or more of her books is problematic and the work as a whole may not exactly arrive.

"One evening in the summer of 1963 I ran downstairs to answer the door," begins *After a Funeral*, which tells the story of her relationship with Waguih Ghali, an Egyptian writer of colossally bad character with whom Athill became infatuated. She had fallen in love with the manuscript for *Beer in the Snooker Club*, Ghali's only book, which André Deutsch Ltd. would publish in 1964. Now, at her invitation, its author was on her London doorstep.

We are told at the outset that Didi—the name Athill gives Ghali—is the poor relation of a wealthy family, living in exile from both his country and his relatives. The Egyptian government had withdrawn his passport in



the 1950s because of his membership in the Communist Party, and the family had been cruelly unloving from his birth on. When Athill meets him, he has been living hand to mouth for some years as a stateless person in Germany, longing to settle in London, the city of his heart.

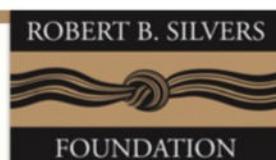
Athill is instantly enchanted, as are most people upon meeting Didi. They seem to fall quickly under the spell of his remarkable charm and wit. What they cannot immediately grasp is that he is possessed of a deeply disordered personality. A compulsive gambler, alcoholic, and womanizer, he will soon prove a beguiling deadbeat who exploits every connection he makes. Athill, it turns out, is one of the easiest marks Didi has ever encountered. In no time at all—within weeks of their

meeting—he is living in her spare room, and she is all but supporting him. *After a Funeral* is a blow-by-blow account of Didi's incredible and repetitious transgressions and Athill's equally incredible and equally repetitive forgiveness.

Athill is nothing if not understanding. She describes Didi's outrageous behavior—he lies, he cheats, he steals—with a kind of social worker's patience regarding what she calls his "illness." It's her upbringing, she suspects, her inbred "niceness," that demands she go the extra mile for someone as emotionally broken as Didi. Needless to say, she does so to no avail. "I had naively hoped that if he could be made to feel that someone's affection would endure whatever he did, his sense of his own value might be restored," she writes. "It worked the other way. The kinder and more patient people were with him, the more evil he felt himself to be."

From the start Diana wants to sleep with Didi, and from the start he—who sleeps with any and every woman who comes his way—rejects her. Only once, toward the end of their tortured liaison, do they make what Athill calls love. Clearly this is a power move on his part. When, in 1969, Didi commits suicide in Athill's flat, he leaves his diaries open for her to read. What does she find in these pages? "His physical revulsion for me expressed in words"—he just doesn't know how he has gone on living with her all this time.

What makes *After a Funeral* so much a product of Athill's generation



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is her devotion to a relentlessly degrading relationship. The worse Didi acts, the more understanding Diana is, and the more understanding she wants the reader to be. "He couldn't love if he was loved in return," we are told, "because he could only...know love as the loneliness and pain which he had learnt as a child." I do not believe a woman of the next generation would so easily have written these words and let it go at that. They reminded me of the moment in the 1970s when the women's movement began to find its feet, and critics who were put off by its rhetoric begged the revolutionary young feminists to remember that men acted badly because their egos were fragile: the demands of the movement were destroying them.

Episode after episode puts Didi's fragility at center stage and Diana's sense of injury on the defensive edge. Nothing moves either of them off that dime. Didi at the beginning is Didi at the end, and so is Athill. Thus the story never deepens, and the memoir cannot achieve the status of literature. The first time I read *After a Funeral* I threw it halfway across the room; the second time, as I prepared to write this essay, it hit the wall.

In 1971, Athill met and became entranced by yet another distressingly disordered man. *Make Believe* (1993) tells the story of her affair with Hakim Jamal, a Black American militant who, like Ghali, gained Athill's unstinting empathy, only this time to the accompaniment of headlines around the world.

Jamal was born Allen Donaldson and grew up in the Roxbury slums of Boston. By the age of twelve he was addicted to alcohol, by fourteen to heroin; by his early twenties he was doing time for attempted murder. In jail he read and taught himself to write, and he soon converted to Islam, began worshiping Malcolm X, and renamed himself. After his release he became a self-styled leader of the 1960s Black Power movement. In fact the work Jamal did for the movement was as negligible as his temper was violent and his working habits undisciplined. He also fantasized himself God. What he was really good at was seducing women. He had notable, much-publicized affairs with white middle-class women including the American actress Jean Seberg; Gale Benson, the daughter of an English MP; and Athill.

When Jamal appeared in her office with a book proposal under his arm in 1971, Athill instantly yearned for him. "The story of that beautiful child being made to hate and despise himself," she writes in *Make Believe*, "wrung my heart, and the extent to which he had been stunted and twisted by his circumstance enraged me."

Almost immediately Athill takes Jamal home, and very soon she sleeps with him. The experience is magical:

He sank right into me with the release of tension. He lay on me, holding me, kissing and kissing and kissing my cheeks, my eyes, and my mouth, over and over again.... The fucking hadn't made me come, but the tenderness of this did.

From start to finish Athill sees Jamal almost exclusively as a spiritually soulful person whose needs are far more worthy of fulfillment than her own. These needs, of course, include sleeping with other women all the while he's with Diana.

Athill had known Jamal a year when, together with Benson, he traveled to Trinidad to visit the commune of the Black Power militant Michael X, a man who had gained the political respect of many liberals and radicals in England and the United States but had recently become bent on mayhem. There, under Michael's orders and possibly with the complicity of Jamal, Benson was murdered in what looked like a ritual killing. Soon after this horrifying event, Jamal returned to Boston, where on May 1, 1973, he himself was murdered. The Boston police attributed his death to the followers of Elijah Muhammad, the Nation of Islam leader, who was thought to be responsible for the assassination of Malcolm X.

Make Believe received its share of literary applause, but not all the reviews were admiring. *The New Statesman* called it "a deeply disturbing book [that] enacts a racist fantasy" in its portrayal of Athill's attraction to Black culture's "supposed air of primitive vitality, danger and primal sexuality." Perhaps sex without love is not always so enlightening a project.

Athill published six more books after *Make Believe*, all of them distributed as memoirs, although I would call most of them reminiscences, as these are works in which Athill makes sketchy use of old biographical material—the affair with Paul gets repeated airings—while musing on a variety of preoccupations that do not shape a specific experience, which is what I think a memoir should do. The one work in which these musings do cohere around a single subject is *Somewhere Towards the End*, the 2008 book that won her enduring celebrity, and the one that reveals her fully as the amiable popularizer she was.

She was almost ninety when she wrote it, and from the beginning she announces that its subject is her old age. She also announces the constraint she has put herself under in choosing to write it:

When you begin discussing old age you come up against reluctance to depress either others or yourself, so you tend to focus on the more agreeable aspects of it: coming to terms with death, the continuing presence of young people, the discovery of new pursuits and so on.

This caveat was really not necessary, because anyone among Athill's legions of admirers could have testified that throughout her writing life she had assiduously avoided depressing anyone. And never more so than

here, where that famous upbeat tone of hers becomes instructive as well, directing the aging reader to stay active, cultivate young friends and new interests, exercise, take up gardening. It reminded me of a moment in *Stet* when a morbidly depressed V.S. Naipaul asks Athill how she manages to "surviv[e] the horribleness of life" and she tells him, "By relying on simple pleasures such as the taste of fruit, the delicious sensations of a hot bath or clean sheets, the way flowers tremble very slightly with life, the lilt of a bird's flight." I could just see Naipaul staring at her.

The question of who is being addressed in *Somewhere Towards the End* became an interesting one for me. At one point Athill observes that "dwindling energy is one of the most boring things about being old.... You just have to resign yourself to doing less," and I suddenly realized how often the generic "you" is employed here—"You can do this, you can try that"—almost as though this is a self-help book. For whom, exactly, I thought. Then Athill herself had the same thought.

She is, of course, addressing the reader most like herself—that is, middle-class and middlebrow—and how could it be otherwise? For whom, after all, does one write except oneself and one's familiars? But when Athill realizes the possible consequence of her assumptions, she immediately, to her considerable credit, moves to correct for any social injury they might be inflicting:

How successfully one manages to get through [aging] depends a good deal more on luck than it does on one's own efforts. If one has no money, ill health, a mind never sharpened by an interesting education or absorbing work, a childhood warped by cruel or inept parents, a sex life that betrayed one into disastrous relationships...if one has any one, or some, or all of those disadvantages, or any one, or some, or all of others that I can't bear to envisage, then whatever is said about old age by a luckier person such as I am is likely to be meaningless, or even offensive. I can speak only for, and to, the lucky.

Taken all in all, Diana Athill was a woman of parts. She endured a worthy loneliness—that of the lifelong single woman—all the while keeping company with her own working mind. Even when her subject was slight or misguided, as I sometimes thought, she wrote to make sense of things. That's what writing meant to her. Very often the work reads as though she is listening to the sound of her own life coming back at her through the words she is writing, and she is speaking to that sound. In the great tradition of personal narrative, her voice was at once her instrument and her subject. ●

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A Daring Departure

Colin B. Bailey

Paris 1874:

The Impressionist Moment

an exhibition at the Musée d'Orsay, Paris, March 26–July 14, 2024, and the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., September 8, 2024–January 19, 2025.

Catalog of the exhibition edited by Sylvie Patry and Anne Robbins with Kimberly A. Jones and Mary Morton. Musée d'Orsay/National Gallery of Art, 287 pp., \$65.00 (distributed by Yale University Press)

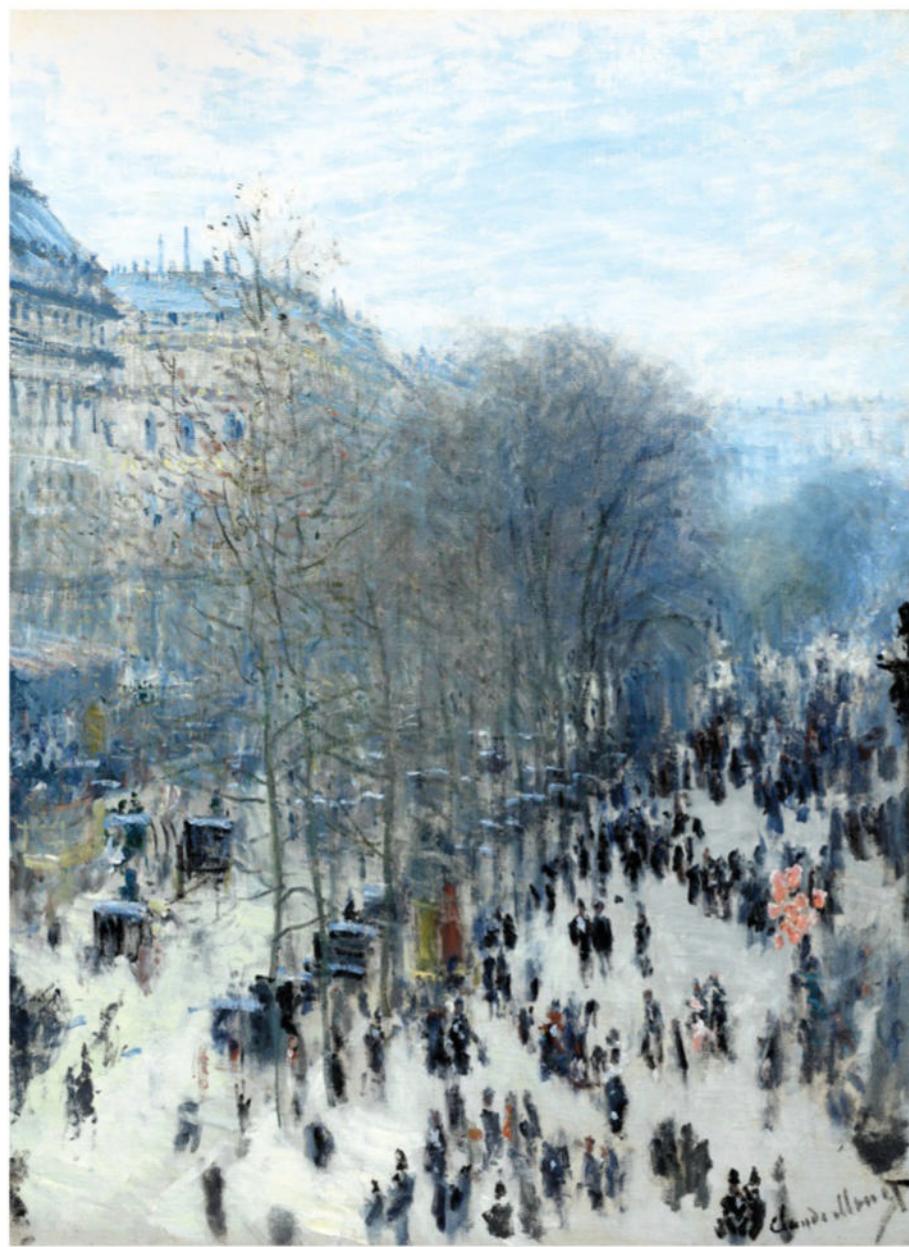
Paris in Ruins: Love, War, and the Birth of Impressionism

by Sebastian Smee.

Norton, 370 pp., \$35.00

"The Impressionist painters, especially Monet and Sisley, had delicate sensations, quite close to each other; as a result their canvases all look alike." Henri Matisse's reservations were shared by other early-twentieth-century advocates of modernism. Clive Bell criticized Monet for his "bad science" and the Impressionists in general for leading artists down a "blind alley" with "absurd notions about scientific representation." The Irish poet and critic George Moore—who had sat for Manet—claimed that Monet had been too concerned with the "rapid noting of illusive appearance." For the German critic and art historian Julius Meier-Graefe, the "improvisation of the Impressionists" was but a transitory stage in artistic development. Writing in 1908, he declared that Manet, Degas, Cézanne, and Renoir were the "four mighty columns" of modern art. Roger Fry considered Cézanne and Renoir apart from their Impressionist brethren, with Renoir ascending to an "efflorescence of creative power" in his later years, and he praised Renoir's nudes from this period for their "realization of plastic relief."

In 1974, the centenary of the first Impressionist exhibition in Paris, such hesitations and distinctions were a thing of the past. The paintings of the seven Impressionists—Monet, Renoir, Pissarro, Degas, Sisley, Cézanne, and Morisot—who were among the thirty-one participants in the show that took place in the photographer Nadar's former studio on the boulevard des Capucines between April 15 and May 15, 1874, had become icons of nineteenth-century art, voraciously collected and popular among museumgoers on both sides of the Atlantic. The heroic struggle for recognition of these six men and one woman had been meticulously documented in John Rewald's pioneering *History of Impressionism*, which had first appeared in 1946. (By 1974 it was in its fourth edition.) In September 1974, Paris's Grand Palais mounted an exhibition of masterpieces entitled "Centenaire de l'impressionnisme." Comprising only forty-two paintings dating between 1858 and 1886, it included works by Manet, Bazille, and Caillebotte—none of whom had participated in the inaugural Impressionist exhibition—and only eight that had appeared on the walls of Nadar's studio a hundred years earlier. On view



Claude Monet: Boulevard des Capucines, 1873–1874

for just over two months, it was seen by more than half a million visitors.

The next two decades witnessed a renaissance in the scholarship on Impressionism, with monographs and studies of the movement by art historians such as John House, T. J. Clark, Richard Schiff, and Robert L. Herbert, the latter a frequent contributor to these pages. The 1980s and 1990s were also a heyday for ambitious exhibitions on the individual artists as well as on the group as a whole, accompanied by impressive catalogs—often of considerable heft—with new visual, literary, and archival material. While the popularity of Impressionist exhibitions gives no sign of declining—witness the response to the Metropolitan Museum of Art's recent "Manet/Degas"¹—in his introduction to *A Companion to Impressionism* (2021) André Dombrowski notes that scholarly engagement has "since diminished, along with interest in European art and visual culture of the nineteenth century more broadly." A note of barely concealed condescension permeates recent reassessments of the movement. It has been characterized as one of "pretty pictures" beloved by the general public, and while recognized as "a crucial episode in the rise of modernist painting," it has been co-opted to satisfy museumgoers "at

an ever more frenetic pace as impressionist exhibition chases impressionist exhibition." Even Jason Farago's generally positive and well-informed review of "Paris 1874: The Impressionist Moment" in *The New York Times* lamented that such exhibitions are a "preordained crowd pleaser," described Impressionist paintings as schmaltzy, and raised the question, "Does loving Impressionism make me basic?"²

Paris 1874: The Impressionist Moment," the blockbuster show celebrating the 150th anniversary of the first Impressionist exhibition, co-organized by the Musée d'Orsay and the National Gallery of Art, garnered both enthusiastic attendance—some 725,000 visitors in Paris, the second most in the Orsay's history—and very positive reviews. In Paris the 150 or more works on display—forty-five of which had been shown at the official Salon of 1874—were installed in spacious galleries, with the Impressionists grouped separately for the most part, and paintings and sculptures exhibited at the official Salon were placed in contiguous rooms. The exhibition was accompanied by a virtual reality component, which lasted for almost

two hours.³ The National Gallery chose not to offer this program, but it has been remounted at Eclipto centers in Atlanta and New York as a forty-five-minute immersive experience entitled "Tonight with the Impressionists."

In John Russell Pope's stately galleries in Washington, the installation of "Paris 1874" was a somewhat tamer, more academic affair. It opened with Monet's *Impression, soleil levant* (*Impression, Sunrise*, 1872; see illustration on page 17)—the canvas that gave the movement its name, making its first voyage to the United States—placed next to Jean-Léon Gérôme's *L'Éminence grise* (1873), the crowd-pleaser of the Salon of 1874 and the recipient of its *médaille d'honneur*. (At the Orsay, *Impression, Sunrise* was given a room to itself.) In Washington, the encounter between Gérôme, a lifelong enemy of the Impressionists, and Monet was likely intended to contrast the polish of Salon paintings with the vigor and experimentation of the New Painting (as it also came to be known). But in Gérôme's meticulously executed historical melodrama, one is struck by the dappled light evoked by yellow patches of color that glance over the stone landing and stairs. That some of the freedoms introduced by advanced painting of the 1860s had infiltrated the work of such a bastion of officialdom was an unexpected takeaway from this opening salvo.

The integration of Impressionist and non-Impressionist paintings in Washington—only the final gallery of landscapes was devoted, with one exception, solely to the practitioners of the movement—had a tendency to blunt the lightness and fluidity as well as the vibrancy and audacity of the Impressionists' compositions. This was particularly the case with Monet's magisterial *Luncheon* (1868–1869), an exceptional loan from Frankfurt's Städel Museum that did not travel to Paris. Inspired by Manet's *Luncheon in the Studio* (1868)—for which Monet had modeled (as a stand-in) for the seated, smoking figure at right—*Luncheon* had been refused by the Salon of 1870 and was the most ambitious work in the Impressionist exhibition of 1874 (although it had been painted five years earlier). It was also the most expensive; priced at 5,000 francs, it remained unsold.⁴ With

³Produced by Excurio and Gédéon Experiences, in collaboration with the Musée d'Orsay.

⁴The generally high—and ambitious—prices at which the Impressionists hoped to sell their work are known from the critic Philippe Burty's annotations to the 1874 exhibition catalog, which has only recently been published in full. See Anne Distel, "Un document impressionniste: la première version du catalogue de l'exposition de la Société anonyme des artistes peintres, sculpteurs, graveurs etc... Paris 1874" in Sérgolène Le Men and Félicie Faizand de Maupeou, *Collectionner l'impressionnisme: Le rôle des collectionneurs dans la constitution et la diffusion du mouvement* (Milan: Silvana Editoriale, 2022). Of the four paintings that sold during the run of the show, three were landscapes by Monet, Renoir, and Sisley (including the notorious *Impression, soleil levant*), all of which were priced at 1,000 francs.

¹See my review in these pages, December 21, 2023.

²"How the Impressionists Became the World's Favorite Painters, and the Most Misunderstood," October 10, 2024.

the painting crammed in the center of room 5 at the National Gallery, one couldn't easily absorb the complex spatial and societal issues explored in this rarely lent full-length work, a celebration of bourgeois prosperity, paternity, and propriety, although the models for the painting were Monet's mistress, Camille Doncieux, and their son, Jean, born out of wedlock in August 1867. This was all the more frustrating since an entire wall in a neighboring gallery displayed a reproduction of Léon Bonnat's *Christ on the Cross*, commissioned in 1873 for the Cour d'Assises of the Palais de Justice in Paris and exhibited at the Salon of 1874. (This painting had not been part of the Orsay exhibition.)

Such caveats aside, "Paris 1874: The Impressionist Moment" was an exceptional curatorial and scholarly achievement, admirably fulfilling the organizers' brief to revisit an exhibition that has become "both fabled and little known today." (*À la fois mythique et méconnu*: the French is more eloquent.) Both on the walls and in the pages of the excellent catalog it was made clear that the first Impressionist exhibition—on view for a month but almost a year in preparation—was a complex, heterogeneous, and in some ways marginal affair. As has long been established, only seven of the thirty-one participants were Impressionists, and only one quarter of the approximately 215 works on view in Nadar's galleries were by these artists. Planning for a group exhibition independent of the Salon was initially the responsibility of Monet and Pissarro, who launched the project in May 1873. (They were joined later that year by Renoir and in early 1874 by Degas.) This was not to be a *Salon des Refusés* but a commercial undertaking that would open two weeks before the annual Salon, which in May 1874 showed some 3,657 works in twenty-four galleries and was seen by more than 300,000 visitors during its seven-week run. (Critics complained that it was a veritable Tower of Babel, "with a kilometer of paintings to make one's way through.") By contrast, the first Impressionist exhibition was installed in seven (or eight) rooms and had an attendance of around 3,500 visitors.

Notably absent from the supporters of this project was the dealer Paul Durand-Ruel, who had been buying works by Manet and his younger colleagues and exhibiting them in his London gallery since the winter of 1870. (Durand-Ruel lent two works by Sisley to the Impressionist exhibition in 1874 but acquired nothing from it.) This archeconservative likely resented the cooperative structure of the group and was an avowed enemy of the current French government. As Renoir noted many years later, "We needed a reactionary to defend our painting, which Salon-goers said was revolutionary. Here was one person, at least, who was unlikely to be shot as a Communist!" In an article that appeared on the front page of *Le Figaro* on October 31, 1873, Durand-Ruel blamed the slump in his business on

the fear of falling again into the hands of republicans, and we all aspire, both as Frenchmen and as tradesmen, to the return of the hereditary monarchy, which is the only institution that can bring an end to our difficulties.

The decision to rent Nadar's former studio for 2,020 francs was a good one, since the premises with their immense glass windows on the third and fourth floors were something of a landmark in the heart of one of Paris's most fashionable tourist areas, opposite the Grand Hôtel with its seven hundred rooms, near the Jockey Club, and not far from the theater district. Monet and his colleagues added (and paid for) an entrance canopy, a turnstile, and security. In the end Renoir was responsible for the relatively spacious hang—to a friend in early April he noted that he was "still not quite out of the woods with this

establish a self-administered corporation not requiring state authorization. Constituted on December 31, 1873, the Société des Artistes Peintres, Sculpteurs, Graveurs et Lithographes was intended to last for ten years, with annual exhibitions permitting the sale of works and a commitment to publish a regular journal. Each member paid an annual fee of 60 francs to provide a minimum capital of 1,200 francs. Seven years earlier Bazille—who was killed in November 1870 at the Battle of Beaune-la-Rolande—had attempted to launch such an independent artists' collective but had succeeded in raising only 2,500 francs. From the financial

cast their net wide. Efforts had been made to recruit painters such as Henri Fantin-Latour, Jean-Jacques Henner, and James Tissot, all of whom declined to participate. As late as April 6, 1874, a little over a week before the vernissage, Degas was still urging Manet to exhibit with them, though he had steadfastly refused. Confident that Manet could be persuaded to change his mind, Degas informed the engraver Félix Bracquemond that "riled up by Fantin and his own self-induced panic, Manet still refuses to join us; but as yet nothing seems to be definitively settled." In fact it was. Manet had sent four paintings to the Salon of 1874 (two of which were rejected) and did not yield to Degas's blandishments. However, he agreed to lend Morisot's ravishing *Hide-and-Seek* (1873) to the exhibition.

It is clear that a primary motivation for organizing this independent exhibition in April 1874—one of some twenty-five art shows mounted in Paris that year—was the artists' growing frustration with the annual Salon and its jury. The Impressionists' exhibition was not intended as a "contre-Salon." Not only did it open well before the official celebrations at the Palais de l'Industrie, but at least one third of those participating in it also had work on view at the Salon of 1874 (notably Eugène Boudin and Giuseppe De Nittis). But if the organizers were far from constituting an avant-garde collective with a new shared aesthetic, their efforts were not without risk. The collector and writer Théodore Duret—heir to a dynasty of Cognac distributors and an early champion of the Impressionists—argued forcefully against such a venture, telling Pissarro in mid-February 1874:

You have one last barrier to surmount, namely becoming known by the public and accepted by all the dealers and art lovers. For this, there are only the auctions at the hôtel Drouot and the great exhibition at the Palais de l'Industrie.... Your group exhibitions will not help you gain a reputation. The public does not go to them. You need to make a name for yourselves, to brave and confront the critics, to present yourselves to the general public. This can only be done by exhibiting at the Palais de l'Industrie.

Two things emerge from a close reading of the reviews of the first Impressionist exhibition: the generally favorable response of the press—of around sixty articles published, only seven were overtly hostile—and the critics' focus on the paintings of the core members of the group rather than those artists (the majority, in fact) who did not work in this advanced style. Ernest Chesneau, the critic for *Paris-Journal*, even complained that the corporation had opened its doors too widely, admitting "all the incompetents, all the hangers-on at the official exhibitions." While Louis Leroy's pungent critique of the exhibition in *Le Charivari*, in which the group was given its name in print for the first time, is often cited as indicative of the philistinism and incomprehension of the art press (and the public generally), the lengthy review by the distinguished critic Jules-Antoine



Pierre-Auguste Renoir: *La Loge (Theater Box)*, 1874

complicated installation"—in which the works were placed on walls of reddish-brown fabric, shown on two levels only, and not skied as at the Salon.⁵ From a meticulous rereading of the journalists' reviews of the exhibition and a study of the floor plan of Nadar's studio, the curators of "Paris 1874" have been able to reconstruct digitally the arrangement in the various rooms, one of the most fascinating additions to the corpus of scholarship on this topic.

Monet and Pissarro created a *société anonyme*, or joint-stock company, modeled on the charter of a bakers' union in Pontoise, that allowed them to es-

records found among Pissarro's papers, we know that the first Impressionist exhibition incurred expenses of over 9,000 francs and that, *pace* Monet's recollections of Nadar's generosity, the photographer had charged rent for the use of his premises. Revenue from attendance and sales was disappointing—of the 102 works available for purchase, only four were sold—and after the accounts were drawn up, each member still owed the société 184 francs. Not surprisingly, it was dissolved in April 1875.⁶

The need for financial support led Monet and his fellow organizers to

⁵"After two days, Renoir undertook this delicate task on his own," wrote George Rivière in *Renoir et ses amis* (Paris: H. Flory, 1921), p. 46. In an undated (and unpublished) letter to his friend Philippe Burty, likely written in mid-April 1874, Renoir claimed that while he would have liked to chat with him about Japonisme, "je ne suis pas encore complètement débrouillé avec cet accrochage compliqué." The letter is in the Musée du Louvre.

⁶See the documents assembled and reproduced in John Rewald, *Histoire de l'impressionnisme* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1986), pp. 383–395. In the Archives de Paris, Catherine Méneux has discovered the hitherto unpublished incorporation deeds of December 31, 1873, listing the twenty-two founding members of the Société des Artistes Peintres, Sculpteurs, Graveurs et Lithographes. See her essay "The Founding of the Cooperative Society," in *Paris 1874: The Impressionist Moment*.

Castagnary that appeared four days later in *Le Siècle*—a newspaper with a much larger readership of 40,000—provided sensitive and informed commentary. “They are *impressionists*,” he wrote, “in the sense that they render not a landscape but the sensation produced by a landscape.” Another ally, the critic Philippe Burty, identified the Impressionists’ “common artistic aim” as “in technique, the rendering of the broad daylight of the open air, and in feeling, the clarity of the initial sensation.” It should be noted, however, that even the most supportive critics were alarmed by the sketchiness and lack of finish of the Impressionists’ canvases, and at least one referred to the group show as an “exhibition of sketches” (*l’exposition des esquisses*).

In part, the relatively positive reception can be explained by the fact that the Impressionists’ pictorial strategies—the abandonment of traditional chiaroscuro, the use of coloristic modeling and syncopated brushwork—were not new in 1874. Manet had pioneered such innovations in his Salon paintings of the 1860s, and as his avatars—members of the École des Batignolles, immortalized in Fantin-Latour’s group portrait at the Salon of 1870—Monet and Renoir had already worked together in the summer of 1869 on a series of elaborate, experimental plein air landscapes at La Grenouillère, a somewhat raucous bathing and boating establishment twenty minutes by train from the Gare Saint-Lazare.

It takes a certain effort of the will (and imagination) to recover the daring and radicalism of many of the Impressionist paintings on view in Nadar’s studio in the spring of 1874, all of which are familiar and admired today. The “shock of the new” can still be experienced in front of a work such as Monet’s *Boulevard des Capucines* (see illustration on page 15), a sketch for the larger horizontal canvas today in Moscow’s Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, which was sent to the 1874 exhibition. Two gentlemen in top hats, indicated by a flurry of black strokes midway up the right-hand edge of the canvas, look down from the unseen balcony onto the teeming Parisian crowd below. Some of the passersby are shown walking, some in cabs, with a light dusting of snow visible on the pavement and the hoods of the carriages. As there were several frosty days in Paris in November and December 1873 (but no snow until February 1874), it is probable that Monet made this painting in late 1873.⁷ The sensation of a cold, wintry afternoon is palpable, but still striking today are the disembodied patches of pink impasto in the lower right-hand quadrant of the canvas that read almost as abstract patterns of paint. (They represent the balloons being hawked to children by one of the street vendors.)

Another of the paintings on view in 1874, Renoir’s *La Loge* (*Theater Box*) —one of the glories of London’s Courtauld Gallery and rarely seen outside Somerset House—was listed for sale

by the artist for the ambitious sum of 2,500 francs. After failing to find a buyer, it was shipped to London in November by Durand-Ruel to be shown in the Ninth Exhibition of French Artists in his galleries on New Bond Street, where it was exhibited as *At the Theater* and again went unsold. *La Loge* was finally acquired by the picture dealer Père Martin for 425 francs.⁸ (According to Ambroise Vollard, Renoir claimed that he was so desperate for money at the time that he agreed to part with the painting for 85 francs, but this is an unreliable reminiscence.) In *La Loge* Renoir placed his models—both dressed in considerable finery (note the man’s gold cuff link and white glove)—in one of the boxes closest to the stage in front of the drop curtain. These seats did not provide a partic-

essays in the catalog—is the effect of the recent Franco-Prussian War and Paris Commune on the core group of Impressionist painters. Can Impressionism, as a style and repertory of modern-life subjects, be understood as offering a sense of salvation and expiation after the ravages and dislocations of the dark days between Napoleon III’s surrender to the Prussian army at Sedan in September 1870 and the violent clashes of *la semaine sanglante* in Paris and the suppression of the Commune in May 1871? The turmoil, upheaval, and uncertainty experienced by Manet and the future Impressionists during this period is the subject of Sebastian Smee’s engrossing *Paris in Ruins: Love, War, and the Birth of Impressionism*. However, as the exhibition’s primary organizers, Anne

stroyed; he estimated that out of 1,500 canvases only forty paintings survived.⁹ Sisley suffered the same pillaging in Bougival. In September 1870, Morisot’s studio in Passy was commandeered by the army: “The militia are quartered in the studio, hence there is no way of using it.” Renoir, who was called up for duty on August 26, 1870, and assigned to a light cavalry regiment stationed outside Bordeaux, fell ill from dysentery and suffered a nervous collapse. Although he did not see battle, he painted almost nothing for seven months, returning in April 1871 to Paris, where he wandered the streets in the early evening to the sounds of cannon fire and bombing. With the Commune in full force, however, Renoir painted the beautiful portrait of the mistress of his friend Edmond Maître, arrayed in fashionable silks and lace, holding a Japanese fan, and looking pensively at an iron birdcage housing four budgerigars. (The canvas is signed and inscribed “April 1871.”)¹⁰

One needs to tread carefully when seeking the ramifications of the country’s defeat at the hands of the Prussian army and the depredations of the civil war in Paris for the emerging repertory of Impressionist canvases produced by the small group of artists leading the charge in April 1874. Does the specter of *L’Année terrible* preside in any meaningful way over the development of this new pictorial language? Do early Impressionist landscapes and subject pictures—or their more conservative counterparts shown at the Salon—serve as balm or expiation to assist in the recovery from national trauma? In place of this new orthodoxy, it is worth returning to Meyer Schapiro’s assessment of early Impressionism as an art of urban idylls, of spontaneous and informal sociability. In its continuities with advanced painting of the 1860s, he wrote in *Modern Art: 19th and 20th Centuries* (1978), Impressionism engaged—and celebrated—haute-bourgeois preoccupations with leisure, consumption, and luxury:

In enjoying realistic pictures of his surroundings as a spectacle of traffic and changing atmospheres, the cultivated rentier was experiencing in its phenomenal aspect that mobility of the environment, the market, and of industry to which he owed his income and his freedom. And in the new Impressionist techniques which broke things up into finely discriminated points of color, as well as in the “accidental” momentary vision, he found, in a degree hitherto unknown in art, conditions of sensibility closely related to those of the urban promenader and the refined consumer of luxury goods.



Claude Monet: *Impression, soleil levant* (Impression, Sunrise), 1872

ularly good view of the performance but gave their occupants exceptional visibility for the other members of the audience. The variety and rhythms of Renoir’s handling of paint evoke the sensation of a glance that lingers and hesitates before deciding upon its focus. François Debret’s Opéra Le Peletier had been ravaged by fire on the night of October 29, 1873, and since Charles Garnier’s new opera house would not be ready to mount performances until January 1875, the Paris Opéra was homeless when Renoir was at work on his painting. This might help explain the nostalgia, affection, and anticipation conveyed in his scene of Parisian highlife.

A subtheme in the exhibitions in both Paris and Washington—and an issue touched upon in several

⁸The *Dancer*, which had been priced at 3,500 francs at the Impressionist exhibition and remained in Renoir’s possession, was also included in Durand-Ruel’s show in New Bond Street, where it accompanied *La Loge* and was listed in the catalog as *A Ballet Dancer*. It also did not find a buyer in London and was returned to Renoir, who stored the painting in Durand-Ruel’s Paris gallery. In May 1878, *The Dancer* was eventually sold for 1,000 francs to Charles Deudon, heir to a Welsh mining fortune and a recent convert to Impressionism. See my *Renoir, Impressionism, and Full-Length Painting* (Frick Collection, 2012), pp. 45, 50.

Robbins and Sylvie Patry, note, not a single work in Nadar’s gallery in 1874 engaged directly with the consequences of France’s recent defeat and civil war. Is it reasonable to assume, as Smee writes, that visitors encountering Monet’s *Boulevard des Capucines* in Nadar’s galleries, for example, would have been conscious that this thoroughfare “had seen some of the most atrocious violence during Bloody Week”? There is no doubt that France’s humiliations in war and the recent carnage in the capital provided history painters and sculptors with subjects for the Salon. But among the works by the more advanced painters, Manet’s etching of women queuing at the butcher’s during the siege of Paris and his two lithographs and a large drawing in ink, watercolor, and gouache depicting the bloodshed of the Commune, produced in 1870–1871, were outliers. In their paintings and works on paper on view in the spring of 1874, the Impressionists returned to a repertory of modern-life subjects and suburban landscapes that had been established in the late 1860s.

Of course, all the future Impressionists had been deeply affected by the disruptions of the Franco-Prussian War and the subsequent civil unrest and famine in Paris. Both Pissarro and Sisley lost their homes and the contents of their studios to the Prussian onslaught. Pissarro’s property in Louveciennes was looted and de-

⁹Pissarro’s responses to these devastating losses are eloquently discussed in Anka Muhlstein’s *Camille Pissarro: The Audacity of Impressionism* (Other Press, 2023), pp. 92–95.

¹⁰For this wistful canvas, Renoir’s “Commune painting,” see my *Renoir’s Portraits: Impressions of an Age* (Yale University Press, 1997), pp. 114–116.

Rebooting the Pentagon

Fred Kaplan

Unit X: How the Pentagon and Silicon Valley Are Transforming the Future of War

by Raj M. Shah and Christopher Kirchhoff. Scribner, 319 pp., \$30.00

In 2006 Raj Shah was a captain in the US Air Force, piloting an F-16 fighter jet during the insurgency phase of the Iraq War. Not long into his tour of duty, he noticed a problem with the display screen in his cockpit: the signal from GPS satellites let him see a map of the terrain below, but there was no moving dot or icon to indicate his location in relation to coordinates on the ground. At times, on missions near the Iran–Iraq border, he couldn’t tell which country he was flying over. This was a dangerous situation: at five hundred miles per hour, one stray minute on the wrong side of the border could place him within range of Iranian air-defense weapons.

Back in his barracks, Shah had an early pocket PC called an iPAQ for playing video games. He loaded it with digital maps and strapped it to his knee while he flew. The software in that \$300 gadget let him see where he was—basic information that the gadgetry on his \$30 million plane could not provide.

Shah suddenly realized how far Silicon Valley had leaped ahead of the nation’s largest defense contractors in certain vital aspects of high-tech prowess. He also saw that this posed a danger to national security: the US military had long maintained an edge over its adversaries through technological superiority. Commercial software, like the tracker in his iPAQ, was available worldwide; at some point, possibly soon, the US would lose its edge—and could lose the next war.

Ten years later, after some time at business school and a cybersecurity firm, Shah was recruited to run a tiny Pentagon-funded start-up called Defense Innovation Unit Experimental (DIUX), whose mission was to cram some of Silicon Valley’s adventurous, streamlined methods into the military’s sclerotic weapons-building apparatus. In their new book, *Unit X*, Shah and his coleader in the project, Christopher Kirchhoff, tell the story of how DIUX began, met hostile resistance from nearly all corners of the defense establishment, but in the end triumphed—sort of, a little bit, though by the authors’ estimate not nearly as much as it should have.

Citizens who are not well versed in the Defense Department’s ways might assume that as the world’s threats have multiplied and our budget deficits have soared, officials would welcome something like DIUX: an agency in which the nation’s most creative innovators devise new ways to deter and fight wars more effectively and inexpensively. Alas, that is not the case. The Defense Department is a bureaucracy; like all bureaucracies, its main interest is self-protection, which largely means fending off outsiders who want to change how it operates. And so Defense Department officials,



Illustration by Paul Sahre

the contractors they funded, and the legislators in states where weapons were built and provided jobs viewed DIUX—whose explicit aim was to transform the weapons-procurement business—as a threat.

Shah and Kirchhoff write that the biggest challenge in overcoming this problem is “the inherent conservatism of the military.” There is something to this: as they note, the British navy at first rejected steamships, cavalry units dismissed the practicality of tanks, and jet-fighter pilots resisted the advent of ballistic and cruise missiles and, more recently, drones. But the hostility toward DIUX, as described by Shah and Kirchhoff, was something different, directed not at military revolutions (which can be expected to stir opposition from protectors of the status quo) but simply at new ways of performing old tasks.

Besides, for roughly a half-century after World War II, the US military thrived on, and at times instigated, innovation. Radar, the atomic bomb, nuclear-powered submarines, and the Internet began in—and were, in some cases, invented by and for—the military. The microchip, though devised by scientists at two corporations (Texas Instruments and Fairchild Semiconductor), could not have entered the commercial marketplace without NASA’s space program and the Air Force’s Minuteman intercontinental ballistic missile, which generated enough demand for chips to spur economies of scale that made them cheap enough to install in consumer products. All through the cold war, many defense companies, while never hotbeds of competitiveness, flourished as manufacturers of civilian goods as

well and were at least open to adopting technologies and techniques from that realm.

This changed after the end of the cold war. As defense budgets plunged (there really was a “peace dividend”), many companies got out of the war business, and a small number of defense contractors—the ones that did very little but war business—came to dominate the field. Over the next few decades, those firms merged into a mere handful. This was deliberate Pentagon policy. In 1993, Secretary of Defense Les Aspin and his deputy, William Perry, gathered the leading aerospace executives at what came to be called “the last supper” and told them that the defense budget would continue to tumble and that it would be best for them to consolidate.¹ Eventually, four of the largest companies—Lockheed, Martin Marietta, Northrop, and Grumman (already the products of mergers and acquisitions involving fifty-one companies)—merged into two (Lockheed Martin and Northrop Grumman).

This was meant to increase efficiencies, but as often happens with monopolization (forced or natural), it had the opposite effect. As global tensions increased and defense budgets swelled beyond even those of the cold war years, the bloated, sluggish weapons-procurement machinery was too bloated and sluggish to respond with agility. Major weapons systems now take years, sometimes decades, to rumble from contract bidding to research and development to procurement and deployment, by which time

¹M. Thomas Davis, “What You Don’t Know About the Defense Industrial Base,” *The National Interest*, December 15, 2023.

their technical specs are often outmoded. The Defense Department’s annual budget has soared to \$849.8 billion, yet many defense analysts (and not just hawkish ones) conclude that the US military is ill-prepared to fight, and might well lose, a large war that erupts with little warning.

Shah and Kirchhoff don’t cover this history but delve deep into its consequences. They begin, after a quick account of Shah’s F-16 improvisation, with the moment in February 2015 when Ashton Carter became Barack Obama’s fourth and final secretary of defense. Carter was a Yale- and Oxford-trained physicist and defense policy analyst. As far back as 2001 he had written, “Tomorrow’s defense innovations will largely be derivatives of technology developed and marketed by commercial companies for commercial motives.” Yet in his first two jobs under Obama—undersecretary of defense for acquisition, technology, and logistics, then deputy secretary of defense—he had noted, to his alarm, that his early prophecy had failed to come true because of institutional resistance. Soon after ascending to the department’s top job, he flew to Silicon Valley and implored executives to get involved with defense contracting. Most of them were reluctant; a few had tried but were put off by the military’s indifference. Besides, after Edward Snowden’s leaks revealing their complicity with the National Security Agency’s post–September 11 mass-surveillance programs, they feared aggravating the opposition to defense work from their employees. Carter promised them a new start—and created DIUX as a test.

Shah soon took over, assisted by engineers from Google and other companies, and he was authorized to run the agency like a venture capital fund. “Our offices,” he and Kirchhoff write, “looked like a startup, not an air force facility,” with programmers dressed “in jeans and hoodies” working at “open tables instead of in cubicles.” Recalling his own experience, Shah asked military personnel what help they needed on the battlefield, then scoured Silicon Valley for those who could come up with solutions. (This was the opposite of the Pentagon’s normal method, which was for bureaucrats to spend a year or so devising a program with a long list of requirements, then send it out for bidding to contractors, who would take months more—without ever consulting the people who would end up having to use the resulting weapon.)

At first DIUX had tight limits on how much money it could invest in any one project. Still, some of them, esoteric at first glance, had potentially vast consequences. Early on Shah discovered something shockingly antiquated about one of the Air Force’s most basic functions—lining up the flight paths of its fighter jets and cargo-transport planes with the tanker aircraft that refuel them in midflight so they aren’t forced to land. This is a very complicated task, and at the time Air Force

personnel were coordinating 1,500 refuelings a day over Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria. Yet to plan these operations, they were moving magnetic pucks around on a whiteboard, just as their forebears had done during World War II. Northrop Grumman had won a contract to overhaul this system; by the time Shah saw the whiteboard, the company had spent \$745 million—twice the original estimate—over ten years with nothing to show for it, and the Air Force was now asking Congress for more.

Shah found a small Silicon Valley firm to work on the problem. In four months, at a cost of \$1.5 million, its coders turned in a working product: software that could enable planners in Air Force headquarters to match a fighter plane to a refueling tanker in less than a minute (as opposed to several days). Shah and his DIUx colleagues saw themselves as “part of the Rebel Alliance,” in a reference to the *Star Wars* franchise. When they delivered the tanker-refueling app, “we felt like Luke Skywalker dropping a proton torpedo into an exhaust port of the Death Star.”

They faced intense resistance from the Air Force officer managing the Northrop Grumman program and from staffers on the House subcommittee overseeing the defense budget. Eventually they found a higher-up to break through the blockage. One innovation after another brought on similarly fierce battles. In the unit’s first two years, Shah took fifty-five red-eye flights from California to D.C. because there were “fires to be put out.” On one such flight he took with Kirchhoff, they discovered that their government credit cards had been canceled.

Still, the unit had more victories than defeats, across expanding plains of operation. In Project Maven, Amazon, Microsoft, and Google—hardly big names in defense contracting—jointly developed computer vision algorithms that made it easier to track the movements of ISIS militiamen. Shield AI, developed by an MIT engineer and his brother who had been a SEAL officer in Afghanistan, was a small drone that could fly into a building and transmit video signals back to special-operations troops so they could see whether enemy insurgents were inside before they knocked down the door.

By the end of 2018 DIU was a full-blown unit, without the “x” for “experimental,” and was “starting to breach the walls of the Pentagon fortress.” In part this was because the secretary of defense, retired marine general James Mattis, had spent the previous two years at Stanford, where he learned of DIU and was impressed with its work. Still, Mattis’s enthusiasm could go only so far; he became mired in myriad crises, and President Donald Trump didn’t care about any of this. Shah and Kirchhoff, whom I briefly met around this time,² describe a meeting at the White House that Shah attended along with “a few dozen of the country’s biggest tech executives,” supposedly to brief the president and his cabinet on emerging

innovations. “Instead,” they write, “the first twenty-five minutes were wasted introducing people and praising Trump, who soaked up the adulation.” As for the substance, Trump “wasn’t interested at all.” He stood up halfway through the briefing and said, “You’re doing a tremendous job. We’re doing great technology. And next week we’re going to announce our great health care plan.” At which point he walked out, along with the entire cabinet, except for the commerce secretary, who carried on for another twenty minutes.

After a while, Mattis resigned from the Pentagon over far larger disagreements with Trump’s policies.³ The Pentagon bureaucracy remains a dominant fixture, regardless of which party is in charge. The Defense Department, even under Mattis, was working with just three of the top AI firms. DIU’s total portfolio of programs amounted to just 0.01 percent of the DoD budget.

Ironically, at the end of 2024, in the weeks leading up to his second term as president, Trump almost (perhaps unwittingly) put the DIU agenda into motion when he short-listed a major Silicon Valley figure—Trae Stephens, the cofounder and executive chairman of Anduril and a former associate at

²See my “The Defeat of General Mattis,” *The New York Review*, November 21, 2019.

Palantir, two of the most successful venture capital firms to win defense contracts, mainly in AI, robotics, and autonomous drones—to be deputy secretary of defense, the official who runs the Pentagon’s day-to-day operations. In the end, though, Trump selected Stephen Feinberg, a more conventional billionaire hedge fund director whose firm, Cerberus Capital Management, has invested enough in defense to raise possible conflicts of interest but not in ways that suggest an innovator’s instincts.

It was a missed opportunity for transformation, as in the years since Shah’s futile meeting with Trump many more Silicon Valley innovators have come around to defense. In particular, as Shah and Kirchhoff recount, Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine “set in motion a new gold rush” in defense investing. That year tech companies pumped \$33 billion into defense technology, twice as much as in 2019. The war—the largest in Europe since World War II—became, in some ways,

the war DIU had envisioned, fought with drones, satellites, and artificial intelligence, hackers on both sides launching cyberattacks, and Ukrainian citizens using smartphone apps to alert their military to enemy positions.

Capella Space, a small firm that received DIU funds for building miniature satellites to monitor North Korea 24/7 even through thick cloud cover, was now flying a constellation of satellites to observe the Russian invasion as it unfolded. When Vladimir Putin denied that he was intending to invade, it was a Capella image of his buildup that the Pentagon released to CNN. Microsoft’s rapid response team plunged into the war business to assist US Cyber Command with a host of cybersecurity and surveillance programs. Various Bay Area venture capitalists, many of whom had only just started speaking with anyone from the Pentagon, were getting nonstop requests for night vision goggles, Kevlar vests, and more. The rockets fired by HIMARS, a mobile launcher that the US supplied to Ukraine, were guided to their targets by drones that had been ordered from Amazon. In all, thirty new products created by DIU start-ups were, and still are, being used in the Ukraine war.

Even Google, which had dropped out of Project Maven after three thousand employees signed a petition urging that the company dissociate from anything involving the military, reentered the defense business via DIU. The money was too good, and the cause—helping Ukrainians break free from Russian imperialism—was appealing.

Silicon Valley’s roots, back in the 1960s, were in defense. Now the connection was coming full circle, with little protest from within.

The battle for Ukraine isn’t entirely a hypermodern war. After some breathless prose suggesting that it is, Shah and Kirchhoff quote Bill LaPlante, the Pentagon’s acquisition chief during the Biden administration, pooh-poohing the notion. “The tech bros aren’t helping us too much in Ukraine,” he said in an industry interview. The war was instead coming down to old-school clashes of tanks, artillery, and ammunition.

Shah and Kirchhoff allow the point, to some extent, noting that the conflict has been a “hybrid” war—“commercial technologies” deployed “in tandem with traditional, exquisite weapons systems, both to enhance their effectiveness and enable their defeat.” They also make the case that this fusion we’re seeing in Ukraine is a preview of wars to come, notably if China mounts an invasion of Taiwan. The Chinese army has invested heavily in the sorts of weapons that the Pentagon, in part because of DIU’s persistence, has only just started to buy in bulk: minidrones, cyber and countercyber tools, and augmentations of AI.

The bad news is that, as with most breakthroughs in defense technology, other countries’ militaries have adapted, either through imitation or asymmetric tactics. The Ukrainians fended off Russia’s invasion and mounted an effective counteroffensive, aided by commercial technology that helped them track Russian movements and that improved the accuracy of their weapons. But the Russians soon found ways to jam the surveillance sensors, fend off the drones, and launch some of their own new-tech weapons. And so the fight has turned into a slugfest, where advances and retreats are measured a few kilometers at a time. The new devices help both sides ward off defeat, but they provide no magic bullet for victory. ●

Delivery

Paper pusher, I’ll tell you what it feels like
To spend the exact cash you make the same

Night you make it. That sky velveted as
An empty ring box. Disintegration coming out

Of the speakers again. Neck-deep in the quarry swimming
Hole. This thing between us like snapping a bar of cold

Chocolate. I like wading into my weakness &
Treading there like the final girl. This life no

Bigger than a drugstore makeup aisle, than waking
Only to learn of the late-night car accident. Who said

To stitch shut is to mend. Each morning the dogs kept
Us alive, even when we hadn’t planned it. The room slow

Spun the way the water had moved around us, & the bare
Light on the water, those apparitions—our love’s

Strategy, a deer tendering into the kitchen through
A back door left open, through the rooms where we

Undressed. Bring me to myself & sew the horizon
Into place. Out of the winedark that sun we like

Was coming back into style. What we borrowed
We know we cannot return. I held your jaw

Like a piece of fruit. Your hand rested on the warm
Animal between us, running in its sleep.

—Amy Woolard

²I met them while reporting one of the first big stories about DIUx, “The Pentagon’s Innovation Experiment,” *MIT Technology Review*, December 19, 2016.

Curable or Not?

Michael Hofmann

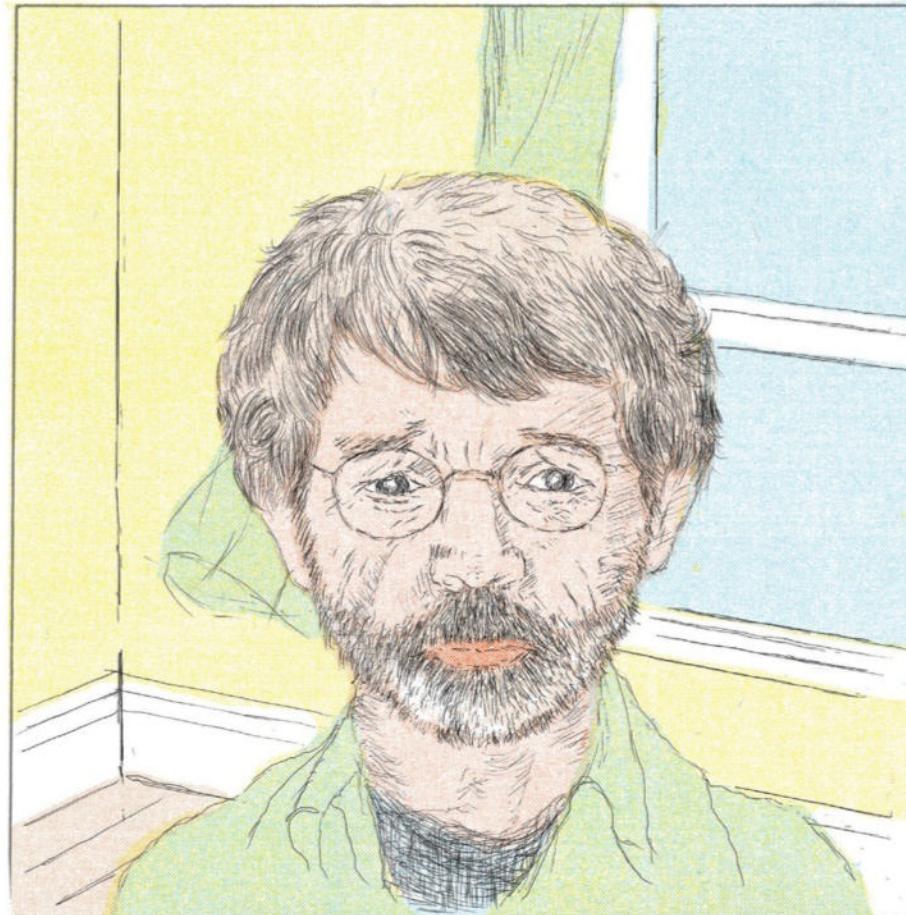
The Swiss author Markus Werner—beard, curls, grizzle, glasses, absence of affect, we corresponded but I never met him—was a cult writer at the turn of the millennium, the sort of writer whose books traveled by word of mouth among readers, a *Geheimtipp* in the German *Sprachraum*. Yes, he had some qualified admirers (not in the sense of qualified admiration, but—you know), experienced and intelligent critics like Marcel Reich-Ranicki and Helmut Böttiger, and he won the odd prize, but his reputation was not one of those seeking to be imposed from above. Rather, Werner's name was passed around among grateful and slightly incredulous readers—incredulous that something could be this swift, this bleak, and this deadly.

The literary production of Werner, who lived from 1944 to 2016, consisted of seven short, barbed novels published between 1984 and 2004, beginning with *Zündels Abgang* and concluding with *Am Hang*. The latter was translated into English by Robert E. Goodwin as *On the Edge*; the first, *Zündel's Exit*, the third, *Cold Shoulder*, and now the second, *The Frog in the Throat*, by me. For a private, quirky, and scandal-free foreign writer, retired from schoolmastering, then from authorship, and finally from the lists of the living, this would seem to be a respectable showing, three books. But here's the thing: if one has a taste for Werner, and not everyone does (one German reviewer actually pleaded with his readers *not to buy the book*), but if one does, one may well hold the author to be one of the glories of the contemporary—the recent—scene and find the product exquisitely addictive, and there are only seven of them, and why would one ever willingly stop?

Werner's books dramatize figures on the outs with life. There is a loose thread, which may be something distinctly trivial, often something written or said, a word or a phrase in a postcard or a newspaper or a telephone call, and the Werner figure (and these exist, just as the Bernhard figure exists, or the Kafka figure exists) tugs at it. Perhaps it's a communication cord on a train, or a bell rope or a fuse. He—it's usually a "he"—pulls at it idly or experimentally, in a spirit of irritation or retaliation, vengeance or self-defense, and then, like the translator above, won't willingly stop. He becomes a verbal and attitudinal terrorist. A table setting sets him off not because it's wrong or he's fussy (though he is) but merely by being there the night before and presuming on a tomorrow with breakfast.

He goes on picking and pulling. Existence very rapidly—in the space of a few score pages—loses its texture, its weft or its warp; shreds of it hang down looking unappealing and distinctly unlivable. Whole worlds, or what had been worlds, devolve to piles

*This essay appears, in somewhat different form, as the introduction to a new translation by Michael Hofmann of Markus Werner's *The Frog in the Throat*, to be published by New York Review Books in March.*



Markus Werner; illustration by Alain Pilon

of lint: first, or most grievously, the innermost circle of the *Intimsphäre*, one's minimal domestic existence in what Randall Jarrell once called the "group of two," the home life or private life or emotional life that in Werner is always overpriced and overprivileged, the only "soft" or "premium" part of life, the desert island of feeling in a sea of verbiage and uncouthness and money. And then rapidly also one's professional life, one's wider setting and prospects, and finally the possibility of a continued conventional existence within language and society.

The novels seem to catch Werner's heroes (a doubtful term in his context) at bad moments: there has been a mishap involving a cigarette machine, an ill-timed absence, an unendurable professional humiliation. A provocation that could have been surmounted, perhaps even has been surmounted, nine times is unendurable a tenth. The books give a sense—true, I believe—of something not built into being but cut down into it. They cling fast to economy, a jaggedness of utterance, a scorn for platitude, a ruthless, look-no-brakes speed. They are the kind of books that Thalmann (in *The Frog in the Throat*) favors, remarking that "their authors, in writing them, did so to avoid doing something far worse." Whatever that may have been. Read enough of Werner's books, and you will come to an appreciation that life is just about made up of such "bad moments," one after another. And then? Then it's a question of attitude, of self-respect, of resistance, of what the French once called *contenance*. If you have ever wondered why you go on taking it (whatever "it" is) and what would happen if you maybe stopped, or if you work for Elon Musk, then Werner is for you.

Vietnam trough; powered by first-wave feminism, women had without question surpassed men; and Switzerland was no longer chocolate and cheese, or even Swiss watches and cuckoo clocks, but frankly pharmaceuticals and financial jiggery-pokery. Television—the media—was proliferating, well, like frog spawn, and our overexposed rhetorics of persuasion and opinion and even of introspection were looking distinctly shopworn. It was the dusk of the Age of Respect. Terror of the Left and Terror of the Right—separately, mind you—had set up in opposition to the Terror of the Middle.

The Frog in the Throat (Froschnacht) is Werner's second novel, appearing in 1985, the year after *Zündel's Exit*. The death promised or suggested in the title of that book has already happened in this one; it is that of the older Thalmann, Klemens by name though hardly by nature, who in some male parody of a period haunts his defrocked son Franz once a month for three days in the form of a frog in his throat and agonies of introversion and justification. The book covers the six months after Klemens Thalmann's death, and its ten chapters are five paired solo scenes: Franz, Klemens; Franz, Klemens; and so on. (This is the "contraption.") Franz struggles with his frog, soliloquizes through his somewhat shameful "anecdote-enriched past," while the ancient but seemingly indestructible Klemens, his head companionably pressed against the flanks of each of his five cows in turn, reminisces about village life to his now-preferred audience. It is a book about Switzerland and about the modern age, about the great leap forward from a productive to a service economy (or what, in a further degeneration, we call the "knowledge economy")—Franz having left the cloth and taken up the rancid calling of life coach.

What is miraculous in such a short book is how Werner manages to make such a dense weave of existence. It is possible—in fact, I would urge it—to read *The Frog in the Throat* again and again, so deeply and subtly is so much information dissolved in it. With just a few strokes of the pen, the writer gives us three highly individuated generations of Thalmans across most of the twentieth century, men and women, parents and children; the long life of Klemens and his many village contacts; and the long midlife of Franz and a few of his many clients. Numerous scenes sharply assert themselves: with Helen in the lewd Greek taxi, phoning Frau Trüssel at the passport office for some pointers on a potential client, the landlady's ribald calls in the pub, Kezia's lake-side seduction moves, the respective quirks of five cows, the first Kennedy assassination.

Werner has an utterly distinctive way with a sentence, which in his practice is something brief but highly flavored and often studded with unexpected vocabulary, a kind of ideal labeling. Say, the syndrome that regularly befell Franz at the foot of the pulpit,

that he calls “reverend’s remorse” or “*taedium crucis*.” What will remain of us is not whatever Larkin says, but maybe irony. Many of Werner’s sentences are exquisitely dispirited, of which just one shall stand here: “We wandered silently in the general direction of Sparta.” The book gives us births and deaths, a strong sense of a dwindling social horizon across the twentieth century; Klemens still political, still with his radio and his newspapers, and his socialist and global arguments; Franz seemingly not interested in anything beyond his job and his personal life, and the eventual realization of his aspiration, which is the completion of his switch (in the apt terms of Wislawa

Szymborska) from “worried Christ” to “carefree Buddha”:

I promise you one thing, though: One day I’ll be sitting under a grapevine, or maybe a fig tree. I’ll draw deep and satisfying breaths through my shamelessly open mouth, and the sun will warm my tonsils, and no one will stop me. You’ll be lying off to the side in the grass, still just about wiggling, but little more than a corpse.

The Frog in the Throat finds room for such recurring markers as the magical shrub, the elderflower, and the graveyards (not uncommon in Werner)—the one in Fez, the site of all life and all

joy; the one in the local town where Kezia plies her trade; and the one in the village with the intoxicating, unapproved elderflower that Klemens planted over the grave of old Knüsel, his schoolteacher.

The two men, father and son, Thalmann and Thalmann, are at loggerheads, ten years broken, cut off, and set aside. Each man is left to hoe his own row. They are opposites, the one who lived by the rules (or did he?) morally and mortally let down by his son who kicked over the traces, the dominant and the craven, the widower and the accidental Don Juan. In fact, the book shows us, they are not so much opponents—a crossed line of battle—as they are cussed, independent souls,

lines in parallel destined to meet in infinity. Both quarrel with their lot, both see themselves as done down, both are full of resentment and unappeased aggression. They put me in mind of the ending of “Remembering My Father” by another great Polish poet, Zbigniew Herbert (translated by John and Bogdana Carpenter):

he himself grows in me we eat our
defeats
we burst out laughing
when they say how little is needed
to be reconciled

Of course, reconciliation is out of the question, but equally there is no possibility of not laughing. Until infinity. ●

A Telenovela Macondo

Alma Guillermoprieto

One Hundred Years of Solitude
a television series directed by
Alex García López and Laura Mora

One afternoon in 1961 the Colombian poet and novelist Álvaro Mutis climbed seven flights to a friend’s bare-bones apartment in Mexico City and frisbeed a slender book over to him. “Read that, *cabrón!*” Mutis is supposed to have said. “So you’ll learn how to write.” The book was one of the greatest ghost stories ever written, *Pedro Páramo*, by the taciturn Mexican writer Juan Rulfo, and the recipient of Mutis’s gift was a young Colombian writer newly settled in Mexico, Gabriel García Márquez, whose own haunted novellas and short stories had already brought him great prestige. In later years García Márquez told the story over and over of how Rulfo’s austere prose, the lack of any apology or explanation for the strange, unhappy universe he created, and the tone of extreme loneliness and emotional privation he established from the very first sentence—“I came to Comala because they told me my father lived here”—inspired him and gave him new hope for a novel whose structure he had been struggling with for so long.

A few years later García Márquez, by then a successful copywriter at an advertising agency, was driving his family to Acapulco for a holiday when a Pauline flash of inspiration forced him to brake and pull over. Awestruck and grateful, he saw at last before him the complete structure of the novel he knew would bring him greatness: the story of his family, which would be at once the story of a childhood and of the senseless, endlessly repeating history of Colombia. The laconic presentation of an alternate reality in *Pedro Páramo* had made him see how he, too, could eliminate pages of clumsy explanations and clarifications. He could simply describe a world in which ghosts and miracles were as much a part of daily life as the noon-day meal. Right then, the legend goes, he made a U-turn on the highway, quit his day job as a copywriter, told his long-suffering wife, Mercedes Barcha, to keep the bill collectors at bay, and



Marleyda Soto (center) as Úrsula Iguarán in Alex García López and Laura Mora’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, 2024

sat down to write *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.¹

The facts have been stretched a bit in García Márquez’s varying accounts of this miracle, but what came after is indisputable: 50 million copies sold worldwide, translation into nearly fifty languages, a devotion few novels have ever commanded, a Nobel Prize, all the fame he could ever have aspired to, and now, nearly sixty years after the novel’s sensational debut, an ambitious two-season, sixteen-episode Netflix series. An entire town was created in which to film the various stages of the

¹For a thrilling account of the creation of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, readers should repair immediately to Gerald Martin’s graceful and exhaustive biography, *Gabriel García Márquez: A Life* (Knopf, 2009).

fictional Macondo’s development from thatch-roof village to boomtown to its decline in the 1920s; the house of the Buendía family was also recreated in its various stages of expansion and collapse. Colombian actors (mostly) appear on-screen; they speak lines taken word for word from the novel with the real music of their own real accents.

With García Márquez’s two sons, Rodrigo and Gonzalo García Barcha, as executive producers—as children they were in the back seat on the famous aborted ride to Acapulco—Netflix has spared no expense and cut not a single corner in order to remain faithful to the novel. The sincerity of its commitment is evident at every turn, and one can only wish that it had spent a few more years—perhaps not the eighteen that García Márquez spent

agonizing over the structure of his feverish novel, but close—considering how (or if, really, or why) words that were the product of a single overwhelming rush of inspiration could be satisfactorily translated by various “creative teams” into the slow-motion unspooling of a narrative through images. Because, unhappily, what so much well-intentioned labor has produced is a dud.

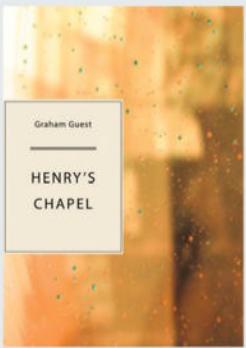
One Hundred Years of Solitude is a novel of genesis and apocalypse. It starts with a couple—José Arcadio Buendía and his wife, Úrsula Iguarán—fleeing the ghost of a murdered man and settling “on the bank of a river of clear water that ran along a bed of polished stones, which were

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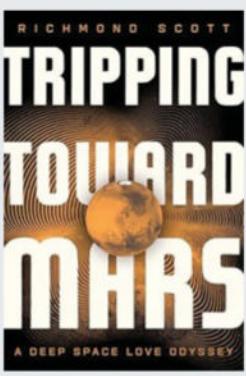
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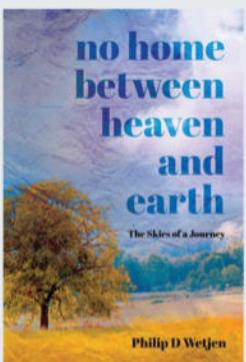
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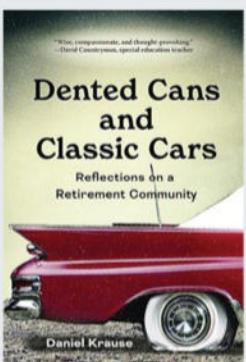
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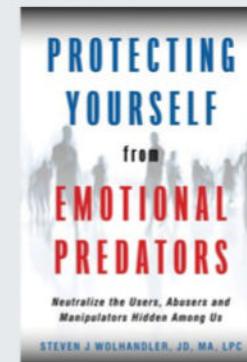
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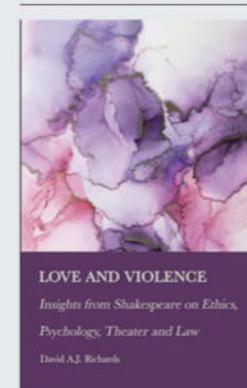
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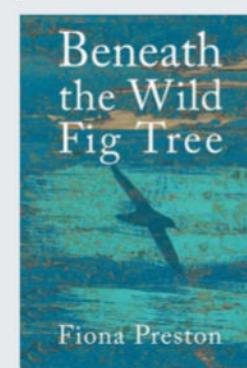
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The Great Leap Backward

Irina Dumitrescu

Free: Coming of Age at the End of History

by Lea Ypi.

Norton, 267 pp., \$17.95 (paper)

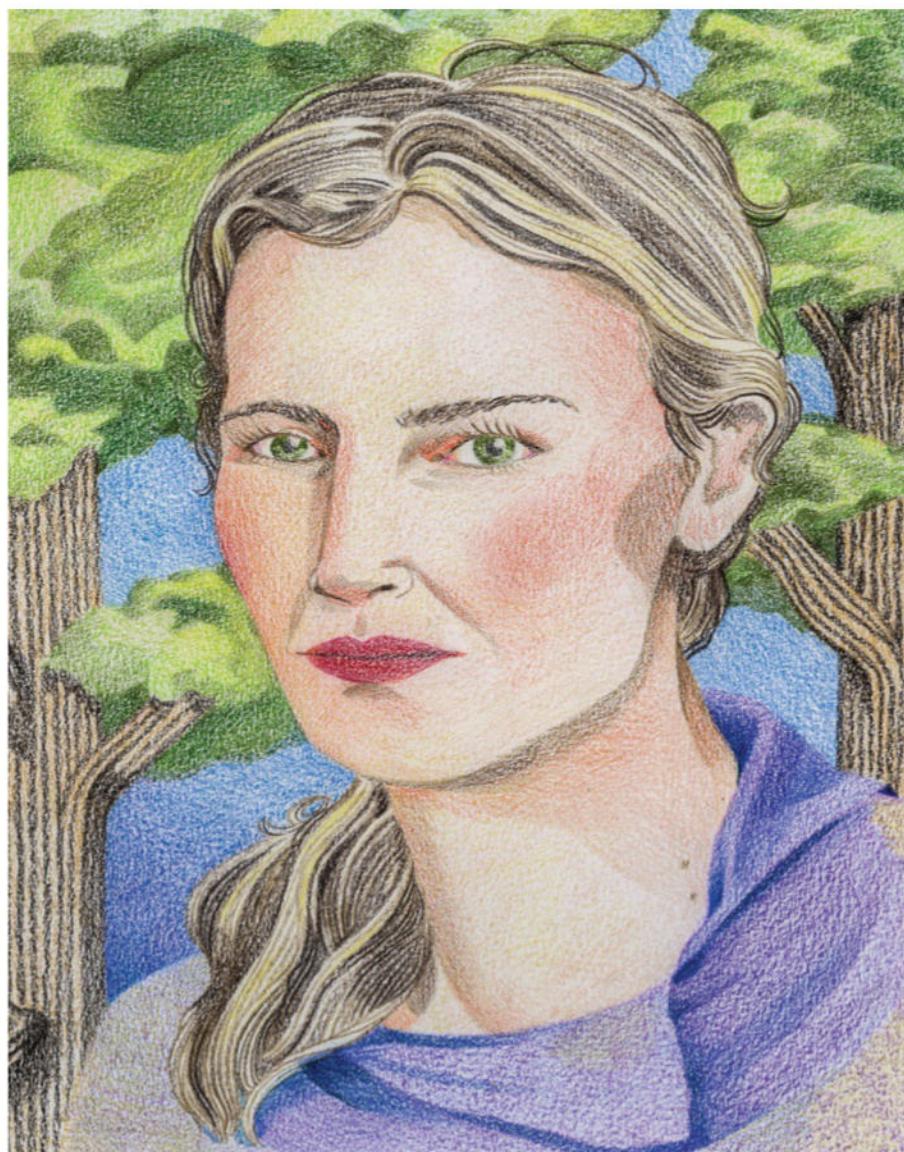
One late August day in 1985, Lea Ypi climbed a tree in search of peace. Her parents, branded as “intellectuals” in Communist Albania thanks to their bourgeois family histories, were feuding with their closest friends. The object of their contention—like the golden apple that caused the Trojan War—was an empty Coca-Cola can. Ypi’s mother had brought the can home and placed it on an embroidered cloth to brighten their apartment. This was a treatment that most Albanians reserved for photographs of Enver Hoxha, the brutal dictator who ruled the country for over forty years. Despite little Lea’s enthusiasm for “Uncle Enver,” her parents did not subscribe to Hoxha’s personality cult. No photo, just the Coke can. Until it disappeared.

The Ypis suspected their closest friends, the Papases, of stealing the can. An older couple with much better credentials—the wife, Donika, steamed letters open at the post office, and her husband, Mihal, was a Party member with a collection of war medals for killing Nazi soldiers—the Papases had taken a liking to the Ypis despite their social differences. The Papases even put in an occasional good word for them at Party meetings. But the accusation of theft cooled relations, and no apology would soothe the older couple’s wounded pride.

Upset at the ruined friendship, Lea hid in a fig tree in the Papases’ garden for hours, hoping that the search for her would bring the families together again. The ruse worked. By evening the families were enjoying meze and raki together and joking about the corrupting power of imperialist Coca-Cola, when Lea decided to push her luck by complaining that her parents refused to decorate the television set with a portrait of Hoxha: “They keep promising to put a photo there, and they never do it. I don’t think they like Uncle Enver.”

Everybody froze. Lea’s father dropped his fork, her grandmother’s hands trembled, and her mother “stopped speaking and looked intently” at Donika, “as if trying to guess her thoughts.” The impulsive remark of a child had turned a small squabble between neighbors into a question of life and death. Finally Mihal, the reliable Party insider, broke the spell. He admonished Lea for saying such a “stupid thing” and told her never to repeat it to anyone, assuring her that her parents “love the Party and Uncle Enver too.” And then, an odd afterthought in a still-silent room: “You must promise me that if you ever again have silly ideas like that about your family, you will come and tell me. Me—nobody else, not even Auntie Donika. Do you understand?”

Lea Ypi’s *Free: Coming of Age at the End of History* describes her family life before and after the fall of communism in Albania in 1990. Ypi is a professor of political theory at the London School of Economics, and the project began, she says, as a philosophical exploration



Lea Ypi; illustration by Carly Blumenthal

of “the overlapping ideas of freedom in the liberal and Socialist traditions.” Frustrated by the inability of her socialist friends in the West to recognize that “flesh and blood” human beings had lived out the theoretical abstractions they knew from books, Ypi decided to tell the stories of the people she’d grown up with.*

Conveying the experience of living under communism is a challenging task. There was a guardedness in everyday life that is hard to get across to those who have not lived in a police state. Words could have alternative, coded meanings, or might be emptied of all meaning when they had to be parroted on command. The government’s version of reality and the one experienced by people in their daily lives sometimes differed wildly, but this difference was not up for public debate.

For different reasons, it is also hard to talk about communism with those

*Ypi uses the word “socialist” to describe both the politics of her university friends and the regime under which she grew up in Albania, which is usually referred to as “Communist.” At one point she recalls how an elementary school teacher explained the difference to her class, acknowledging that “socialism was a dictatorship” but one that would, “with time,” evolve into “a humane system”: “Class enemies become fewer in number, and class struggle first softens, then disappears. That is when communism really starts.” In this essay I describe pre-1991 Albania as “Communist” to avoid confusion with social democracies.

who mainly understand it as a political project that has not yet been fulfilled. Progressives in the West have come to see the value of recovering histories of violence, trauma, and deprivation. Because they assume that criticism of communism must come from a far-right position, however, they often minimize or overlook the suffering of those who lived under Communist regimes. It turns out that it’s easier to ignore mass killings, political prisons, forced labor camps, the restriction of reproductive rights, and the persecution of homosexuals than to question one’s own mental categories.

Free is a portrait of a family at odds with itself, held together by fear during communism, then cracked apart by the chaotic events following the introduction of democratic processes and a liberal economy. It is also an allegory of competing political ideals, presented in the voices of Ypi’s relatives. Her father is a romantic skeptic, in love with revolutionaries but not with the societies they help to bring about. Her mother is a hardened realist who views life as a merciless competition for survival. And her grandmother Nini, the family’s most sympathetic figure, is the voice of pragmatic wisdom, having lived through too many political changes to put much stock in the promises of another one.

Free is also, perhaps unwittingly, testimony to an obscure legacy, hard to define but felt all the same by me and many of those I know who spent

their childhoods in the Eastern Bloc. It is not so much a stance as a sensibility—toward language that means something other than what it says, toward the workings of power in intimate relationships, toward the mortality of utopias. We whose first years were shadowed by communism know that change is inevitable but not always for the good, that revolutions trumpet progress but usher in more violence. We also know fear—if not our own, because we were too young to understand the danger around us, then that of those closest to us.

Ypi’s Coke can story reminded me of an event that took place in my own Communist childhood, before my parents moved us to the West. In the early 1980s, as a result of a series of economic miscalculations, the Romanian government imposed austerity measures on the country. Food was rationed, as a good deal of domestic production was set aside for export to Russia. Severe gas and electricity shortages meant that people had to survive freezing temperatures without heat. Hundreds died in their apartments, either frozen to death or asphyxiated from gas that had been unexpectedly turned on again. In order to conserve fuel, the government instituted a dark hour each evening, shutting off the electricity at the time of day when it was most needed.

It must have been during one of these winters, when I was four or five years old, that I was riding a crowded Bucharest bus with my parents. The bus stopped briefly in front of a mural of Nicolae Ceaușescu, the great leader, the genius of the Carpathians, the most beloved son of the Romanian people. “Look,” I said innocently, “it’s the man who turns off our lights at night.” The other passengers fell silent. Amusement flickered on some faces, but no one dared laugh. At the next station, my parents bundled me off the bus and walked away as quickly as they could. And then, for years afterward, they told me this story, about a place where a little girl could condemn her parents without even knowing it.

Lea Ypi’s father had an inconvenient name. Though known as Zafo to his friends, Xhafer Ypi shared his first and last names with a man widely considered a traitor. “The other Ypi” was the former prime minister of Albania, known as a fascist collaborator for welcoming the invading Italians in 1939. When her history lessons reached that point in the textbook, Lea was at pains to explain to her classmates that the former prime minister was no relation. “Each year, I hated that conversation,” she writes, though her parents resisted her attempts to skip school, insisting that she—and they—had “done nothing wrong.”

This was particularly frustrating as Ypi was in other ways a model student. She was attentive at school when Nora, her “moral education” teacher, explained the political philosophies of Marx and “Hangel,” and how Albanians had once “gathered in large buildings called churches and mosques” but now

understood that religion was a tool used by capitalists to exploit the poor. She loved both Uncle Enver and Stalin, though it was sometimes hard to tell who was more lovable; after all, "Stalin looked straight at you, and if he felt like it, or if you behaved well, his eyes would smile." Ypi enjoyed the educational opportunities that Communist Albania offered its children: clubs for poetry, chess, and theater, and summer camp for young Pioneers. Despite being successful in the ways her parents demanded, she felt she was somehow out of place in her family, wallowing in "wild fantasies" about some stranger or newfound relative who would bring her a "change of fortune."

Zafo's name was one clue that Ypi's family was different from others. Another was the matter of her parents' biographies. These were not the events of their own lives, as one might guess, but the sum of their family histories and pre-Communist class identities. "Biography," Ypi tells us, was the reason her parents met and married, and it determined whether they were allowed to go to university and what they were permitted to study once there. Biography was the judgment before the action, the fall before the sin. As Ypi puts it:

Biographies were carefully separated into good and bad, better or worse, clean or stained, relevant or irrelevant, transparent or confusing, suspicious or trustworthy, those that needed to be remembered and those that needed to be forgotten.

Ypi does not spell out why her parents, who came from ethnic groups that were traditionally at odds and had little in common otherwise, were forced to marry by their biographies. I recognized the logic from Romania, where the file or "dosar" functioned in the same way. Someone who had a "bad file" because their family had left the country or because they had been imprisoned for studying literature might choose not to marry someone with a clean record, lest they "spoil their file." Keeping someone's file good by breaking up with them was an act of love. I have heard of a case where two people who both had bad files married each other so as to minimize the damage to others.

There were other things that Ypi did not understand while she was growing up. Her parents' silence about the incipient protests in 1990 was one, though they seemed to listen to the news on the radio when she was in her room. Another was her mother's occasional angry outbursts, and the way she reflexively looked up at one of the windows of the local Party headquarters when walking down the street. There was also her family's mistrust of Ahmet, a distant relative who had just graduated from university and whose wife had been a teacher, a seemingly respectable profession. And her grandmother Nini's insistence on teaching her French, and the old postcard from Paris she kept with the name of the sender scratched out. And her father's refusal to explain what "Allahu Akbar" meant. Ypi's childhood was one of codes, and like Perceval in the presence of the wounded Fisher King, she did not know how to ask the healing question:

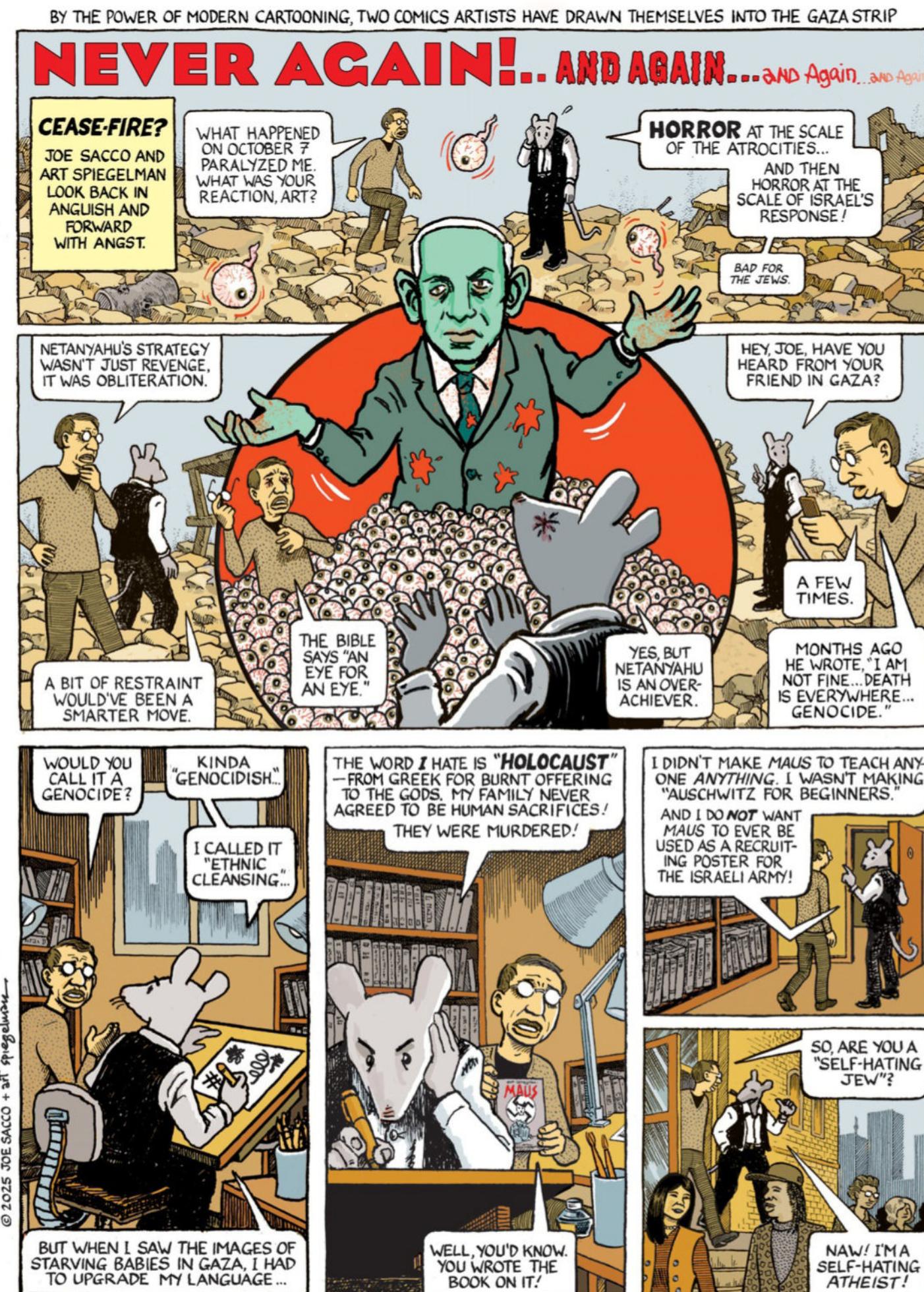
When I reflect on all the unsolved mysteries of my childhood... I think of them as part of a truth that was always there, waiting to be discovered, if only I'd known where to look. Nobody had concealed anything from me; everything was within reach. And yet I'd needed to be told.

What Lea Ypi needed to be told, as the reader guesses early on, is who she really was.

When freedom finally arrived, it was like a dish served frozen." In 1990—inspired by the fall of the Berlin Wall, student protests in Ti-

rana, and the Romanian can-do spirit in the application of firing squads to tyrants—Albania's president, Ramiz Alia, began modest movements toward reform. These culminated in Albania's declaration as a multiparty state in December of that year and the country's first free elections the following spring. December 1990 was also the time when the secrets around Lea Ypi began to unravel. Her mother had come from a wealthy family, with significant properties that had been seized by the state. If she sometimes glanced up at the Party headquarters, it was not only because her family had once owned the building; in 1947 her grandfather had jumped from one of its windows to avoid torture, shouting "Allahu Akbar!"

Ypi's grandmother was the well-born, French-educated niece of an Ottoman pasha. She had a small child and some experience working in government when the new regime imprisoned her husband and upended her life. And what had kept Ypi's father from studying the subject he wished at university was not simply the name he shared with the quisling prime minister, but the fact that Xhafer Ypi was in fact his grandfather. University, too, was not always what it seemed. In the everyday conversation of her parents, it was a code for political prison. Graduation with good results meant a brief sentence, expulsion was capital punishment, and "dropping out voluntarily... meant committing



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suicide." Most terrifying were students like Ahmet and his wife, who were clever enough to become teachers—that is, who had turned informer.

For Ypi, these revelations were a shock, rewriting her family history and breaking the trust she had had in her parents and grandmother: "I found it difficult to process the fact that everything my family had said and done up to that point had been a lie, a lie they'd continued to repeat so that I would continue to believe what I was told by others." Albania's political and economic transition was also not straightforward. The 1991 elections for the People's Assembly kept the Communist-era Party of Labor in power, though there were complaints of irregularities. Strikes and violent protests followed, and foreign experts arrived to guide the country's transition to a liberal, free-market democracy. Albanian refugees fled to Italy on a crowded ship, the *Vlora*, only to be held in inhumane conditions and subsequently deported home.

The second half of *Free* chronicles the breakdown of Albanian society as Ypi had known it, culminating in the pyramid schemes that wiped out the savings of half the country's population and the 1997 civil war. The fall of the old order, in Ypi's telling, also meant the loss of other, ineffable aspects of life. The complex bonds of community that had existed under communism were gone. People no longer held collections at work to help one another with large purchases. History was blotted out with silence, it being more convenient to forget who had been a Party member or a spy. An entire value system disappeared overnight, along with its symbols, its songs, its paraphernalia:

The red Pioneer scarf I worked impossibly hard to earn, and which I proudly wore every day to school, would soon turn into a rag with which we wiped the dust off our bookshelves. The stars, medals and certificates, and the very title of "pioneer," would soon become museum relics, memories from a different era, fragments of a past life that someone had lived, somewhere.

The little red neckerchiefs that marked the Communist version of the Scouts meant different things to people of my generation. For some, they were the sign of an ideology that had exhausted itself, yet another example of rote obedience. For others, they served as proof of academic excellence: though almost all children were expected to join, the cleverest and best behaved were allowed in first. Some remember the hassle of keeping them clean and ironed, and how they absentmindedly chewed on the corners. A number of people have told me, almost wistfully, that they were among the last Pioneers, sworn into a brotherhood remarkable at that point mainly for the speed of its passing.

The loss of such symbols was the slightest of the traumas to come. These included: the disappearance of Ypi's close friend Elona when she left on a ship to Italy with her boyfriend; the accidental gun death of a classmate; the decline of Zafo's health after he lost his job and was hired to impose "structural reforms" on the country's largest port by lay-

ing off many of its Romani laborers; and the sudden breakup of her family when Ypi was seventeen years old and her mother spontaneously left on another ship during the civil war, with only Ypi's younger brother in tow. As she narrates these painful events, her voice grows ironic, borrowing the knowing vocabulary of international experts now flooding Albania: "transition," "free individual initiative," "shock therapy."

It is here, too, that Ypi develops her main argument about the relative nature of freedom. If freedom is the power to do what one wants, there is no effective difference between a system in which people are prohibited by law from fulfilling their dreams and one in which they are hindered by lack of money. A version of this claim ap-

pears early in the book in Zafo's voice, when he explains, "In capitalism...it's not that the poor are not allowed to do all the things that the rich can do. It's that they can't do them, even if they are allowed." Years later, when Albania's borders open, it becomes clear that freedom of movement, a human right touted by the West, was easy to advocate for as long as no one was showing up in the ports and embassies of Western countries asking to be let in. "But what value does the right to exit have," asks Ypi, "if there is no right to enter?" By the end of the book Ypi, speaking now as a professor who teaches courses on Marx in London, concludes, "My world is as far from freedom as the one my parents tried to escape." The difference, she claims, lies in the nature of their failures.

What, then, is freedom, if it is not to be found in the promises of communism or capitalism? It is Nini, the warmly charismatic grandmother to whom the book is dedicated, who teaches her the answer:

In the end, my grandmother said, we are always in charge of our fate. "Biography" was crucial to knowing the limits of your world, but once you knew those limits, you were free to choose and you became responsible for your decisions. There would be gains and there would be losses. You had to avoid being flattered by victories and learn how to accept defeat. Like the moves in chess my mother used to describe, the game was yours to play if you mastered the rules.



It is a liberating idea, at least at first sight. Freedom lies in being responsible for one's actions within the confines of any given society. Elsewhere, Nini insists that whatever the vagaries of her life, whatever the losses she suffered, she had not lost herself or her dignity. Nini's understanding of a freedom that is personal and internal is threaded throughout the book, as when Ypi comments on scenes from her childhood by noting which choices she made and what consequences she experienced.

There are commonsense objections to this. It is true that neither capitalism nor communism offers its citizens perfect agency—nor has any other society in human history. In all systems, people experience certain limits on their freedom to make choices and can choose whether to stand by

the consequences of their decisions. But surely some consequences seem more just to the people living with them than others? To pick one example from the lives of women close to me: in the Romania of my childhood, both contraception and abortion were illegal. Among the results of Ceaușescu's hardline natalist policy by the end of the 1980s were Romania's notorious, abusive, disease-ridden orphanages; a sky-high infant mortality rate; and the highest maternal death rate in Europe, with most of those deaths due to illegal abortions. Agents of the Securitate, Romania's secret police, were posted in hospital maternity wards to look into suspected cases of abortion, and prevented doctors from helping sick women until the patients had informed on their abortion providers. The ab-

sence of sex education did not help matters, contributing to high rates of HIV infection. The choice to have sex can bear serious consequences anywhere. But is a woman dying from a kitchen-table abortion really as free as one allowed to buy and use contraception? And what use to her is her inner dignity as she bleeds out?

One might also ask whether it is such a simple thing to maintain one's inner freedom in a totalitarian state. If the state determines the contents of everyone's education, does that not have an effect on the inner lives of a populace? What about dissenters forced to torture one another in political prison as part of their "reeducation"? If secret police break down the bonds of trust between even the closest of family members by manipulating people to inform on their

loved ones, as both Romania's Securitate and Albania's Sigurimi did, is their dignity not necessarily affected? Is it possible, in other words, to have a concept of freedom separate from the ideals of justice or proportionality? It is all well and good to claim that "we never lose our inner freedom: the freedom to do what is right," but when dissidents know their families will be targeted in retribution, the consequences of standing up for one's ideals can be unbearable.

In fact, Ypi's memoir tells a more complicated story. She is aware that her family experienced communism as a denial of liberty, whereas she "equated liberalism with broken promises." But the two halves of *Free*—stability and communal solidarity under communism, violent chaos under post-1990 liberalization—also correspond to a split between Ypi's innocent childhood and her knowing adolescence. On a purely intellectual level, it is clear that Ypi understands the broken promises of pre-1990 communism. She is critical, for example, of Western Marxists' inability to acknowledge the devastations suffered in her home country, and insists that "behind every personification of an economic category" in Marx's *Capital*, "there was the flesh and blood of a real person." Still, she lands on an absurd equivalence between one of the Eastern Bloc's most repressive tyrannies and any given capitalist society. The only reason I can think of for her inexplicable conclusion is this: by structuring her philosophical inquiry as a memoir, with members of her immediate family representing particular positions, she winds up mingling her analysis of history with her feelings toward her family members.



Throughout *Free*, there is one person who stands for the cold spirit of capitalism: Ypi's mother, Doli. Doli is the person who nurses the greatest resentment about her family's loss of wealth and status, whose frustration is most likely to slip out even before 1990. Her entrepreneurial spirit is relentless. She brings home fifty chicks from a collective farm and tries to raise them in the bathroom, knowing that most of them will die there. She makes Lea sell loofahs on the street, "alongside the Romany girls hawking lipsticks and hair clips." After a forced early retirement, she becomes active in the anti-Communist Democratic Party, Albania's main opposition, leaving her family at home to give fiery speeches bolstered by the novel vocabulary of economic liberalization. She has a fighter's spirit—"her will was made of gunmetal," writes Ypi—and makes many of her decisions without consulting the rest of the family. She is convinced that people are, at their core, evil, and that only the protection of private property can keep society from descending into violence. She believes that, given the right conditions, "everyone... would have the opportunity to become as rich as her ancestors had once been."

Doli is in many ways a charismatic figure. In one scene, a visiting French women's group asks her if Albanian women ever suffered harassment. "Sure," she replies, "I always carried a knife." She is also no fool: though she comes across as a true believer in the Western promise of freedom, she has little time for foreign aid organizations that ignore the needs of

the people they claim to help. Doli's efforts to recover her family's properties, derided by Zafo and Nini, are ultimately successful and help pay for Ypi's university education. But in Ypi's account, her mother is also the one who does the most to destroy her family unit. It is Doli who persuades Zafo to sink their savings into a doomed pyramid scheme, because investing is what "the rest of Europe" does. It is Doli who pushes her husband to run for office as an MP, a career that gives him a front-row seat on the civil war. And it is Doli who decides to save her son from the war by escaping to Italy but leaves her daughter behind.

That this is a traumatic experience is evident: the teenaged Ypi loses her voice. In a sense, the adult writer does too. The events of the civil war, including Doli's abandonment of her family and her subsequent stay in Italy, are told mainly through an excerpt of Ypi's diary from January to April 1997. From a human perspective, it is understandable that she might not want to revisit this painful period by writing about it. From a critical perspective, interrupting her narrative with a diary entry seems like a defensive move, a way to avoid delving too deep into the emotions it brings up. Only a hint of Ypi's feelings

comes across when she resumes the story. The turquoise dress she means to wear to her end-of-school celebration is too long, and her mother is not around to make the alteration: "I resented that she wasn't there."

How much a memoirist owes her readers is open to debate. Surely a writer has the right to nurse some wounds in private and to present her loved ones in a way that all can live with. There is more to life than one book. At the same time, experienced readers of memoir can compromise on facts—they know that memory is faulty, that characters will be altered and dialogue invented—but they will

not compromise on emotional truth. What seems true in Ypi's *Free* is the way that personal tragedies were bound up with political policies under communism. As families focused on survival, they developed their own intimate regimes of silence. And while there are literary genres and devices available to reflect totalitarian life—surrealism, satire, coded allusion—there is still no adequate language for what happens after the walls fall, when people become nominally free. But the taboo that seems to animate Ypi's philosophical argument is a universal one: unspeakable rage at one's mother. ●

'A Loving Caw from a Nameless Friend'

Christopher Benfey

The Letters of Emily Dickinson
edited by Cristanne Miller
and Domhnall Mitchell.
Belknap Press/Harvard University
Press, 955 pp., \$49.95

Unpublished at thirty-one except for a couple of poems printed anonymously in the local newspaper, Emily Dickinson did what aspiring poets do. She selected four of her favorite poems and mailed them to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, an essayist and minor poet who had published an article full of advice for young writers in the April 1862 issue of *The Atlantic Monthly*. In her cover note dated April 15 of that year, one of the most famous letters in all of American literature, Dickinson asked Higginson if he was "too deeply occupied, to say if my Verse is alive" and requested that he keep their correspondence secret, "since Honor is its own pawn."

In a smaller envelope, as though hiding from her own audacity, she enclosed a card on which she signed her name. Higginson, who was bold in politics—an outspoken abolitionist and a secret supporter of John Brown, he assumed command of a Black regiment the following November¹—but timid in literature, was evidently not encouraging. (His answer has not survived.) "Thank you for the surgery," she wrote in a follow-up letter, and, in another, "I smile when you suggest that I delay 'to publish' – that being foreign to my thought, as Firmament to Fin."

She continued to send Higginson poems, and he continued to find fault with them. "You think my gait 'spasmodic,'" she wrote in her third letter. "You think me 'uncontrolled.'" It was only after her death in 1886, when hundreds of her poems were found in a bureau drawer in her bedroom, that



Emily Dickinson; illustration by Hugo Guinness

Higginson was persuaded—by Mabel Loomis Todd, the lover of Dickinson's brother, Austin—that some of them were publishable after all, though first he had to perform some mutilating "surgery," regularizing rhymes and meters like so many fractures, and excising verses that might have seemed blasphemous to respectable readers.

But over a long correspondence with Higginson, and in similarly charged epistolary exchanges with a select group of friends and family members, including her beloved sister-in-law, Susan Gilbert Dickinson, who lived next door in Amherst, Dickinson discovered that letters themselves could be an art form rivaling poetry.² Asked for personal details by Higginson,

who made a practice of mentoring young women poets and begged Dickinson without success to visit him ("I must omit Boston"), she answered in a riddling, performative register that closely resembles her poetic practice:

this one to the painter Edgar Degas, before publishing them as poems:

Rue, au 23, Ballu
J'exprime
Sitôt Juin à Monsieur Degas
La satisfaction qu'il rime
Avec la fleur des syringas.

(23 Rue Ballu, I express to Monsieur Degas, now that June is here, satisfaction that he rhymes with the flower of the syringas.)

I'm grateful to Richard Sieburth for pointing out this connection. My prose translation is adapted from Anthony Hartley's in his 1965 Mallarmé edition for the Penguin Poets series.

¹Dickinson would have been familiar with Higginson's extraordinary essay "Nat Turner's Insurrection" in the August 1861 issue of *The Atlantic*, which detailed the vicious reprisals against Black people in the rebellion's aftermath. As Brenda Wineapple notes in *White Heat: The Friendship of Emily Dickinson and Thomas Wentworth Higginson* (Knopf, 2008), Higginson gave much less attention to the rebellion itself than to "the far greater horrors of its suppression."

²Her playful ingenuity recalls the French Symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé, whose oblique work resembles hers in other ways. Mallarmé addressed envelopes in verse, like

You ask of my Companions. Hills – Sir – and the Sundown – and a Dog – large as myself, that my Father bought me – They are better than Beings, because they know – but do not tell – and the noise in the Pool, at noon – excels my Piano.

Higginson got the same deflective treatment when he asked for a photograph. "My Hair is bold, like the Chestnut Bur, and my eyes, like the Sherry in the Glass, that the Guest leaves – Would this do just as well?"

A century of writing about Dickinson has clarified important aspects of her poetry: her innovative use of slant rhymes like "pearl" and "alcohol" in "I taste a liquor never brewed"; the wonders she extracted from common hymn and ballad meters; her casual mixing of slang with the abstractions of New England Calvinism; her love of ancient forms like the riddle or newer ones like the dictionary definition. (Noah Webster, a friend of her grandfather—the two were among the founders of Amherst College—began compiling his famous dictionary in Amherst.)

No comparable interpretive work has been done on Dickinson's letters. Even the most cursory immersion in these extraordinary texts makes one thing immediately clear. They are a major literary achievement in themselves, related to her poems and perhaps exceeding them in experimental energy. And yet, we don't know how to read them.

Dickinson could hardly have been more explicit in stressing the primacy of letters in her personal and imaginative life. Her poem beginning "This is my letter to the World,/That never wrote to me" defines her stance as a poet. Her first poems were verse letters, witty valentines sent to friends, and she relished the illicit mailing of valentines during her single year at Mount Holyoke, when students drew the local postmaster into the conspiracy to flout the prohibitions set in place by the stern founder and headmistress, Mary Lyon, who sought to stamp out "those foolish notes." Some of her last poems were written, in bizarrely expressive ways, across torn envelopes, the very shapes

of which inspired, in her so-called envelope poems, remarkable texts.³

No account of her literary achievement is complete without an assessment of the Master Letters, those extraordinary drafts of three anguished love letters:

Master.

If you saw a bullet hit a Bird – and he told you he was'nt shot – you might weep at his courtesy, but you would certainly doubt his word –

One drop more from the gash that stains your Daisy's bosom – then would you *believe?*

These may have been intended for a specific "Master," male or female, or they may have been experiments in her newly emerging form of creative letters.⁴

Her similarly pitched letters to Susan—"Why don't you write me, Darling? Did I in that quick letter say anything which grieved you, or made it hard for you to take your usual pen and trace affection for your bad, sad Emilie?"—are sometimes thought to be evidence of a physical love affair. I suspect they *are* the affair. In 1885, the year before her death, she summed up the place of letters in her life: "A Letter is a joy of Earth – / It is denied the Gods."

We are lucky to have a meticulously edited new collection of Dickinson's known letters from two seasoned scholars, Cristanne Miller and Domhnall Mitchell. The last attempt to collect her correspondence was in 1958. Eighty new letters have been discovered since, according to the editors, "or radically re-edited." Dates are adjusted, historical references identified, misspellings and misreadings corrected. Some of the editors' conjectures seem overly literal. When Dickinson mentions Orion in a poem, must we assume that the constellation was visible in the night sky at the time of writing? Does a reference to "The Frost of Death" mean there was a cold snap in Amherst? More controversially, the new edition "adds to the collection of her correspondence over 200 letter-poems that Dickinson circulated." According to the editors, a letter-poem is a poem intended to be sent through the mail and includes either a greeting or a signature.

The editors were charged with refereeing close calls. Is an imaginary letter—written to a fictive recipient or as a literary exercise—a letter? (No.) Is a draft? (Yes.) They have made a valiant attempt to draw firm distinctions between letters and poems, though an exciting feature of the letter-poems is that we are often unsure which of the two we are reading. Dickinson habitually signed the poems she sent next door to Susan. When she sent many of the same poems to Higginson, she enclosed them, unsigned, with a cover letter. The poems to Susan are categorized as letters, the same ones to Higginson as poems. Might we say instead

that such texts indicate the essential porousness of the letter–poem distinction for Dickinson? The editors recognize that "these two aspects of her artistry interweave." They get closer to the truth when they concede, "Especially in her later years, Dickinson emerges as a great writer of prose as well as poetry, that is, a writer for whom letters in part suspend the distinction between poetry and prose."

brusque finality? "Don't you know," she wrote, "you are happiest while I withhold and not confer – don't you know that 'No' is the wildest word we consign to Language?"

Her letters suggest that Dickinson was a riddle to her contemporaries. "All men say 'What' to me." She may have been a riddle to herself as well. Her efforts to explain her tortured feelings to her most intimate friends were met with affectionate bemusement. The dashing editor Samuel Bowles, recipient of some of her most tormented letters and poems, thanked her for her "little pleasant notes." In the face of widespread incomprehension—"Myself the only Kangaroo among the Beauty," she wrote—Dickinson's letters became subtle instruments of

a friend in 1885. "Accept a loving Caw from a nameless friend."

Dickinson engaged with letters on several levels, material and metaphorical. She was fascinated by the physical processes of writing, sealing, addressing, mailing, delivering, and reading letters. She recruited an Amherst cousin to address her envelopes for her, and enlisted friends to mail her letters from places other than Amherst. The editors have identified "no single reason why." She loved to imagine the letter's journey:

Yet Susie, there will be romance in the letter's ride to you – think of the hills and the dales, and the rivers it will pass over, and the drivers and conductors who will hurry it on to you; and wont that make a poem such as ne'er can be written?

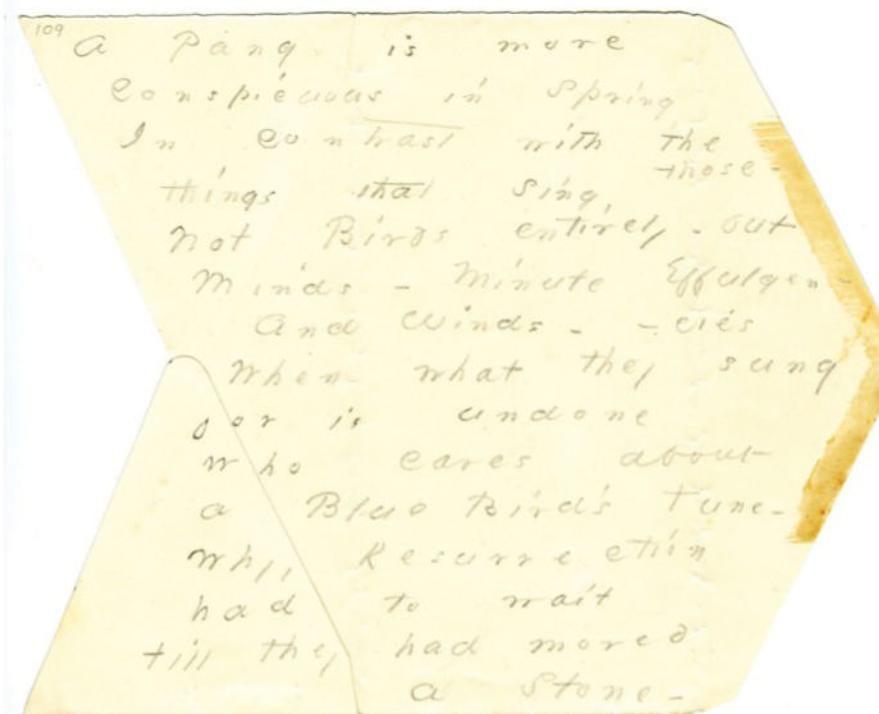
She was delighted when the Amherst postman misdelivered a letter addressed to the "Misses Dickinson" (there were several in Amherst), which reached its destination two weeks late: "The postmaster knows Vinnie, also by faith who Emily is."

In poems and letters she invoked the wonder of each stage of a letter's life. Sometimes the letter itself is spoken to, as in "Going to Him! Happy letter!" and "Going – to – Her!", two versions of the same poem. The former was folded ("Tell Him – just how she sealed you – Cautious!") and perhaps mailed to Bowles. Sometimes the letter itself speaks, as in a love letter to Susan: "Open me carefully." Sometimes the letter's journey is described: "The Mail from Tunis, probably,/An easy Morning's Ride." And sometimes its reception: "The Way I read a Letter's – this – /'Tis first – I lock the Door." Letters are among her most potent symbols: "A Letter always seemed to me like Immortality, for is it not the Mind alone, without corporeal friend?" That sentence is itself perfectly metered as poetry, with a caesura after "Immortality."

But her sustained and surprising thinking about the nature of letters, letter writing, and letter receiving, on display everywhere in this extraordinarily rich volume, attains a fever pitch in the opening sentences of an 1880 letter to her cousin Louisa Norcross:

What is it that instructs a hand lightly created, to impel shapes to eyes at a distance, which for them have the whole area of life or of death? Yet not a pencil in the street but has this awful power, though nobody arrests it. An earnest letter is or should be life-warrant or death-warrant, for what is each instant but a gun, harmless because "unloaded," but that touched "goes off"?

What a breathtaking way to imagine the progress of a letter, from a hand lightly created to eyes at a distance, with a dark joke about arresting a pencil for murder. Guns and letters bridge distances. Readers of Dickinson will notice a metaphorical overlap with her famous poem "My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun," which, among other multilayered resonances, imagines poetry, that twin of letter writing, as "loaded," explosive, and a matter of life and death. ●



One of Emily Dickinson's envelope poems, 'A Pang is more/Conspicuous in Spring,' circa 1881

editors claim. This may be true, if by "contours" they mean external things like her home life in Amherst, her intense early friendships, her excellent education at the Amherst Academy followed by a mostly unhappy year at Mount Holyoke, her imposing father who practiced law and served a term in the US Congress ("too busy with his Briefs – to notice what we do – He buys me many Books, but begs me not to read them – because he fears they joggle the mind") and her invalid mother ("the weary life in the second story"), her Byronic brother and retiring sister, the Irish servants, the dog Carlo.

But much about Dickinson's life is not well known. What were her religious views ("The Doubt like the Mosquito, buzzes round my faith") or her sexual experiences, if any, with women or men? What exactly was the "terror – since September – I could tell to none," which she alluded to in a letter to Higginson and which seems to have turned her life decisively inward in 1861? Was it a romantic rupture, a psychotic break, eye trouble? Why did she look for literary validation from Higginson but refuse to publish her poems when her childhood acquaintance Helen Hunt Jackson, an established novelist and advocate for Native American rights, later urged her to do so? Why did she reject the late-in-life importunings (for sex? or marriage?) of Judge Otis Lord, another recipient of passionate love letters, with such

engagement, deflection, and verbal exploration.

They are also records of loneliness. In a poem often dismissed as a children's ditty and not included in this edition despite its epistolary conceit, Dickinson adopted the persona of a lonely fly writing to an absent bee:

Bee! I'm expecting you!
Was saying Yesterday
To Somebody you know
That you were due –

The Frogs got Home last Week –
Are settled, and at work –
Birds, mostly back –
The Clover warm and thick –

You'll get my Letter by
The Seventeenth; Reply
Or better, be with me –
Your's, Fly.

There is so much to treasure here: the slant rhymes that stitch each stanza together ("week," "work," "back," "thick") before the closing exact rhymes ("by," "reply," "fly"), like a shift from minor to major; the casually truncated "Was saying" and "Birds, mostly back"; the insistence on letter writing in specifying the precise date of arrival and impatiently requesting a reply; and finally the poignant "Or better, be with me" that signals the Fly's loneliness, the real subject of this perfect poem. "Morning without you is a dwindled Dawn," Dickinson wrote to

³See my "Dickinson: Raw or Cooked?", nybooks.com, January 25, 2014.

⁴Emily Dickinson: *The Gorgeous Nothings*, edited by Marta Werner and Jen Bervin (Christine Burgin/New Directions, 2013). See also Werner's *Writing in Time: Emily Dickinson's Master Hours* (Amherst College Press, 2021), reviewed in these pages by Brenda Wineapple, July 1, 2021.

Waiting by the Phone

Anna Louie Sussman

The End of Love

by Tamara Tenenbaum, translated from the Spanish by Carolina Parodi. Europa, 213 pp., \$17.00 (paper)

The Case Against the Sexual Revolution: A New Guide to Sex in the 21st Century

by Louise Perry. Polity, 216 pp., \$59.95; \$19.95 (paper)

Rethinking Sex

by Christine Emba. Sentinel, 204 pp., \$27.00

Bad Sex: Truth, Pleasure, and an Unfinished Revolution

by Nona Willis Aronowitz. Plume, 321 pp., \$28.00

When she was in her early twenties, the Argentine journalist Tamara Tenenbaum went to the apartment of a man she occasionally slept with. It was 10:00 PM and she had missed dinner, having arrived straight from university. Was there anything in the fridge, she asked? “I didn’t bring you here to eat,” he answered, annoyed.” Once she realized he wasn’t joking, she recalls, “I simply smiled and lay on his bed.” After sex, he didn’t offer her so much as “a slice of cheese and some crackers,” and she left, still hungry.

He didn’t hit her or call her names, but the brutality of his response, his frank assertion that no bodily need of hers should stand in the way of his own sexual satisfaction, shocks me each time I read that passage. And yet Tenenbaum acknowledges that she readily accepted it. “In general, we had a good time,” she writes in *The End of Love*, one of a number of recent books arguing that we’re doing sex all wrong and that contemporary sexual culture neglects the needs of, or even harms, heterosexual women in particular.

Since the late nineteenth century, writers from a wide range of disciplines—including philosophy, social science, and psychology—have attempted to analyze and diagnose the sexual culture of their time. Several of these analyses, written or published during the hopeful interregnum of the Biden administration and in the wake of Me Too, seek to explain why, despite having been raised by feminist mothers or at least exposed to pop feminism from an early age, a generation of heterosexual women still experiences desire so unequally. Despite rising anti-feminist backlash, women today are “winning” in many areas of life—they form the majority of college graduates in the US and an increasing share of homebuyers—so why do they wield so little agency when it comes to sex? How did we wind up, in Tenenbaum’s piercing image, with “an entire sisterhood waiting torturously by the phone”?

One answer lies in the various ways that our intimate lives have taken on the worst features of the free market—inequality, precarity, impersonality. This is the argument made in *The Case Against the Sexual Revolution*, an unpersuasive polemic by the British columnist, antirape campaigner, and self-described “reactionary feminist”



Illustration by Kaye Blegvad

Louise Perry. She writes that contemporary sexual culture, based on casual sex and hookups, fails women while benefiting men. She points to the outpouring of Me Too-era stories from women describing “sexual encounters that were technically consensual but nevertheless left them feeling terrible,” because, in Perry’s analysis, “they were being asked to treat as meaningless something that they felt to be meaningful.”

Like Christine Emba in *Rethinking Sex*—a short, essayistic “provocation” interwoven with anecdotes and interviews with straight, educated professionals, most of them women—Perry is at pains to expose the supposed “free market” of sexual exchange as a buyer’s market in which women are getting a raw deal. Both writers cite women’s preferences for monogamy and committed relationships, as well as survey data showing that men are more open to hookups and more likely to orgasm during a casual encounter. Perry, who worked at a rape crisis center earlier in her career, also believes that casual sex puts women at risk of sexual violence.

Perry argues that rape is not only about power, as Susan Brownmiller theorized and as Perry herself often repeated as a rape crisis worker; it is, actually, also about sex. After reading *A Natural History of Rape* (2000) by Randy Thornhill and Craig Palmer, Perry comes to believe that rape is an evolutionary strategy, hardwired into men’s behavior, by which a minority of aggressive men spread their genetic material:

Hundreds of thousands of years of sexual violence—not only in our own species but also in many others—is not a consequence of some kind of misunderstanding, swiftly cleared up during a 45-minute workshop in which kids are told in words of one syllable not to rape one another.

Both Emba and Perry use the metaphor of an unregulated marketplace to describe this anything-goes sexual culture where everyone operates as a free, unfettered agent; both also link this sexual culture to a broader capitalist ethos of choice, freedom, and transaction. For women especially, this freedom is an illusion. Tenenbaum offers a sociological theory, referencing work by scholars such as Eva Illouz and Chris Haywood to explain that men cultivate emotional detachment in order “to keep control of the relationship.” Emba and Perry both emphasize biology, pointing to women’s shorter fertile windows and, in Perry’s case, concepts from evolutionary psychology, such as parental investment theory, which claims that the asymmetrical physical consequences of sex motivate women to be more selective about their mates. (This argument is less convincing in an era of reliable contraception that, at the time of writing at least, is still readily accessible to the urban professionals Perry appears to be addressing.)

I’d offer another explanation, one more in line with a market analogy. Perhaps it is relevant that Washington, D.C., where Kirsten presumably lives, has one of the most lopsided ratios of educated straight women to educated straight men in the country, or that since the 1980s American women have been outstripping men in gaining bachelor’s degrees. As three sociologists studying assortative mating recently observed, “a college degree is the dividing line across which it is most difficult to intermarry.” Did Kirsten believe that if she upset her boyfriend by telling him she didn’t like to be choked during sex, he would leave her and she would struggle to find another, more suitable boyfriend? In Emba’s telling, Kirsten knows—by the numbers or simply in her gut—that the odds are not in her favor, and she has made a calculated decision to trade episodic sex for the daily companionship that so many people desire.

She didn’t really like the choking, Kirsten explained, but she really liked *him*. She wasn’t sure whether to say anything, or even if it could actually be considered a valid problem. After all, sex like this was something that she’d said yes to; and she had definitely said yes to him—it was the bargain one made in order to leap off the dating app carousel into the arms of an otherwise great guy. And anyway, this kind of thing had happened to her friends too—the norm for heterosexual hookups seemed to have changed. Vanilla was out, extremes were to be expected.

Why, I wondered, did Kirsten (and dozens of others like her in the book) seem unable to simply communicate with her boyfriend about her sexual preferences? What was stopping her from exercising what the scholars Jennifer Hirsch and Shamus Khan would call her “sexual citizenship”? Did her boyfriend think she liked it, or did he not seem to care? How much could he be blamed individually, and how much could be ascribed to his upbringing, schooling, experience with previous girlfriends who accepted or even seemed to enjoy his proclivities, or simply to cues from film, video games, pornography, music, or any of the other social and cultural phenomena that shape our preferences without our necessarily knowing it?

If Kirsten was scared to just walk away, her fears were not unfounded. A recent survey found that 45 percent of college-educated women say that not being able to find someone who meets their expectations is a major factor in why they are not dating, compared with 28 percent of women without a college education and 33 percent of college-educated men. And today’s straight singles are mismatched from a purely economic perspective too. A 2019 paper compared the existing supply of American single men to men whom educated women had already married, and found that the married men were more likely to be college-educated, employed, and higher-earning than those still up for grabs.

That study’s conclusion—that educated women in the US face “large deficits in the supply of potential male spouses”—would likely not surprise any of the women in Emba’s book or, to be honest, any woman who has tried dating in a major metropolis. In *Motherhood on Ice* (2023), the sociologist Marcia Inhorn found that 82 percent of the 150 college-educated, professional women she surveyed in the US cited a lack of a partner as the reason

for freezing their eggs. (Inhorn also notes that while Silicon Valley has a high ratio of educated men to women, women in that city repeatedly told her that while “the odds are good...the goods are odd.”) But while egg freezing may help to compensate for some of the asymmetry in the reproductive periods of women and men, the most recent data, from 2022, shows that fewer than 30,000 women freeze their eggs every year, so it can’t address the broader demographic imbalance that is particularly acute in certain parts of the country, nor the disagreeable male behavior that appears to result. A thirty-four-year-old law student describes to Emba an endless run of “bullshit shenanigans” with men who lack “the initiative to be reliable partners, because sex is both so casual and so available.”

Perry borrows from the economic historian R. H. Tawney, dividing the sexual marketplace’s participants into predatory pikes and vulnerable minnows. Inspired by labor rights and redistributive measures that protect the minnows from unbridled exploitation by the pikes, Perry calls for “a sophisticated system of sexual ethics.” She asks men, “as the stronger and hornier sex,” to “demonstrate even greater restraint than women when faced with temptation.” To extend her market analogy, this seems a bit like asking corporations to operate under stakeholder capitalism instead of shareholder capitalism, to certify as B-corps instead of ruthlessly (or rationally) maximizing their returns. It is an entreaty, not a solution.

In diagnosing the maladies of today’s sex and dating culture, neither Perry nor Emba dwells much on the liberatory possibilities of sex, or its potential for simple physical pleasure—for women as well as men. Nona Willis Aronowitz tackles both, without shying away from the pitfalls of seeking them through an activity that relies on another person’s goodwill. In *Bad Sex: Truth, Pleasure, and an Unfinished Revolution*, she ties together several threads: the collapse of her marriage and her quest for self-discovery through a series of sexual relationships and one-offs; the published and unpublished musings of her mother, the sex-positive feminist writer and music critic Ellen Willis; and a nuanced historical account of how feminists going back more than a century sought to reconcile their ideas, feelings, and actions when it came to love, desire, and autonomy. “What, exactly, do I want?” she asks in the book’s early pages. “And are my sexual and romantic desires even possible amid the horrors and bribes of patriarchy, capitalism, and white supremacy?” In the next sentence, she acknowledges “the complexity and absurdity” of answering those questions.

Her attempts to understand her own conflicting desires are thorough, earnest, and often illuminating. Because Perry and Emba take for granted certain generalizations about what straight women and men want—based on surveys, their own personal experience, and, in Emba’s case, a number of interviews—their arguments lead them naturally toward protecting women and helping them achieve their stated goal of a committed relationship. Willis Aronowitz, meanwhile, is more attuned to those on the margins, to individuals and movements seeking to carve

out different paths, giving ample space to the experiences and ideas of earlier generations of feminists of color, free love advocates, and lesbian separatists who hoped to create a world dedicated to women’s needs and desires.

In exploring the concept of vulnerability, she observes how power, identity, and hierarchy shape sexuality and relationships in unexpected ways. The gendered inequality in her relationship with a Chilean lover who once criticized her lack of enthusiasm for blow jobs “while not acknowledging that he’d never once even seen my pussy” is tempered by the greater social and economic power she enjoys by virtue of being “a much richer white American woman,” although the tension between those two forms of power remains unexplored.

Recounting the debate that began in the 1970s between pro-sex feminists, including her mother, who envisioned a genuine sexual freedom that required a more egalitarian world, and anti-porn activists who saw pornography as a dehumanizing product of a patriarchal society, she quotes the self-described “Chicana, Catholic-raised lesbian” Cherrie Moraga. In Moraga’s view both antiporn feminists and sexual libertarians overlooked a history of devaluation that already rendered Black and brown women’s bodies vulnerable to sexual violence, leaving them unable “to grasp why it might be harder for women of color to just proudly embrace sexual freedom,” Willis Aronowitz writes. She goes on to discuss Black feminist writers such as Joan Morgan, Adrienne Maree Brown, and Audre Lorde, who have sought to reclaim erotic pleasure as a crucial liberatory aspect of Black female sexuality, which—when not pathologized in “the three paradigms of Jezebel, sexless mammy, and Sapphire”—has often been understood through stories of trauma and violation.

One of the most affecting sections of the book details the sexual exploration of her close friend Selah, which was complicated by the lessons Selah had absorbed from church and from her strict Black single mother. After a series of disappointing and occasionally violent encounters with men, Selah comes to embrace her queerness when she meets a “confident butch named Alexis” during a trip to Atlanta. Alexis breaks her heart, but not before guiding Selah toward self-discovery by taking her to a sex shop to buy a dildo. When Selah asks Alexis which toy she wants to use on her, Alexis turns it around: “Baby. What do you want?” It was a question no one had ever asked her before.

Willis Aronowitz narrates her own journey to unearth her desires with abundant candor. There are ecstatic highs (“He could fuck my mouth with authority and then moan with abandon when I fingered his ass and then suck my clit for a hundred years and then burrow his face in my breasts sweetly, lazily”) and undeserved lows (an encounter with a much younger man who, when she glances up mid-fellatio, turns out to have been filming her). Although Mr. Moan with Abandon reveals himself to be a melodramatic liar, “an unworthy recipient” of her “newfound openness,” Willis Aronowitz nevertheless insists on the value of slogging her way through this thicket of often unimpressive men, describing sex as the terrain on which she conducts her self-exploration. “I had just learned so

much about myself through fucking,” she writes at one point. “I’d turned my whole life upside down largely because I’d determined that sexual pleasure was a gigantic priority of mine.”

She winds up in a long-term relationship again, with a man who shares her ideological and practical commitment to nonmonogamy. She admits that this is the path of greater resistance, a recipe for more insecurity, more “serious talks,” more “worry and despair.” Both she and her partner are often exhausted and on edge. Again, she concludes that the effort is worthwhile, leading her to a place of greater integrity: “The best truth I can offer is that while nonmonogamy is not at all relaxing, it also feels worthwhile to excavate the deepest wells of my own generosity and trust.”

I sometimes wondered if there wasn’t an easier, less excruciating way for Willis Aronowitz to discover herself. Why not take a pottery class or visit a museum? Clearly she and I are different people, and while pursuing encounters with whoever happens to be on Tinder that night strikes me as a circuitous route to finding one’s truest self, I worry more that the suggestions offered by Emba and Perry leave little room for someone whose “gigantic priority” is pleasure, or for the feminists of color for whom eroticism and a positive reclamation of sexuality are not only sources of pleasure but important forms of political resistance.

Take Perry’s solution to the problem of a too-liberal sexual culture that rewards men for behaving like cads:

In order to change the incentive structure, we would need a technology that discourages short-termism in male sexual behavior, protects the economic interests of mothers, and creates a stable environment for the raising of children. And we do already have such a technology, even if it is old, clunky and prone to periodic failure. It’s called monogamous marriage.

The passage arrives at the end of a book that depicts men as incorrigible creeps, a not-insignificant share (at least 10 percent in the US and the UK, in her estimation) of whom are inclined to rape, and that acknowledges that a “durable marriage is fast becoming a luxury of the upper classes.” Such a prescription strikes me as not just glib, smug, and unrealistic, but also utterly incoherent in light of everything she has argued in the preceding pages. Whom exactly are women supposed to marry, and why would men give up all the goodies currently available to them—and to which they are, in her telling, evolutionarily disposed—in exchange for matrimony?

Emba (a convert to Catholicism who writes that she opposed premarital sex in her personal life until, after “wrestling with [her] own faith,” she didn’t) guides the reader instead to the thirteenth-century philosopher Thomas Aquinas, and in particular to his admonition to love. His definition of love was “willing the good of the other,” a description not of romantic love per se or even of any form of action, but rather “an intention: to bear goodwill toward another for the sake of that person and not oneself.” Perry herself hopes for a sexual cul-

ture that “recognises other human beings as real people, invested with real value and dignity.” Willis Aronowitz writes that “most of the time, a hot one-night stand simply requires being a decent human.”

At the core of all these books is an implicit question: What is sex for? Clearly, just as there is no average sexual encounter, there is not a simple answer to this question. But failing to talk about it, or even to contemplate it, leaves us all poorly equipped to come to anything resembling a shared consensus. Emba concludes that sex with someone you know and care about is better than casual sex with someone you’ve just met, not least because it’s more likely that you’ll have their interests at heart—you’ll be more predisposed to will their good. Not all women, as Perry suggests, want or need sex to be “meaningful,” but sex—or even conversation, as anyone who has politely sat by as someone with high regard for their own ideas blathers on interminably—should be at least informed by a sense of mutuality that goes beyond mere consent.

I’m inclined to think that Willis Aronowitz’s endless “serious talks” with her partner about their open relationship suggest one way forward, whether in monogamous relationships or casual encounters. As I read about the many unpleasant or unsatisfying sexual scenarios depicted in these books, it often seemed the problem was not so much a lack of consent as a lack of communication. At one point, Emba proposes the dinner party as an analogy for an ideal sexual experience: it is governed by “a clear set of rules,” but still offers the chance of surprise, discovery, delight.

I would suggest that a successful dinner party, like an exhilarating sexual encounter, comes down less to the rules and boundaries that proscribe certain behaviors than to the attitudes or intentions with which participants approach it. Curiosity and respect are more likely to get you invited back to either event than ego and selfishness.

Indeed, the sex columnist and writer Dan Savage has pointed out that queer people beginning a flirtation often lead by asking, “What are you into?” Verbal communication that precedes a physical interaction offers a chance to think about and articulate one’s desires. It is also an opportunity to recognize the other person as an equal—someone with ideas, wants, and a voice of their own, instead of simply a body.

But there’s something terribly poignant and frustrating about reading books by sophisticated thinkers who all conclude, in various ways, that we just need to be nicer, in bed and out of it. I wondered whether the people who need to hear this rudimentary message most—straight men—are likely to pick up these books at all. More influential seems to be the discussion of sexual politics playing out online, in which male strength and female submission are celebrated by proudly misogynistic influencers such as Andrew Tate. The professional racist Nick Fuentes’s exultation on the night of Trump’s election—“Your body, my choice. Forever”—went viral. Sexual ethics in a post-Me Too era may not have been clear cut, but these books, for the most part, are attempts to forge a path forward, toward a sexual culture founded on mutual goodwill and respect. It no longer feels like “forward” is where we are headed. ●

China's Counter-Histories

Perry Link

Sparks:

China's Underground Historians and Their Battle for the Future

by Ian Johnson.

Oxford University Press,
381 pp., \$27.95; \$19.99 (paper)

The word “China,” as used by Western journalists and government officials, almost always refers to the thoughts, values, positions, and plans of high-ranking members of the Chinese Communist Party. This is the case when one reads of “China’s” position on Ukraine, “China’s” effort to stimulate domestic consumption, and so on.

In Ian Johnson’s bracing book *Sparks*, “China” means something else. Johnson writes of Chinese people who uncover momentous truths about their country’s modern history and risk their careers, indeed their lives, to do it. Their values and actions are continuous with ancient moral traditions as well as with the daily life that lies beyond official reach today. They, too, are China.

The CCP presses them terribly and largely succeeds. The journalists, professors, rights lawyers, and primitively equipped filmmakers who make up Johnson’s “underground historians” (alternatively, “counter-historians”) appear to be only a tiny minority. But he shows how they draw on values that have not only survived dynasties but also helped to bring some dynasties down. Today’s rulers seem aware of that. Our best evidence of this is the highly expensive 24/7 “stability maintenance” measures that the regime uses to monitor, dissuade, and, if necessary, stifle them. The tools of dissuasion are basically two: threats designed to induce fear and offers of comfort to reward capitulation. Beyond that, punishment.

The ancient Confucian value of *yì* 義 means to do what is right even (or especially) if it involves opposition to authority. Chinese history offers many glowing accounts of officials who, in addressing emperors, chose *yì* even at the cost of separation of head from torso. Johnson rightly points to another value—one that a high official would see as beneath his dignity but that was cherished and potent among ordinary people. This is the spirit of *jianghu*, literally “rivers and lakes,” which refers to the wilds from which *xiake* (“roving knights” or “righteous heroes”) emerge to help common people get justice. Today’s underground historians see themselves as heirs of the spirits of both *yì* and *jianghu*. As Johnson paraphrases them, “If the ancients dared to speak out, then how can I not?” Moreover they see themselves as passing their priceless tradition on to the future; their works are almost like time capsules: “They want future Chinese to know that in the 2020s, when things had never been darker, Chinese people inside China did not yield to comfort or fear.”

Their confidence in the durability of Chinese moral rectitude leads them not just to hope but actually to predict that eventually the cruel reign of the CCP will be no more:

They know they will win, not individually and not immediately, but someday. In essence, the Chinese



Hu Jie: Let there be light #16, 2015; from a series of woodblock prints about China's Great Famine of 1958–1962

Communist Party’s enemies are not these individuals but the lasting values of Chinese civilization: righteousness, loyalty, freedom of thought.

The counter-historians have no organization: no charter, officers, or meetings. They offer one another moral support in loose affiliation, but that’s all. The caution about organizing is necessary because the regime crushes—in embryo, if possible—any group it views as potentially oppositional. The Internet has helped immensely in making informal liaison possible. Before the Internet, people had to meet at physical places, police could raid them, and meetings were broken up. Online meetings with people physically dispersed are more difficult to disrupt. (The regime still tries, but its task is harder.)

Johnson gives many examples of the people and episodes in Communist China’s past that have been documented by the underground historians. Mao Zedong’s land reform movement of the early 1950s was not a transfer of land from landlords to farmers but a land confiscation by the CCP. “Landlords” (including many who hardly deserved that label but were identified as such to fill quotas set by the regime) were targeted for “class struggle.” Millions were executed.

The Anti-Rightist Campaign of 1957 caused the suffering of millions of intellectuals who had dared to voice criticisms of the new society. It led to broken families, suicides, and banishment to labor camps in remote areas. No ex-

ample has been more chilling than the recently uncovered story of Jiabiangou, a labor camp in the Gobi Desert of China’s northwest, which was so isolated that there was no need to put fences around it. Anyone who walked out would die of dehydration. Inside the camp thousands starved, especially during the Great Famine of 1958–1962. Some were driven to the ghastly dilemma of whether or not to consume the flesh of fellow inmates who had died.

In 1959 a group of students who had been sent to the countryside as “rightists” became sufficiently horrified by the famine and by the official mendacity about it that they came up with a quixotic plan to bring down the Communist Party by founding a journal, which they named *Spark*. Within a year all its organizers were tracked down and either imprisoned or executed. One of *Spark*’s main contributors, Lin Zhao, later became famous for her defiance in prison and was the subject of a splendid film by Hu Jie called *Searching for Lin Zhao’s Soul* (2004).¹ Deprived of ink, Lin had written letters from prison in blood. When she finally was executed, the regime sent an agent to demand that her mother reimburse the state for the cost of the bullet. *Spark*’s legacy lasted into the twenty-first century, and now it provides the title for Johnson’s book.

In January 1967, during the frenzied years of Mao’s Cultural Revolution, Yu Luoke and his younger brother Yu Luowen published the *Journal of*

Secondary School Cultural Revolution. It opposed the persecution of people Mao had dubbed “the five black categories”: landlords, rich farmers, counterrevolutionaries, bad elements, and rightists. The journal’s circulation soon reached the tens of thousands, its editorial board swelled to twenty, and every day the editors received hundreds of letters from readers. It was forcibly closed in April 1967. Yu Luoke was arrested, imprisoned, and, in March 1970, shot by firing squad in Beijing’s largest stadium, where schoolchildren were assembled to view the execution in order that they might draw their own conclusions about the wisdom of resistance.

In the 1980s Tan Hecheng, whom Johnson describes as “garrulous, stubborn, and emotional,” stumbled upon the story of the mass political murder of nine thousand or more people in a remote area of Hunan province. Tan spent the next four decades on a one-person crusade to document how, during “class struggle” in August 1967, they were bludgeoned to death, and their bodies were tossed into rivers—or, more imaginatively (in order to underscore the political zeal of the attackers), dispatched by methods with colorful names like “homemade airplanes,” which described the way their body parts flew in all directions when explosives roped to them were detonated. In 2011 Tan published (in Hong Kong) a book called *Blood Myths*, which was later translated and condensed as *The Killing Wind* (2017).

In the late 1970s Gao Hua, a university student from a family that had suffered bitterly under Mao, began a project to examine how the entire Mao disaster had begun. He found that the horrors of the 1950s and 1960s had their seeds in the years between 1930 and 1945, when Mao elbowed his way to the top of the CCP and established a regime that could and did destroy anyone who would challenge him. Gao worked almost entirely alone for twenty-two years before publishing, in Hong Kong, a nine-hundred-page book called *How the Red Sun Rose: The Origin and Development of the Yan'an Rectification Movement, 1930–1945*. The “Red Sun” of the title is Mao. Johnson writes that the book is “dense, long, and challenging” yet an “overwhelming” achievement, “a rewriting of the Yan’an myth that also calls into question the entire Communist project.”

Wu Wenguang, a documentary filmmaker who specializes in recording the lives of ordinary people, uses an approach that differs in one significant respect from that of his “underground” peers. Wu shares their values but stays just barely “inside the system” politically. He avoids conspicuous trespass into the regime’s forbidden zones, and the reward for this circumspection is that he can do more work with less hassle and can show at least some of it inside China. In 2010 he launched the Folk Memory Project, in which dozens of young people have gone to their hometowns carrying rudimentary equipment to film survivors of the Great Famine. By 2020 they had interviewed more than 1,300 people in 246 villages.

An underground journal called *Remembrance* began publishing in 2008

¹See Ian Johnson, “China’s Invisible History: An Interview with Filmmaker and Artist Hu Jie,” nybooks.com, May 27, 2015.

from a high-rise apartment in a Beijing suburb. The editors invite people to send in accounts of events that they remember or have researched. The journal uses footnotes and has something of an academic flavor. Its issues, which are seventy to ninety pages in length, are sent out every two weeks in PDF form to a list of subscribers whose total number is kept below two hundred, because a circulation any higher would make the journal a “publication” that would need government registration; below two hundred, it can be just a “newsletter.” The editors encourage a just-the-facts objectivity, but the facts tell stories. During the violence of the Cultural Revolution in Inner Mongolia, for example, 22,900 people died and another 790,000 were imprisoned, yet at the time no attention was paid to the fact that the perpetrators were overwhelmingly Han Chinese and the victims overwhelmingly Mongolians.

The counter-historians have been marginalized, muzzled, sometimes imprisoned, and occasionally executed, but, Johnson notes, they don’t go away. Moreover they understand themselves as a chain—from the “1957 rightists” to *Spark* (1959) to Yu Luoke (1967) to the “Democracy Wall” (1979) to the Tiananmen protests (1989) to the “rights support” movement (2002–2008) to citizen journalism during the Covid-19 pandemic (2020–2021) and the “white paper” protests (2022). Each rising is smashed, but no smashing breaks the chain. Johnson sees the pattern as continuing, with “new sparks that leap off the flint of history every time it is struck.”²

This tenacity seems to contradict an opposite trend that others have noticed. In 1990, while in refuge at the US embassy in Beijing after the 1989 Tiananmen massacre, the dissident astrophysicist Fang Lizhi published an essay in these pages called “The Chinese Amnesia.”³ He argued that the CCP’s skill at suppressing memory, well practiced after both 1957 and 1979, would be applied again to the 1989 events and that later Chinese generations might not know about them. In 2014 Louisa Lim published *The People’s Republic of Amnesia: Tiananmen Revisited*, in which she essentially spells out how Fang’s prediction was proved right. Today many of my students in California who come from China don’t know that there was a massacre in 1989. But there is no contradiction: Fang, Lim, and Johnson are all correct. The steely determination of the counter-historians is all the more impressive when one appreciates the strength of the headwinds they have faced.

Two of them whom Johnson describes in more detail than others are the filmmaker Ai Xiaoming and the journalist Jiang Xue, both of whom are women. Many others are women as well, including the Tibetan poet Tsering Woeser, the public intellectual Cui Weiping, the anthropologist Guo Yuhua, and the sexuality expert Li Yinhe. It was apparent during the white-paper protests in Shanghai in November 2022

that the leaders were women and that many (perhaps most?) of the supporters in the streets were, too. In recent years the most energetic and effective leaders of young Chinese freethinkers overseas have been women as well. By contrast, in spring 1989, when I was in Beijing during the huge pro-democracy demonstrations, men in the streets outnumbered women. Something, it seems, has changed.

We might ask to what extent feminism has become a motivation in China’s political opposition. In recent years, especially among university students, Me Too has dawned; it has also suffered attack, in the form of retaliation and defamation lawsuits, even as the potential for its growth, given China’s still highly patriarchal society, remains enormous. For young feminists, the pursuit of gender equality has sometimes had a secondary effect of leading to antiauthoritarianism more generally. It seems that resistance to patriarchy, as one form of authoritarianism, can lead naturally to resistance to political oppression, since political bosses are, in fact, usually male.

Whether people of both sexes in China’s liberal movement see the connection equally well is not clear, however. Li Sipan, one of China’s most articulate feminists, has written an article asking why it is that men in China’s political opposition, however astute in their antiauthoritarianism, have trouble bringing gender equality into daily practice. She finds that even among colleagues in the opposition, the men tend to see the women as the second sex.

Johnson has a chapter on “History as Myth,” and his point is profound. The CCP claims that its role in history has been “correct” and is, in consequence, the foundation of its right to rule. The emperors of old did this as well. An emperor was the “son of heaven.” (“Heaven” did not mean an extraterrestrial place but, roughly, “the natural order of things.”) The emperor’s rule was legitimate because he had a “mandate” from heaven. When a new dynasty took over, it was the duty of court historians to write recent history so that the moral judgment of heaven was plain. The CCP inherited this traditional notion and fused it with the Leninist idea of a “party” conceived abstractly enough that it could be held to be infallible. Actual party members might make mistakes. Even Mao, in the estimation of his successor, Deng Xiaoping, was “70 percent correct, 30 percent incorrect.” But the party itself was by definition immaculate.

This is why, when underground historians expose facts that tarnish or wholly invert the Communist Party’s account of itself, it sees them as not just inaccurate but blasphemous. The threat is existential. Can it be that the land reform of the early 1950s was not the transfer of land to its tillers? Was it in fact a seizure of power achieved through the methodical execution of people tagged as “landlords”? If that is true, then (in Johnson’s words) “by what right did the party rule?” The counter-historians might be very few, but they are termites in the foundation of CCP rule. The regime fears that their accounts of the past—even if “just the facts”—might spread. *And then what?*

The most detailed counter-history of the Great Famine is Yang Jisheng’s

book *Mubei (Tombstone)*.⁴ The title provides a sly ambiguity: Is the book a literary tombstone for the tens of millions of victims or a moral tombstone for the regime that caused their deaths? The CCP has always feared tombstones, be they literary or physical. When the famous dissident Liu Binyan died in 2005, authorities forbade his family to engrave the words “Here lies a Chinese person who did some things that it was right for him to do and said some things that were right that a person say” on his tombstone. *What if those words inspired onlookers? What if a group formed?* When Liu Xiaobo, another eloquent CCP critic and the winner of the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize, died in 2017, the regime took extraordinary steps to ensure that his ashes were buried at sea. There they are eternally dispersed. No tombstone, no threat.

The regime’s attempts at erasure have given rise to a shrewd answer from its critics: blankness can be eloquent. When the authorities vetoed the epitaph for Liu Binyan’s tombstone, his family countered by leaving it, for the time being, blank. Saying nothing in a sense said it all. In the 2010s what Johnson calls “China’s liveliest public forum” for lectures and readings was one in Xi’an that called itself Zhiwuzhi—“I Know I Know Nothing.” When white-paper demonstrators in November 2022 held up blank pages to protest Covid restrictions (plus, implicitly, much more), the blankness was useful at several levels. First, it was useful in countering police interrogation: “I wrote nothing—what can you charge me with?” More deeply, it invited reader participation: “Fill in what you like, and you will be part of our protest.” To the regime it said, “You know that I know that you know that we both know what I mean.” Today one of the most popular podcasts among young Chinese from the PRC who are living abroad is called *Bumingbai boke*—the “Unclear Blog” or “I-Don’t-Get-It Blog.”

The regime is aware that seeds of its potential undoing lie not only in history but in daily life. The populace today is blanketed in disinformation and politically intimidated, so very little resistance appears on the surface, but beneath the surface the everyday values of Chinese life survive, and these are very different from either Marxism or Xi Jinping Thought. Activists in the rights-support movement of 2002–2008 perceived this and made good use of it. As pro-democracy reformers, they were quite similar to (and in some cases the same people as) the activists of the 1980s. But in the 1980s the main hope was that change could be brought about by working through “liberal-minded” leaders. As late as the 1989 demonstrations, a major demand was still for “dialogue” with the top.

After the June 4 massacre, the strategy had to change. There was no longer any hope of working with the top, where, in any case, no one remained to be interlocutor. The “liberal” leaders had died, had been placed under house arrest, or felt paralyzed in the harsh new atmosphere. Democracy activists now looked downward, into society, and were pleasantly surprised to learn that the commonsense values of ordi-

nary people were not only thriving but in fundamental agreement with their own democratic notions.

From 2006 to 2008, Liu Xiaobo wrote several essays in which he showed how the advent of the Internet in China allowed people to discover that they agreed with one another about notions of justice—which included what the rest of the world called “human rights.” In the days before the Internet, if the sons of local officials raped a young woman, killed her, and threw her body into a river, their fathers could lie about it and few people would know the truth. Public opinion then was atomized. But with the Internet, accounts of official misbehavior could spread quickly and lead to public protests. Wrongdoers could be held accountable—not because protests themselves could do that but because of pressure from superiors. If “the masses” in a certain county created a furor, provincial authorities could accuse officials in that county of not governing well. From this pattern Liu learned that ordinary people did not need any instruction from him in the theory of human rights. The Internet was crucial, but not because it enabled people to reach overseas, to Amnesty International or Human Rights Watch, to learn about rights. It simply let fellow citizens know what had happened, which led to a natural convergence of moral opinion.

This digging downward to uncover commonsense values can apply not just to society but to individuals. Many Chinese writers in the Communist years have provided illustrations. Zhang Xianliang, who wrote extensively about his experiences in labor camps, was at first frightened by the abrasive jargon used by both inmates and guards. In time, though, he learned that many people had “a true self within” that was something different. The exterior of a person was the more visible part, but it might be like a callus, grown for protection from a harsh environment. Inside, a more natural self could survive.

During the Communist years, the biggest mistake that outsiders have made in trying to understand what China “thinks” has been to accept superficial impressions as the entire story. The regime’s political labels (“Communist,” “bourgeois,” “counterrevolutionary,” and many others) are worthless in any serious social analysis. People’s private minds have more than one level, and surfaces can be misleading. The broad distinction between “what I think” and “what I show” applies in a wide variety of ways. As just one example, take the term *xiao fenhong* “little pinks”. It refers to strident voices of young people who “love China” and “hate America” or “hate Japan.” Little pinks do, indeed, assail the US and Japan inveterately. But is it “hate” in the sense of “we reject everything about you”? Hardly. One of their most common complaints is that the US is dominating the world and “keeping China down.” But the complaint entails that “we wish we were where you are” and that “where you are is not all bad.” The voices express not hate so much as rivalry. Yet people, including both supporters and critics of the CCP, tend to accept that little pinks hate America.

Ian Johnson’s counter-historians would not make this mistake. Their mission, simple yet heroic, is to stay grounded in how things actually are. ●

²The volume of material that has already accumulated is impressive. Johnson has set up a website called China Unofficial Archive (www.minjian-danganguan.org) that contains many hundreds of items.

³The New York Review, September 27, 1990.

⁴See my review of the Chinese edition, *The New York Review*, January 13, 2011, and Johnson’s review of the English edition, *The New York Review*, November 22, 2012.

A Hero for Cro-MAGA Times

Sigrid Nunez



Charles Baxter; illustration by Simone Goder

Blood Test

by Charles Baxter.
Pantheon, 209 pp., \$28.00

Philip Roth famously worried that good satirical fiction was impossible to write in America because actual America was too absurd and too extreme to effectively parody. In an essay published in *Commentary* in 1961, he wrote:

The American writer in the middle of the 20th century has his hands full in trying to understand, and then describe, and then make *credible* much of the American reality. It stupefies, it sickens, it infuriates, and finally it is even a kind of embarrassment to one's own meager imagination. The actuality is continually outdoing our talents, and the culture tosses up figures almost daily that are the envy of any novelist.

Of course, much good satire has been written in America, notably by Roth himself, and in his new novel, *Blood Test*, Charles Baxter is more than up to

the job of describing an actuality that, over six decades after Roth's lament, is if anything more stupefying, more sickening, more infuriating.

Take, to begin with, the setting: a small Ohio city called Kingsboro, "a cesspool of pollution, addiction, and potential Superfund sites" led by a mayor of questionable ethics and other "elected mediocrities who sometimes behave like the clowns at the Shrine Circus"; where, given that two thirds of the population have either a drinking or a drug problem, "a healthy person over the age of twenty-five acquires a certain charisma"; where the county highways are in such bad shape that driving on them is like "one of those knock-your-teeth-out thrill rides"—and this is perhaps the only thrill to be had in the region, where yet another ill besetting citizens is "boredom: that American problem."

At Famous Discount, Kingsboro's main store, shoppers

are confronted with... hollow-eyed minimum-wage employees, beaten-down wage earners, most of them indifferent to anything

that happens in the store.... Most of the merchandise... is quite worthless and no one would bother to steal it, much less buy it.

In any case, the security guards are usually hungover and snoozing.

The commodities seem to have been laid out by stoned half-wits. The drugged employees have no idea where anything is. Given all the disarray, shoppers... can feel the store's contempt for them. If they respected the customers, they'd sort this shit out.

But no matter where in America we happen to be, there are good people. And the person speaking here, the book's narrator and main character, is undeniably one of them.

Brock Hobson is a successful insurance salesman (in his own words, "a bureaucrat at heart") and the divorced father of two teenagers, Lena and Joe. Though he and his ex-wife, Cheryl, share custody, the children prefer living with their dad. Seventeen-year-old Lena has a boyfriend named

Pete, who spends much of his time at the Hobsons', where he and Lena are permitted to share a bed (which is where they're mostly to be found). Brock has a girlfriend named Trey, who in the course of the novel becomes his wife and moves in with the family as well. As the head of household Brock cuts a blameless figure: loving, patient, responsible, competent. He is also a Sunday school teacher and a member of the Blueberry Hill Writing Workshop, to which, as it turns out, we owe *Blood Test*'s existence.

Cheryl is Brock's opposite: a woman so impulsive and unreliable that Lena and Joe have learned not to trust her, "not even for lunch money." Two years earlier she dumped Brock and ran off with a subcontractor named Burt, a man with gross habits, a gambling problem, a thing for conspiracy theories, and a hatred of liberals. He belongs to a cult called R/Q Dynamics that espouses a crackpot self-improvement philosophy with a close resemblance to Scientology and that, out of love for him, Cheryl joins too. Burt's "imperturbable ignorance about the world" disgusts the college-educated Brock:

If you were to ask him where Italy is located on the globe, he wouldn't know but would despise you for asking. Did I mention his hat? No. But you can imagine the hat. I don't have to explain everything.

No—except perhaps what Cheryl could possibly see in this creep? Brock grudgingly acknowledges that Burt is exceptionally handsome and well built. But it remains one of the hardest facts of his life that his wife has chosen such a nasty piece of work over his own decent self. In his unfailingly honest way, however, Brock also acknowledges that boredom had everything to do with Cheryl's flight—not just the boredom of taking care of a house and kids or of working nights as the manager of a 7-Eleven, but boredom with him, her devoted and wholly predictable hubby.

But despite his wife's betrayal, and despite his jealousy and utter abhorrence of Burt, Brock is not given to bitterness or revenge. He dutifully pays Cheryl alimony, and when she pleads for additional money to help pay for a new roof for her and Burt's house, he demurs only briefly before obliging.

"Everybody including me says I'm as predictable as a clock," Brock admits. Or a metronome, according to his daughter—"not praise, coming from her." Looking back at his high school days, he recalls how his party animal classmates did whatever the hell they wanted, never apologizing, never showing any guilt:

But not me. I played by the rules, all the rules, every single rule. Someone had to do the dishes and clean up after everyone else had staggered home or passed out on the lawn.... I somehow skipped over the fun and the craziness because I thought that Heaven was

my destination. My church and my parents had convinced me of that.

His classmates called him Old Man and voted him “the one most likely to become a parole officer.” Now that he’s an adult, his worst fault seems to be an obsession with correcting other people’s grammar errors. (His own perfect grammar is a benefit of having been taught by Jesuits at the Catholic school he attended as a boy.)

And so one day, when the doctor he’s consulting about vague pains in his torso tells him about a start-up called Generomics Associates (“bunch of Harvard and MIT graduates, they tell me, mostly in molecular biology and computer science”) and how, using a simple blood test, they’ve developed a way to predict a person’s future behavior, and that this test is available to the general public, Brock is intrigued. Though the test is expensive, he decides to go ahead with it. Aside from providing a blood sample, he is asked to respond to a long questionnaire, which includes such bewildering questions as “If you are married, how long was your honeymoon?” and “What is your preferred method for opening tin cans?”

“One of the most unusual genome blood tests and questionnaires that we have ever processed,” a Generomics representative says of Brock’s results. In addition to “drug taking and possible antisocial tendencies,” his future is said to hold more serious criminality—we’re talking “felony-level misbehavior.” When Brock suggests that there must be some mistake, he is told that the company’s “giant mainframe computers and the algorithms that they’ve come up with in Cambridge, Massachusetts, have never been wrong.... Our AI machines are made in Germany. We have experts with degrees from Yale.” No doubt about it, the rep warns him, “you are about to embark on a major crime wave.”

The obvious absurdity of all this is not lost on Brock. One gets the sense that—perhaps at least partly out of that old problem, boredom—he’s just playing along to amuse himself. He knows he’s almost certainly being scammed. (Among several red flags is the fact that he can’t find anything about Generomics on the Internet.) On the other hand, like most human beings, he’s not entirely insusceptible to fraud. Who is he to argue with Ivy League brainiacs? (Anyone who doubts that sober, intelligent people could fall for such a scam need only recall the Theranos blood test scandal, which Baxter clearly has in mind.)

On his way home from the consultation about his test results, Brock stops at Famous Discount intending to buy some pruning shears and astonishes himself by stealing them instead. Hardly a felony, but could this be the beginning of the predicted crime wave? Brock has an epiphany: “I can do anything I want to. I can go wild. I have a perfect alibi. The mainframe has said so.” The act arouses in Brock unaccustomed feelings of freedom. It’s as if he’s been given back the youth he missed out on because he was too busy following all the rules. What he’s surprised to discover he does not feel, however, is guilt.

But Brock has other, more pressing things on his mind, such as the deepening seriousness of his relationship with Trey, a woman as upright and kind as Cheryl is neither, who works

as a naturalist at a county wilderness park. As a couple they get along well, and Brock gets along reasonably well with his children, who, though at times impatient or mocking toward him, appreciate that he is stable, caring, and a good provider, “the only Gibraltar rock,” as Brock says, “in a landscape of sand and broken promises.”

Brock has some concerns about Lena’s relationship with Pete. They might be in love now and having lots of sex, but what will they do once “the inevitable boredom sets in”? (*That* demon, again.) Far more worrying is the recent behavior of fifteen-year-old Joe. While cleaning his room, Trey discovers what appear to be suicide notes that Joe has left lying about. When Brock learns that the main reason for Joe’s depressed state is the homophobic bullying that Burt subjects him to, he is furious. “Aided by the Generomics blood test” (or so he supposes), he finds himself blurting out that he’s going to kill Burt, alarming his son, who tries to calm him down. In a confrontation with Burt at his and Cheryl’s house, an accident occurs. The scene is slapstick (Burt slips on a banana peel), but the consequences are horrific. Burt’s injuries put him in a coma and, once he comes out of it, in a wheelchair.

How responsible is Brock for Burt’s fate? That he’d long wished for something bad to happen to Burt cannot be denied. It is also true that Burt would never have slipped and fallen backward down a flight of stairs had Brock not poked him in the chest. In his own defense Brock says, “All I wanted from him was an apology and some compassion for Joe, not a skull fracture.” Whose fault is it that Burt’s punishment turns out to be “outsized, as if God, or fate, or my own wily unconscious hadn’t been paying close attention to what I had asked for, what I had really wanted”? “Somehow,” Brock thinks, “God had lost a sense of scale. Or maybe I had.”

More questions: Did this violent episode prove that the Generomics people were right? Was Burt Brock’s first victim?

At first Trey pooh-poohs the blood test results, but when she starts to see changes in Brock she becomes scared. “Even when you’re sleeping, you’re different,” she says. She blames the “evil” people, either scammers or crackpots, who “have cooked up a bad business to make money in the worst way.... They gave you permission to do anything and everything. Everything is permitted once they say so. Don’t you see?” (I confess I myself never did see the logic for the assumption, which several characters seem to share, that Brock has been given an alibi, “a get-out-of-jail-free card,” or “a license to kill.” Why would the predictability of a crime exculpate the future perpetrator? Did the Omniscient absolve the sin of Adam and Eve? Was Judas not guilty because Jesus foresaw his treachery?) Trey, who lost her dearly loved first husband in a freak accident, now fears losing Brock as well.

Shortly after Burt’s fall, Brock is called in for a second Generomics consultation. Apparently, thanks to an app he wasn’t even aware had been installed on his iPhone, the company knows all about the theft of the pruning shears and the alterca-

tion with Burt as well as many other things, down to the stain on the necktie Brock is wearing. And now a new readout from the central mainframe in Cambridge predicts that Brock is going to commit a murder. The doctor suggests he take out an insurance policy that will protect him against any and all damages once the inevitable occurs. Like a man bewitched (or maybe just in a mood), Brock ends up acquiring not only the policy but a white lab rat. (That Brock needs a pet in his life is yet another piece of information gleaned from his test analysis.) And though he does not agree to buy a Finn 23, an “excellent defensive firearm,” when later that day one arrives, along with bullets, on his doorstep, courtesy of Generomics, he keeps it.

What is it about a gun? In a particularly effective passage, Brock describes what happens to him once he becomes one of the millions of Americans who own a firearm. Learning how to shoot, he reports:

My blood began to surge.... I felt the heat in my chest and thighs and in my balls, even in my hands, almost (you could say) as if I were transforming myself, de-virginizing myself...into a different man altogether, someone who didn’t take orders but gave them out, a commander. I’m talking about power and consequence and invulnerability. I was growing bigger, stronger than I had ever been.... Anything I had ever feared began to fall away, as if the Finn had given to me an insurance policy that could never be canceled as long as I had another magazine full of bullets.

A bit over the top, maybe, but nonetheless convincing.

Now that the gun has appeared, we know it must go off—and not just on a firing range. Indeed it will go off more than once, and a second and a third gun will appear, and they too will go off, as Baxter’s increasingly zany story spins toward its climax. (“If you don’t like zany,” Brock quips early on, “you probably shouldn’t live in America.”) There’s a killing too: the senseless shooting of a small forest creature. But none of this violence occurs in any way that is probable, let alone predictable.

That our hero is incapable of becoming the evildoer he’s algorithmically said to be is something the reader understands from the beginning. Nevertheless, his agreement to submit to the blood test leads inexorably to what will be a definitive moral test, and Baxter’s deft pacing and frequent narrative twists keep the suspense mounting. The Generomics characters might be crooks, but his encounter with them forces Brock to face a dark truth about himself, which is a truth about human nature: how susceptible we are to the temptation to do wrong, to do harm. And for the first time in his life he finds himself asking whether he really is the person he has always thought himself to be.

Laughable and lovable, equal parts schlemiel and mensch, Brock makes an ideal protagonist for a comic novel. I could have stayed in his entertaining company for many more pages. He would have been better served,

though, by a more engaging supporting cast. Brock’s “nearly typical teenagers” remained, for me, *too* typical, lacking distinct personalities, and Trey’s uncomplicated goodness only flattens her character, as saintliness in a fictional character is wont to do. (Moved by the sight of his beloved as she stands in the woods hand-feeding birds and deer, Brock conjures up an image of Saint Francis, and the only thing that remotely bothers him about living with this “gold-standard human being” is her habit of not flushing the toilet after urinating, so as not to waste water.)

At the other end of the spectrum from Trey is Burt, the novel’s villain and a true grotesque. You can feel the author’s hostility toward the Cro-MAGA male rising like steam off the page. “Except for the gym and the hunting, Burt is lazy and empty-headed,” says Brock, who cannot resist pressing the point: “He’s quite at home here in America, if I could generalize for a moment.” If anyone in this story could be called boring or as predictable as a clock, it is Burt, who can always be counted on to say or do the dumbest, most loutish thing. Once, while impugning Brock’s patriotism, Burt vaunts his own: “I’ve got a hard-on for the Stars and Stripes.” Cheryl, though hardly a sympathetic or likable character, is at least given a moment of grace. After the misfortune that destroys Burt, including his once-enviable looks, we might expect her to abandon him as she once abandoned Brock for far less; instead she becomes her now helpless partner’s tender and unselfish caretaker. But for Burt there can be no such moment. The man is irredeemable. Indeed, he is portrayed with such fierce contempt, his ruin is detailed with such sadistic glee, that it made me wince.

In his essay Roth asked: “I think this story has been about love and not about the blood test in the title.” By the time Brock tells us this, he doesn’t really have to. His marriage to Trey looks to be a long and happy one, and he finally concedes that, inexplicable though it may seem, Cheryl loves Burt, and Burt, “in his brutish, disabled, stupid way,” loves her back. Brock continues to help out the wretched couple financially, explaining, “Charity is maybe a bad habit with me, but it’s who I am” (a humblebrag that struck me as out of character for the usually sincerely self-deprecating Brock). Besides, he says, Cheryl is the mother of his children, and though she’s been a terrible parent, “I know they love her.” And he can afford to be generous: business is good. As for the kids themselves, we leave them knowing that, whatever growing pains they might be going through, they’ll be all right. Needless to say, nothing bad happens to the rat.

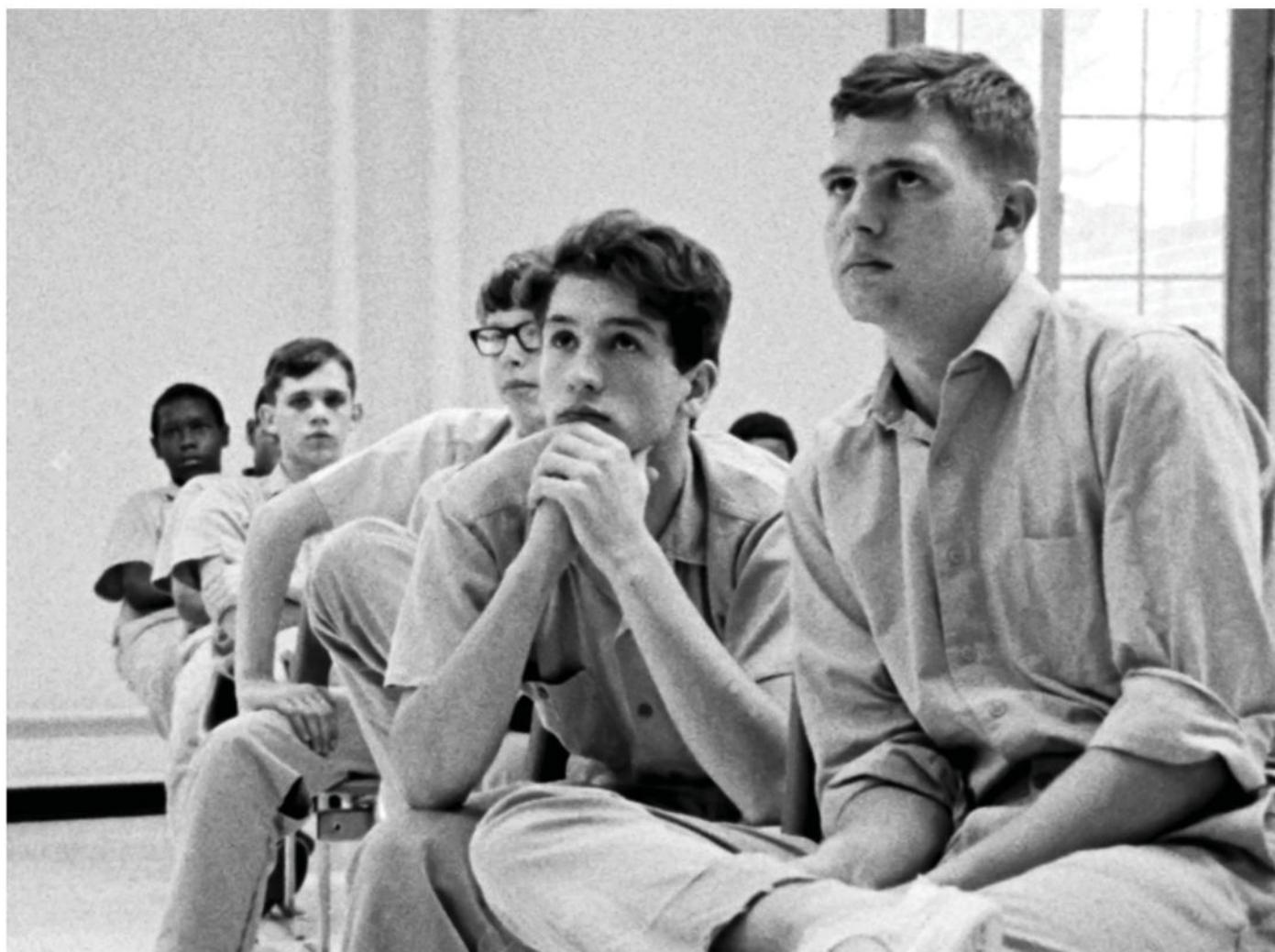
In his essay Roth asked:

If the world is as crooked and unreal as I think it is becoming, day by day; if one feels less and less power in the face of this unreality, day by day; if the inevitable end is destruction, if not of all life, then of much that is valuable and civilized in life...why is it...that so many of our fictional heroes...wind up affirming life?

This is still a really good question. ●

The Impressionist

Andrew Katzenstein



Young defendants in Memphis, Tennessee, in a still from Frederick Wiseman's Juvenile Court (1973)

**Frederick Wiseman:
An American Institution**
a retrospective at Film at Lincoln
Center, New York City,
January 31–March 5, 2025

The Worlds of Wiseman
a retrospective at the
Gene Siskel Film Center, Chicago,
January 1–February 5, 2025

**Voyages of Discovery:
The Cinema of Frederick Wiseman,
Revised and Expanded Edition**
by Barry Keith Grant.
Wallflower, 366 pp., \$140.00;
\$35.00 (paper)

Menus-Plaisirs—Les Troisgros
a documentary film directed
by Frederick Wiseman

Frederick Wiseman has been called a muckraker, a realist, an absurdist, a lyrical expressionist, a trenchant critic of American consumerism and imperialism, a hedonist, a champion of civic virtue, and, by Errol Morris, “the king of misanthropic cinema.” Wiseman himself has been consistently reluctant to define his documentaries. He and they, he has suggested, are too elusive: “I am not sure I understand the films and I know that I do not understand myself.”

Still, Wiseman doesn’t begrudge critics the freedom to come up with theories. That’s their job. And he has a deep respect for all sorts of labor. He’s a workaholic who often pulls twelve-to-fifteen-hour days because “it’s the only way I know how to get the work done,” and he fills his films with footage of

people doing their jobs: politicians, doctors, nurses, salespeople, actors, circus performers, fashion models, ballerinas, garbagemen, janitors, line cooks, construction workers, zookeepers, jockeys, teachers, social workers, sardine canners, art preservationists, prop and set designers, erotic dancers, activists, sommeliers, monks, soldiers, cops, tattoo artists, vacation-area landscape painters, the board members of various institutions planning for their futures, and the sole gardener who is responsible for mowing the entire UC Berkeley campus.

Wiseman’s critics, like his subjects, tend to reveal themselves in unintentional ways. Because his forty-four documentaries are so varied in tone—from the subversive wit of a street photographer to the dutifulness of a congressional hearing on C-SPAN—critics often grab hold of whatever aspects are most appealing to them. It’s hard to avoid the suspicion that in writing about him, they’re really writing about themselves. As Thomas Benson and Carolyn Anderson wrote in their 1989 study, *Reality Fictions*, “Looking through Wiseman’s window on the world, we discover a mirror.” Or as Wiseman put it when asked about Morris’s characterization of his work, “I’ve told Errol several times: sheer projection.”

Wiseman turned ninety-five on New Year’s Day, and theaters across North America and in France are celebrating the occasion. This winter Lincoln Center in New York City and the Gene Siskel Film Cen-

ter in Chicago are screening new restorations of the thirty-two films he shot on 16mm and one feature he shot on 35mm, *The Last Letter* (2002), a dramatic monologue adapted from Vasily Grossman’s novel *Life and Fate*. (Wiseman reluctantly switched to digital in the late Aughts.) Retrospectives have also been planned for Paris, LA, Cleveland, Santa Fe, St. Louis, Boston, and Vancouver; Austin and Portland, Maine, hosted series this past autumn.

The festivities give us another chance not only to see Wiseman’s work but to ask what to make of it all. Describing his process to *The Paris Review* in 2018, he said his “overall goal” is “to create an impressionistic account of contemporary life through institutions.” His choice of subject is “a roll of the dice. Whatever interests me.” During four to twelve weeks on location, he and his cinematographers (the most frequent have been William Brayne and John Davey) decide what to shoot and, using hand signals, how to shoot it. (Wiseman records sound while filming.) Most of the work takes place during editing:

The first phase is to review all of the material.... I then start to edit the sequences that I might use.... It takes me six months to select and edit those sequences. It’s only when I’ve edited those so-called candidate sequences that I begin to work on structure. I have no idea, in advance, of the film’s structure or what its point of view will be. It evolves from studying the material. Then I try to figure out how they might fit together.

Creating the structure “is a process that combines the rational and the nonrational.... My [unconscious] associations are often as valuable as my attempts at deductive logic.”

Wiseman mostly avoids putting forth his own views about his work, instead offering cryptic hints: he forms “theories” as he edits footage, he has said, but “it’s not necessary that anyone reconstructs that theory.” To impose a fixed meaning would amount to a kind of authoritarianism: “I personally have a horror of producing propaganda to fit any kind of ideology, other than my own view of what this material should be.... I like the material to speak for itself.”

Critics always impose their own views on artists to some degree, but it’s a rare artist who gives them no other choice. Wiseman’s films contain no voice-overs and have practically no explanatory text or added soundtracks.¹ They don’t have clear narratives but are vast assemblages of scenes and cutaways. Sometimes a person will state what could be Wiseman’s thesis, but his intentions can only be guessed at based on the events on-screen and their placement within the film. In effect he turns all of his viewers into critics: they “have to fight the film, they have to say, ‘What the hell’s he trying to say with this?’” He claims that his films’ meanings exist halfway between the screen and the mind of the viewer.

Strange things sometimes occur in that space, which is perhaps to be expected when clarity is held to be tantamount to propaganda. In *Voyages of Discovery: The Cinema of Frederick Wiseman*, originally published in 1992 and recently released in a revised and expanded edition, Barry Keith Grant recognizes a central truth about his subject: “Wiseman refuses to descend to the viewer by assuming an authorial superiority.” Yet many of Grant’s interpretations in his closely observed, erudite book strike me as distinctly un-Wiseman-like. (He admits in this edition that “whether my readings coincide with the filmmaker’s intention has not been my concern.”) For instance, he argues that *Model* (1980) and *The Store* (1983), about the Zoli Agency in New York City and the Neiman Marcus flagship in Dallas, respectively, are condemnations of “the culture of the simulacrum” and of “how we have achieved for ourselves the ‘packaged soul’ that Vance Packard predicted back in 1957.”

Is that really how Wiseman wants us to respond to these films—as if we were media studies professors? Grant neglects Wiseman’s worldliness, evident in the copious shots of food being meticulously prepared in his most recent film, *Menus-Plaisirs—Les Troisgros*, about a three-Michelin-star restaurant outside Roanne, France, and the family who runs it. Surely

¹Near Death and *Menus-Plaisirs—Les Troisgros* both have titles before the end credits to inform us of events that occurred after filming, and *High School* begins with Otis Redding’s “(Sittin’ on) The Dock of the Bay.”

there's ambivalence in his depiction of fashion and retail: a recognition of the allure of beautiful people and things, a sense of fun in the fantasies the industries create, a reluctance to malign people's decisions to work in them, along with a desire to demystify their deceptions. This is, after all, a man who said that while filming *Meat* (1976), which shows in gory detail the industrial processing of cows and lambs, he ate steak every night.

But even my conviction about Wiseman's ambivalence is just a guess, really, one that I hope will please this po-faced sphinx. Aren't I merely projecting my own neurotic, conciliatory impulses?

Wiseman's avoidance of clear messages reflects a recurrent theme in his work concerning education and individuality: he likes to show people being given the tools to figure things out on their own. In an essay for the catalog accompanying a retrospective at MoMA in 2010, Andrew Delbanco wrote:

Wiseman is not primarily a social commentator or an investigator of this or that institution, as he is often said to be. He is a portraitist, and his favorite genre is the double portrait. A visiting nurse washes the feet of a diabetic old man. A woman picks lice from another woman's hair. In most such scenes... one person occupies the subsidiary position (student, patient, novice, recruit) while the other (teacher, doctor, drill sergeant, nurse) holds the authority.... In the early films, there can be cruelty in this relation, but in the later work Wiseman seems more interested in unarticulated tenderness, or what is sometimes called tough love.²

Specifically, he's interested in tough love that leads to self-understanding and independence.

Wiseman's earliest documentaries showed the stifling inhumanity of hide-bound bureaucracy and capricious authority. His first film, *Titicut Follies* (1967), depicted the guards and doctors at the Bridgewater State Hospital for the Criminally Insane in Massachusetts as sadistic overseers unmoved by reason or suffering. Back then he was less cautious around (or less bored by) interviewers, and he revealed that the argument he was trying to convey in *High School* (1968) could be summed up in the film's final scene. The principal of Northeast High School in Philadelphia reads aloud a letter from a former student who has been deployed to Vietnam and wants to name the school as his life insurance beneficiary. The student writes that he's "only a body doing a job" in the service of his country. "Now when you get a letter like this," the principal says, "to me it means that we are very successful at Northeast High School."

While much of Wiseman's footage could be described as "bodies doing jobs," in *High School* the phrase suggests the coerced, unthinking labor of drafted soldiers—compared implicitly to the tasks students are subjected to,

²Andrew Delbanco, "Learning from Wiseman," in *Frederick Wiseman*, edited by Joshua Siegel and Marie-Christine de Navacelle (MoMA/Gallimard, 2010), p. 94.

and explored more explicitly in *Basic Training* (1971). The opening shots of *High School* depict the school as a hulking brick building that Wiseman thought looked "like a General Motors assembly plant." His point was that the school manufactured its students into conforming, compliant citizens.

Beginning with the four films Wiseman shot at the Alabama Institute for the Deaf and Blind in the mid-1980s, a countervailing idea of education appeared. In *Blind, Deaf, Adjustment and Work*, and *Multi-Handicapped* (all 1986), we see students learn how to make their way on their own. Instructors discuss the best ways to teach "things we do every day," such as feeding themselves, dressing, grooming, and making purchases. The blind students are taught to navigate by using canes, physical landmarks, and their senses. A single-shot sequence in which a blind boy goes down a long corridor and a flight of stairs to show a teacher his math assignment is one of the most suspenseful and triumphant in all of Wiseman's work. The care these teachers have for their students is evident: they're not only showing the kids how to do discrete tasks; they're instilling dignity.

High School II (1994) provides an even more direct rebuttal to *High School* than the Alabama films do. It was shot at Central Park East Secondary School, a public school in Harlem that, as one of the coprincipals explains, tries to teach its students "five habits of mind":

From whose perspective is something being presented?... What's your evidence?... How is the thing that's being presented connected to other things? What if things were different?... And who cares?

(The coprincipal proudly adds that a journalist and a lawyer both told him that the "habits of mind" are essentially what they were taught in college and graduate school.)

Throughout *High School II* we see teachers trying to inculcate these habits in students, demanding evidence and prodding them to explore the bases of their beliefs. Rather than punish students for disobedience or poor work, the school attempts to show them the importance of education to achieving their goals. "We're going to try very hard not to... make demands on you that are impossible for you," the coprincipal tells a twelve-year-old named Killiss. "But we're going to push you very hard so that you can give us and give yourself your personal best."

Scenes of this sort—call it assisted self-reliance—occur again and again throughout Wiseman's subsequent work. In *Public Housing* (1997), residents of the Ida B. Wells Homes in Chicago encourage one another to get involved with cleanup efforts and other support activities to alleviate the misery caused by years of government neglect. In *Domestic Violence* (2001), women in a Tampa shelter are made to explain and explore the abuse they endured in order to take some measure of control over it. In *Ex Libris* (2017), the New York Public Library provides many services to help patrons learn about and make their way through the world, from lectures on the relationship be-

tween American slavery and capitalism to information about municipal jobs.

Wiseman's politics, like much about him, are hard to pin down, though one constant is a disdain for authority. "You want to know something about my politics?" he said in 1973. "Well, they're kind of anarchic. As the saying goes, the Marx is more Groucho than Karl." It's tempting to argue that he views successful civic institutions as sites of large-scale mutual aid, and failed institutions as ones that refuse to acknowledge the needs and autonomy of the people they're supposed to help. (The clearest villains of the second half of his career may be the radical Idaho Republicans in 2006's *State Legislature* who believe that government has no responsibility for helping citizens.) He has also been critical of "middle-class professionals" who conceive of reforms without sufficient input from those actually experiencing poverty, unemployment, or lack of access to adequate housing and health care: "It's not for me to say what the change should be.... I'm not a pharmacist."

Individuals must make their own decisions, and Wiseman seems to have tremendous belief in individuals—including himself. In the MoMA catalog, he wrote that he did enough work at Yale Law School to figure out how not to do much work, preferring to read novels and poetry. He taught himself filmmaking while working on *Titicut Follies*, which was shot when he was thirty-six; his only previous film experience had been producing *The Cool World* (1983), directed by Shirley Clarke. "What I took away from it," he told Mark Binelli of *The New York Times Magazine* in 2020, "was if Shirley could make a movie, I could, too."

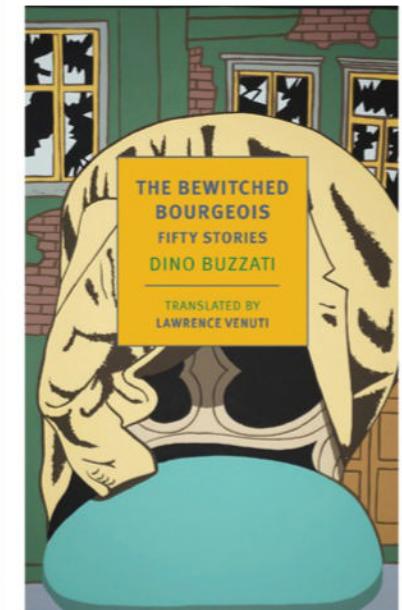
Wiseman extends this faith to his viewers. Like many obsessive workers, he seems to think there's nothing special about himself, just a willingness to spend the time getting things right. In another act of tough love, he asks us to join him in making sense of what we're seeing. The point of his ambiguity isn't to leave us in doubt but to prompt us to speak up. By forcing us to form opinions about his work, he's inviting us to disagree with him and one another, as if he were staging one of the long, contentious meetings he loves to film.

But it's foolish to watch Wiseman's films for lessons about autonomy or civics. Instead, watch them because they're immensely entertaining. His eye for detail—for the telling action or artifact—is astounding. Much of this detail is comic, as Dan Armstrong argued nearly forty years ago in a brilliant essay: "Wiseman's is fundamentally a cinema of the absurd in which the political messages are often oddly inflected through an absurdist mélange of irony, parody, black humor, and burlesque."³ He's drawn to moments when the mask falls off, when people are revealed in all their confusion, bumbling idiocy, and false pride.

Listing favorite moments in Wiseman's films has become a critical cliché, but one worth indulging. Binelli asked Wiseman what he felt after filming a man in *Welfare* (1975)—a

³Dan Armstrong, "Wiseman's Cinema of the Absurd: *Welfare*, or 'Waiting for the Dole,'" *Film Criticism*, Vol. 12, No. 3 (Spring 1988), p. 2.

"Thanks to Venuti's keen editorial eye and crisp translation, this stands as a brilliant record of Buzzati's playful experimentation and lifelong obsessions." —Publishers Weekly, starred review



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OUTRAGE

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Ian Nairn

Introduced by Travis Elborough



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claustrophobic, bleakly funny documentary about a Manhattan government office whose workers repeatedly tell their desperate clients to come back another day for assistance—soliloquizing about "the story of Godot." Wiseman replied, "I felt I'd led a clean, moral life and God was rewarding me." There are many such scenes in his films, rarely as apt as the one in *Welfare* but no less memorable or suggestive. In *Sinai Field Mission* (1978), a group of American men—soldiers, military contractors, or both—hold a party in their desert compound. They pass around someone's cowboy boot, filling it up with beer and drinking from it ("Texas tradition here"), then later washing the leather with beer ("Texas shine job here").

In *The Store* a woman named Margaret who works in the back office of Neiman Marcus receives a singing telegram as a birthday present from her colleagues. The singer is dressed in a pink chicken costume, makes dirty jokes (Margaret, between uncontrollable bursts of laughter, shows off her quick wit in response to them), and ends his act with a striptease, revealing a pair of fuzzy pink briefs. At a cat show in *The Garden* (2005), a woman demonstrates the art of "cat massage" before a rapt audience of hundreds, explaining terms of art (*grand effleurage*, or long stroke) and her own neologisms (*no-mo*, or no motion) while working on a fluffy orange feline that, she assures the spectators, she met only ten minutes earlier.⁴

In *High School II* upperclassmen mediate a dispute between two students named Lev and Ethan, who are probably in seventh or eighth grade. The younger boys are repeatedly asked to recount why they got into a fight, but they're too embarrassed or worked up, and the mediators are out of their depth. Finally Lev manages an explanation:

We were in the classroom, right? And I was talking into the fan, right, to make my voice—you know how the fan, if you talk into it, it makes your voice.... And you know that song "You're Never Gonna Get It"? *Never, never?* You know?... And I was just singing to myself. I wasn't singing to anybody. He's like, "You're never gonna get it, Lev." You know, I was like, I was like, I was like—"Oh well." And—and then he was like, and he said something about my mother.... He said, I—and then he said, so I was just like, "At least I have a mother." And he was like, "Well, so do I." And I said, "No you don't." He said, "Then how did I get born?" And I said, "Your father had artificial insemination."

We never find out what Lev thinks artificial insemination is.

There are plenty of darker moments, some approaching gallows humor or Grand Guignol. In *Aspen* (1991)—a

⁴Per the contract Wiseman had signed with Cablevision, which owned Madison Square Garden, Wiseman needed the company's permission to release the film. The company demanded cuts to scenes in which Garden executives discussed strategy for labor negotiations. Wiseman refused, and the film was never released. See David Blum, "Secret Garden," *The New Yorker*, April 17, 2005.

film that, unexpectedly, spends as much time in churches as in the pleasure grounds of the rich—a woman at a dinner party in a mansion talks about attending the Nuremberg trials as a twenty-three-year-old. She recalls that the women she stayed with during the trials conducted a poll: "Which of the defendants, if they had to sleep with one, who would they sleep with?" Göring won. The British man she tells this to is unsurprised: "He won everything.... He was the hero of the trial."

A lonely, depressed ninety-eight-year-old woman in *In Jackson Heights* (2015) lists her physical ailments and asks herself, "What else have I got that's gone?" A doctor in *Near Death* (1989), trying to persuade an ailing patient not to be intubated because there's no chance of recovery, acknowledges that the prognosis is "a hard thing to swallow." A young art student in *Hospital* (1970) believes—with pitiful drug-induced sincerity—that he's dying from what someone told him was mescaline. He's cogent and articulate, however; clearly he's just having a bad trip. The doctor gives him an emetic (calling out to a nurse, "Ten ccs of ipecac. Make it twenty") and tells him that everything will be all right. The student repeatedly moans, "I don't want to die." Then the medicine kicks in. Immediately after producing Rabelaisian quantities of vomit, he asks the guards watching over him whether they can play music or sing for him. He reflects on his life with the cold logic of someone coming down:

It's pretty hard making it here on my own. Trying to go to school, get an education.... But you can't do anything with art. You can't do anything with anything in life. Just get a job someplace. That's about it.

Wiseman films people talking on the phone, he once said, as if it were "an old Shelley Berman routine." There's the five-minute-long conversation in *Hospital*—reduced from about ninety minutes of footage—of a doctor trying to get a sex worker who just attempted suicide onto the welfare rolls, putting the case to an unseen, unheard, and implacable official: "Miss Hightower, I don't wish to direct any conversation towards his mother. I'm asking for the assistance of welfare. This is an emergency situation." Hightower hangs up on him. (Eerily, Hightower turns up, on camera, in *Welfare*.) A salesman in *Meat*, looking like a WASPy yuppie in his Lacoste cardigan, repeatedly chides a pushy client named Solly: "That's it, *bubbe*.... That's all I can tell you, sweetness." (Another salesman, this one with a western twang, is also fond of Yiddish: "Anybody that's looking at prime is looking up a dead horse's *tuchus*.") An employee fielding calls for an NYPL hotline, trying hard to remain professional, kindly informs a patron that "a unicorn is actually an imaginary animal."

Machines in Wiseman's films are as alien as in Tati's. You can never tell whether they're ingenious, sinister, or pointless: there's the training module kit in *Adjustment and Work* with the words "SIMULATED ASSEMBLY" on it; the robot in *At Berkeley* (2013) that struggles to fold a towel (a task that the Alabama students are

taught to master); the automated conveyor belt in *Ex Libris* that scans and sorts returned library books; the Boston garbage truck in *City Hall* (2020) that compacts a discarded sofa as if it were made of Styrofoam. In the cafeteria of the Paris Opera Ballet, the subject of *La Danse* (2009), an oblong tube attached to a wall slices baguettes into inch-thick pieces. Who else would think to show us that—and also show us the apiary on the roof and the fish swimming in the sewers beneath the building?

Even if, as Errol Morris maintains, there's misanthropy in Wiseman's work, he's still willing to be convinced that human goodness exists. His films are full of people whose care and competence give them a saintlike aura: the infinitely patient Dr. Taylor in *Near Death*, explaining again and again to distraught family members that their loved ones' suffering will only be prolonged by keeping them on life support, or the social worker in *Public Housing* who interviews a man seeking help for crack addiction, managing to get a full picture of his life through nonjudgmental questioning and an impressive knowledge of slang terms for drugs—a stark contrast to the caseworkers in *Welfare* who can comprehend their clients only through flattening bureaucratic language.

Wiseman makes keen intelligence seem like a miracle, as when a nurse in *Near Death* recounts every detail from her conversations with a patient and her family members to the patient's doctors, or when a professor in *At Berkeley* summarizes her graduate students' confused, meandering, stammer-filled discussion about inequality in the smoothest extemporaneous English I've ever heard.

Sometimes, watching Wiseman's films, I wonder whether he includes economic and political issues as covers for voyeurism. The big societal questions he raises, in this sense, may be his versions of a MacGuffin, that which provides an excuse for the action. Yet the truth is that Wiseman is interested in all of it; he just recognizes that he can't in good faith provide any answers.

He's a miniaturist who works at an epic scale, an ironist who treats ideas with sincerity. (The discussion of inequality in *At Berkeley* is immediately followed by a shot of a man playing fetch with his dog on a campus lawn, as if the professor and her students had been engaged in a similarly repetitive game.) Yes, some stretches can be tedious; sometimes you squirm and wonder why Wiseman is paying so much attention to this or that. But the movement between humor and seriousness, the mundane and the abstract, gives his films artistic weight and turns them into something more than moments strung together. In his way, he has made about as many boring films as Hitchcock did.

Wiseman told *The Paris Review* that while editing, "I have to constantly ask myself the question, Why?" Another way of putting this is "Who cares?"—as the coprincipal of Central Park East instructs his students to ask themselves. That question has kept Wiseman alert and open to the world over ninety-five years and 115 hours of film. ●

Brazil: The Threat from the Right

Christopher de Bellaigue

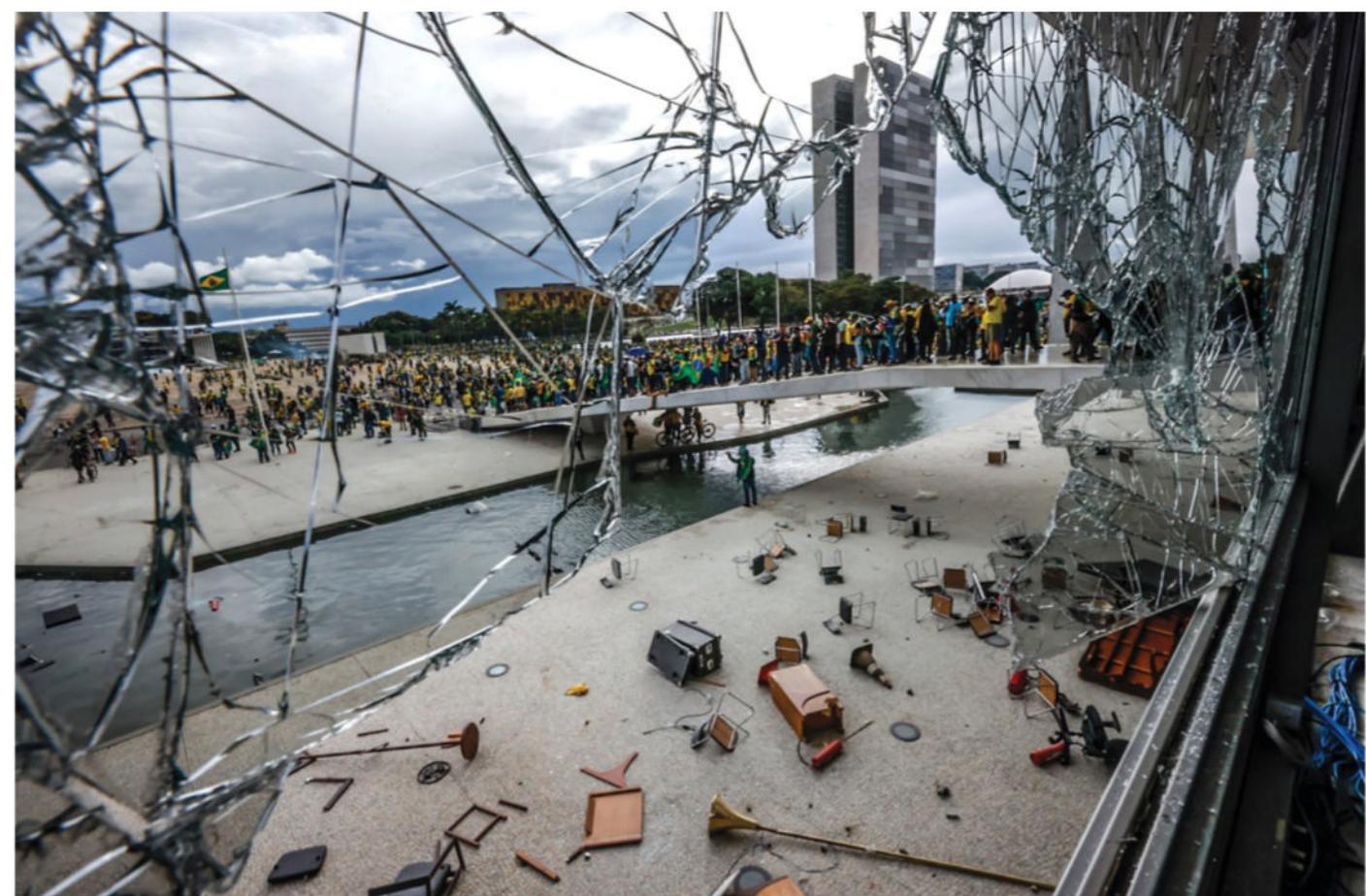
The Square of the Three Powers in Brasília is the constitutional center of Brazil. Anchored on three sides by the glass cube of the Supreme Federal Court, the canopied parallelogram of the Planalto Palace, which contains the offices of the president and other high-ranking officials, and the twin towers of the Congress building, it was intended by the capital's planners in the 1950s to embody the harmonious coexistence of the three branches of government.

On the evening of November 13, Francisco Wanderley Luiz, a right-wing conspirator and supporter of former president Jair Bolsonaro, crossed the square with the intention, his ex-wife said later, of killing supreme court justice Alexandre de Moraes. The Bolsonaristas hate Moraes because of the many orders and rulings he has issued against them in the name of protecting democracy and fighting disinformation. Luiz was challenged by security guards and, after tossing a bomb in the direction of the court—it detonated harmlessly—killed himself by falling on a second bomb at the foot of a statue of blindfolded Justice. Luiz had warned the police in an online post that “you have 72 hours to disarm the bomb that is in the house of communist shit.” That was a reference to a third bomb, planted in a car that he had parked in an annex of the Congress building, which also detonated, damaging only the car.

“Democracy does not simply have the right to defend itself,” Moraes told Bruno Meyerfeld, the Brazil correspondent of *Le Monde*, to whom he granted a rare interview in 2023; “it has an obligation to do so.” Meyerfeld noted that the judge, whose shaved head is part of his pugilistic public image, had arranged his office furniture “in such a way that he would not be surprised by a possible assailant.”

The conflict between Moraes and the Brazilian far right may best be understood as a clash between two forms of authoritarianism: one that defends democratic institutions even at the expense of individual liberties, and one whose free-speech absolutism fosters a public discourse so abusive and scurrilous that it becomes impossible for those institutions to thrive. From his position on one of the most powerful courts in the world, Moraes has frozen bank accounts, suspended officials, and ordered police raids and preventive detentions. In August he blocked access to X in Brazil until the platform reluctantly complied with his demand that it ban accounts spreading Bolsonaro’s baseless claim that the 2022 presidential election, which he lost to Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, had been rigged.

Lula, as the president is known, made his name in the 1970s as the head of the metalworkers’ union in São Bernardo do Campo and Diadema, two of a cluster of cities near the Atlantic coast that are home to the Brazilian auto industry, and as an opponent of the military dictatorship that governed



Supporters of former president Jair Bolsonaro storming the presidential palace a week after the inauguration of President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, Brasília, January 8, 2023; photograph by Gabriela Biló from the series Insurrection

Brazil from 1964 to 1985. In 1980 he cofounded the leftist Workers’ Party and in 2002 was elected president, winning a second term four years later. Under Lula the economy boomed, poverty decreased, and the deforestation of the Amazon slowed. When he stepped down in 2011, he enjoyed an approval rating of almost 90 percent but was subsequently engulfed in a huge corruption case, known as Lava Jato (Operation Car Wash), that led to the impeachment and removal from office of his successor, Dilma Rousseff, in 2016. The following year Lula was sentenced to prison for accepting emoluments from firms that had won contracts during his presidency, and in 2018 public disgust with corruption propelled the far-right Bolsonaro, a former army captain and perennial Congress nonentity, to the Planalto Palace.

Bolsonaro oversaw the second-highest Covid-19 death toll in the world (after the United States), proposed that all members of the Workers’ Party be shot, and advised a journalist who inquired about the protection of nature to “take a shit every other day.” As deforestation surged in the Amazon and its indigenous people were expelled by miners and cattle ranchers, he kept his supporters happy with generous emergency aid payments during the pandemic and antiwoke diatribes. In 2021 Lula’s sentence was overturned by the supreme court, and he reentered politics; the former president was now a divisive figure—the words *Lula Ladrão*, or “Lula the thief,” were scrawled on walls across the country—but he was buoyed by his supporters’ belief that his prosecution had been politically motivated.

Bolsonaro spent the 2022 presidential campaign casting doubt on Brazil’s electronic voting system. On October 30, the day of the runoff against Lula, his allies in the Federal Highway Police set up roadblocks in the northeast of the country—a leftist stronghold—to keep voters from the polling stations. Moraes summoned the head of the highway police and threatened to jail him. The roadblocks disappeared, and that evening Lula was declared the winner with 50.9 percent of the vote to Bolsonaro’s 49.1 percent—the narrowest margin of victory since the end of the dictatorship.

Bolsonaro’s Liberal Party—a misleading name—refused to recognize the outcome and petitioned the Superior Electoral Court, of which Moraes was president, to invalidate any votes recorded by voting machines that lacked identification numbers, which would have overturned the election. Moraes fined the party 22.9 million reais for acting in bad faith. Why 22.9 million? The digits 2, 2, and 9 add up to 13, the electoral number of Lula’s Workers’ Party. (Each party has an assigned number for ease of identification on election day.) The Bolsonaristas, wrote the journalist Ana Clara Costa in her account of the election in the investigative magazine *Piauí*, “understood that it could only be a taunt by Moraes.”

On January 8, 2023, a week after Lula’s inauguration and in avowed emulation of the invasion of the Capitol in Washington, D.C., by the supporters of Donald Trump, thousands of Bolsonaristas overran the Square of the Three Powers. By the time they were ejected by police three hours

later, the Planalto and the Congress and supreme court buildings had been ransacked. Bolsonaro had already fled to Florida, perhaps fearing for his freedom once his presidential immunity lapsed. Three months later he returned to Brazil, where judicial inquiries were underway.

In February 2024, Bolsonaro’s passport was confiscated. (This January the supreme court refused his request to have it temporarily returned so he could attend Trump’s inauguration.) A few months later the Superior Electoral Court convicted him of abuse of power and banned him from seeking public office for eight years. The Federal Police have recommended that he face charges of embezzlement and falsifying the Covid vaccination record that he used when entering the US. Most damning of all, in November Moraes released an 884-page report that “demonstrates irrefutably” that Bolsonaro and dozens of his allies—including his vice-presidential running mate, Walter Braga Netto; the former justice minister; and the former head of the navy—had set up a “criminal organization whose objective was to launch a coup d’état and eradicate the democratic state of law.” According to the report, shortly after the 2022 election Bolsonaro finalized the wording of a decree that would have formed “the legal basis for the coup d’état” by preventing Lula’s inauguration, establishing a state of emergency, and challenging the legality of the electoral process. In statements to the police, the former commanders of the army and air force attested that they had been pressured to join the coup but refused.

Also in November the police arrested four members of the army special

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forces and one of their own agents on suspicion of planning to assassinate Lula before his inauguration, possibly “using poison or chemicals to cause an organ collapse.” Plans were also allegedly made to kill his running mate and current vice-president, Geraldo Alckmin, as well as Moraes. The record of the conspirators’ movements on December 15, 2022, certainly suggests a surveillance operation targeting Moraes. In one exchange of messages the conspirators set a budget of 100,000 reais for an undisclosed operation, while in another they discussed armaments that would be required, including an AT4 rocket launcher capable of penetrating armor. Bolsonaro, the report states, was “fully aware” of the plan, which was aborted thanks to “circumstances beyond [his] control.”

The police’s recommendation that charges be brought against Bolsonaro and thirty-six co-conspirators is now with the chief prosecutor. Netto’s arrest on December 14 prompted speculation that Bolsonaro would be next. Yet Lula’s political survival shows that in Brazilian justice, impunity is more common than punishment. In recent years the supreme court has overturned no fewer than 115 convictions related to the Lava Jato case on the grounds that investigators, prosecutors, and judges broke laws in order to secure them. Much of the evidence for the plot against Moraes was gathered with a *delação premiada*, a dubious legal instrument through which defendants receive reduced sentences in exchange for confessing to crimes, providing evidence, and incriminating others. An opinion poll conducted in December found that while 51 percent of Brazilians believe that there was a coup plot, 38 percent do not.

After the release of the evidence against him, Bolsonaro’s social media feeds featured clips of him and Trump, including one showing the moment in 2018 when Bolsonaro was stabbed in the stomach while campaigning and another showing the bloodied Trump raising his fist after being shot last July. “Trump is back,” Bolsonaro told *The Wall Street Journal*, “and it’s a sign we’ll be back too.” According to Guilherme Casarões, a senior fellow at the Brazilian Center for International Relations, the Bolsonaristas hope that Trump will use the threat of sanctions and other punitive measures to pressure the Brazilian authorities to let Bolsonaro run in the 2026 presidential election.

Bolsonaro has already confounded predictions that his record in office and the debacle of January 8, 2023, would finish him politically. In October’s municipal elections, candidates from the far right and center right, including many who cite Bolsonaro as an inspiration, won control of 63 percent of Brazil’s 5,569 towns and twenty of its twenty-six regional capitals. Left-wing parties, including the Workers’ Party, won control of just 752 municipalities and only one regional capital, Fortaleza. In the São Paulo runoff the center-right mayor, Ricardo Nunes, comfortably defeated the candidate of the left, Guilherme Boulos, though

both were almost surpassed in the first round by a little-known insurgent from the far right, Pablo Marçal, a lifestyle coach and online influencer.

The politicization of the law and the sleaziness of public life have left Brazilians deeply skeptical of their institutions. In November I spent an afternoon in the Congress building trying to buttonhole lawmakers in the powerful agribusiness and evangelical caucuses—in vain because the chamber was in closed session. As we tramped up and down the endless corridors, which were full of staffers, petitioners, and hangers-on, my local fixer, the discerning, informed, usually stoical Diego, turned to me and said, “I would prefer to have my nails ex-

gest newspapers, reported, in October’s elections 114 of the 116 mayors who had received the most money from earmarks won with more than 50 percent of the vote.

Lula’s government has presided over strong growth and high employment, but generous welfare payments have led to fears of inflation and pressure on the Brazilian real. In November the government announced that it would extend income tax relief for the poor. The markets reacted badly, and the real fell below the symbolic threshold of six to the US dollar. TS Lombard, a London-based analysis firm, informed its clients that “the government cannot shake off its populist leanings.”

The Brazilian Congress is socially conservative and economically liberal. In November a constitutional



Guilherme Boulos, left, and Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva greeting supporters at a rally for Boulos’s mayoral campaign, São Paulo, Brazil, August 24, 2024. In October Boulos was defeated by the conservative incumbent, Ricardo Nunes.

tracted one by one than to spend an afternoon in the Congress building.”

According to the news website *Conselho em Foco*, in 2022 (the last year for which figures are available), 115 out of 513 deputies from the lower house and eighteen out of eighty-one senators were being pursued for criminal, administrative, or electoral violations. During last autumn’s municipal election campaign the Federal Police seized 50 million reais in undeclared campaign funds, making the election officially the dirtiest in Brazilian history.

The US caps congressional earmarks at 1 percent of discretionary spending. In Brazil in 2024 the figure was 24 percent, up from 2 percent in 2015. Each deputy in the lower house had 38 million reais (\$6.3 million) to give away and each senator almost double that amount. In the office of one congressman I found a mayor who had just arrived from his home state of Minas Gerais seeking an earmark to finance the drilling of wells and the construction of an ecotourism resort. There is, naturally, a correlation between the size and number of the earmarks that are secured by mayors and councilors and their chances of reelection. As the *Folha de S. Paulo*, one of Brazil’s big-

amendment that would ban abortion under any circumstances was passed in committee. (The law currently permits abortion when the mother’s life is at risk, when the fetus has been diagnosed with a fatal brain defect, and in cases of rape.) The following month the lower house approved a bill providing for the chemical castration of pedophiles. Another piece of draft legislation in the works would reduce the percentage of land that farmers in the Amazon are obliged to exclude from production from 80 percent to 50 percent. According to the Forest Code Observatory, an environmental monitoring body, that would imperil 4.6 million hectares of rainforest. Last year the agriculture lobby secured an exemption for agriculture and livestock from a bill to create a regulated carbon market and helped pass a law restricting land claims by indigenous people.

The day after Trump’s victory I paid my second visit to the Square of the Three Powers. “There are six powers in Brazil,” the Uber driver corrected me, adding, “the drug traffickers, the militias, and the evangelists.” By “militias” he meant paramilitary groups, often linked to the police, that have taken over many neighborhoods in the big cities.

I had an appointment with Celso Amorim, Lula’s foreign policy adviser, in the Planalto Palace. The Brazilian media had been showing pictures of the back of Lula’s neck with a line of stitches, the result of a fall in the shower. Amorim assured me that Lula was physically “very strong” and would in all likelihood run again in the 2026 election, when he will be eighty.

Amorim is a courteous Francophile globalist—a dying breed. As Lula’s foreign minister between 2003 and 2010, he was the advocate of a multipolar world order in which Brazil would gain wealth and influence through its membership in the G20 and the BRICS group of emerging economies, which it founded in 2009 along with China, Russia, and India. For a while the plan worked; even after the financial crash of 2008 the economy grew by almost 3.5 percent a year, in part because of Chinese demand for Brazilian soybeans and iron ore. It didn’t hurt that the down-to-earth Lula—that rare head of state who knows his way around the engine of a Volkswagen Beetle—never willingly made an enemy. As Amorim recalled with a smile, “Only Lula could say ‘companion Bush’ one day and ‘companion Fidel’ the next!”

Two decades later, amicable multipolarity is a quaint notion, and Brazil has revised its ambitions. “We want good relations with the US and China,” Amorim told me, respectively the country’s biggest source of investment and its biggest trading partner. But it is no longer easy to be everyone’s friend.

Lula never hid his preference for Joe Biden over Donald Trump. On November 16 his wife, Rosângela da Silva, said, “Fuck you, Elon Musk,” at a public event. Musk replied on X, “They are going to lose the next election”—ominous words when you consider that the invasion of the Square of the Three Powers was orchestrated on social media. Four days later the Chinese leader Xi Jinping visited Brasília, where he and Lula signed thirty-seven agreements, including a \$690 million loan to Brazil’s development bank denominated in renminbi. On November 30 Trump demanded that the BRICS countries “neither create a new BRICS Currency, nor back any other Currency to replace the mighty US Dollar, or... face 100% Tariffs.”

I had come to Brazil in part to conduct research for a book about the future of farming. In recent decades Brazil has gone from a buyer of food to one of the world’s biggest agricultural exporters. The sector makes up a quarter of its GDP, and each year the development of more resilient and productive crop varieties by Embrapa, the country’s research agency, and a mighty flow of domestic and foreign investment has expanded the “agricultural frontier,” an arc of cultivation and animal husbandry that has been advancing northward and westward since the days of Portuguese rule.

Everywhere I went, from sustainable farms in the states of Paraná,

São Paulo, and Minas Gerais to the ranches of Mato Grosso and the soybean megafarms of Bahia, vast expanses of charred undergrowth were reminders of the wildfires that struck the country with exceptional severity last year. Outside Cáceres, a cattle town in Mato Grosso, I spent an afternoon with Miguel Leao, who told me that his Nelore cows had fallen ill after drinking rainwater that was black with ash. My itinerary didn't take me to the southern state of Rio Grande do Sul, where 181 people lost their lives to flooding in April and May and the cost to farmers was estimated at \$2 billion.

Lula's return to power has been good for the Amazon but bad for the Cerrado, a huge area of tropical savanna that occupies much of the east of the country and from which the Amazon draws much of its humidity. According to Global Witness, an NGO that monitors the environment, the rate at which the Brazilian Amazon is being cleared fell by half in 2023, while in the Cerrado the rate of clearance rose by 43 percent. "Without the Cerrado," Mercedes Bustamante, a biologist at the University of Brasília, told me, "there is no Amazon." She described the Cerrado as a "sacrificial zone" that a politically weakened Lula has given agribusiness to compensate for reduced opportunities in the Amazon.

According to MapBiomas, which uses satellites to follow changes in land use, the amount of surface water in Brazil has fallen by almost 16 percent since the early 1990s. Aquifers are being drawn down faster than they are being replenished. In 2023 nine hydrologists, statisticians, and forest scientists predicted that at the current rate of forest clearance, by 2050 the Cerrado will have lost 23,653 cubic meters of water per second since 1985, "equivalent to a decrease of 33.9 percent of the river flows."

Even among the sustainable farmers I met, whom I had expected to sympathize with an environmentally conscious president, I found no one who had anything positive to say about Lula. While Brazil has become rich through farming, Chinese demand and Embrapa's ingenuity made it happen, not Lula's affinity for the land. The source of his popularity is elsewhere.

In the industrial city of São Bernardo do Campo, a short distance from the bar where the young Lula used to have a glass or two of cachaça from a bottle put aside for him by the management, I visited the headquarters of the metalworkers' union that he led in the 1970s and early 1980s. The building is hung with portraits of Che Guevara, Rosa Luxemburg, and Chico Mendes, an advocate for the rights of indigenous people in the Amazon region who was assassinated by a rancher in 1988, as well as a famous old photo of Lula, cigarette in hand, addressing a stadium full of striking workers. The union's current president, Moisés Selerves, told *Le Monde* recently that São Bernardo and its neighborhood are "holy ground for the working class."

When Lula was starting out, industrial activity accounted for 48 percent of the country's GDP, and 30 percent of the workforce was unionized. These figures are now 23 percent and 12 percent, respectively. In 1985 there were 216,000 metalworkers in and around São Bernardo. There are now 96,000. Each morning the Volkswagen factory

there opens its doors to 8,200 workers, down from a peak of 43,000. The traditional working class is disappearing.

The gig economy that is replacing it relies on technology that Lula doesn't use. He doesn't have a smartphone, and his social media is handled by others. His discomfort at this new world was evident in the speech he delivered on his release from jail in 2019, when he lamented that "people...have no jobs, people work for Uber or delivering pizzas on a bike."

According to the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics, in 2022 there were at least 1.5 million gig economy workers operating through apps. Uber boasts at least half a million drivers and 30 million customers in Brazil. It has generated a new word, *uberização*, which denotes the advance of the informal economy, with its claims of autonomy, flexibility, and entrepreneurship, and the disappearance of millions of formal jobs. Gig economy workers were among the most enthusiastic supporters of Pablo Marçal, who almost advanced to the runoff for mayor of South America's richest and most populous city. If you want to see the future of the far right after Bolsonaro, look no further than Marçal. In an opinion poll on support for the 2026 presidential candidates he came in second, behind Lula and ahead of Tarcísio de Freitas, Bolsonaro's former infrastructure minister and the current governor of the state of São Paulo, who is considered a more orthodox right-winger.

The thirty-seven-year-old Marçal, who started his career working in a call center, claims to have amassed a \$30 million fortune as a "multi-entrepreneur of a multibillion-dollar conglomerate, covering 19 sectors." His message of physical fitness, self-reliance, and piety attracted many Paulistas who associate the left with benefits dependency, sexual license, and efforts to hold up national development by raising spurious concerns about deforestation and climate change. His policy proposals included tripling the number of police, building the world's tallest building, linking the favelas by cable car, and sending communists to Venezuela.

In 2010 Marçal was sentenced to four years in prison for being part of a cyber gang that robbed banks. He avoided jail because his appeal outlasted the statute of limitations. During the mayoral campaign he accused Tabata Amaral—whom he considered disqualified from office because she is unmarried and childless—of precipitating her father's suicide. The head of the small political party of which Marçal is a member boasted of his involvement in securing the release from jail of one of the leaders of Brazil's biggest crime organization, the Primeiro Comando da Capital. In a TV debate in September, Marçal provoked one of the candidates, José Luiz Datena, a TV host whose program, *Brasil Urgente*, specializes in police raids, gangland vendettas, and helicopter chases, into attacking him with a stool.

Controversy turned Marçal into a national celebrity. In the first round of the São Paulo municipal elections on October 6, he won 28.14 percent of the vote, just shy of Boulos's 29.07 percent and Nunes's 29.48 percent. Boulos,



who had been touted as a possible heir to Lula, and whom I followed as he campaigned in a São Paulo favela so prone to landslides that it had to be stabilized by being partly covered in concrete, lost the runoff largely because of his prominent involvement in the Movement for Homeless Workers, which organizes mass invasions of unoccupied real estate. Several Paulistas assured me that Boulos intended to abolish private property—a fallacy spread on social media.

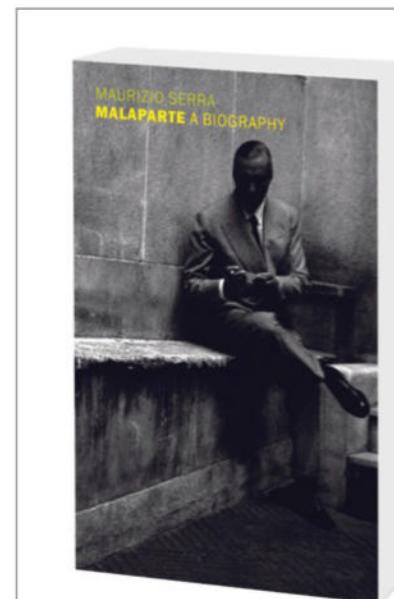
Bolsonaro avoided either endorsing or rejecting Marçal, a younger, more technologically adept version of himself, and by the time I met the former president, a few days before the runoff, Marçal was out of the race. The occasion was a fundraiser for Nunes at a faux farmhouse in urban São Paulo. Wearing a blue shirt and his biggest, most infantile smile, Bolsonaro threaded a path through the businessmen and their wives, reaching down to snaffle a bit of sausage here, a morsel of *picanha* there. (He eats messily, on the move.) As he settled into the car to be driven away I extended my hand through the open door and requested an interview on behalf of *The New York Review*. For a moment he looked at me

coldly, then the door began to close, and I withdrew my hand from his.

That evening, on a brightly lit stage in an evangelical church, Nunes knelt while the pastor blessed his campaign to retain the mayoralty. Bolsonaro and Tarcísio de Freitas looked on. To the accompaniment of a single, shimmering organ chord, Tarcísio, as he is known, intoned, "God sent confusion to his enemies, and do you know why? Because this project is blessed." The swaying congregation, black people, white people, brown and yellow people, the whole range of Brazilian shades, answered, "Amen" and "Praise!"

In the 1970s Brazil was 5 percent Protestant and 91 percent Catholic. Those percentages are now roughly 31 and 50, respectively. According to a study published by the University of São Paulo, between 1970 and 2019 the number of evangelical places of worship in the country rose from just over 1,000 to 109,000. By the mid-2030s the world's biggest Catholic country will have a Protestant majority.

One Sunday I visited the world headquarters of the Pentecostal Church of Deus é Amor—God Is Love—in a formerly industrial part of São Paulo. I was greeted by a young woman named Priscilla who led me into a well-appointed auditorium where around thirty musicians and singers in their teens and twenties were rehearsing rock numbers for the evening service. Then I accompanied her downstairs to a much larger auditorium that is used on special occasions when the church's



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Curzio Suckert (1898–1957)—best known by his pen-name Malaparte—was not only a literary master but one of the mystery men of twentieth-century letters. The son of a cosmopolitan German businessman, his mother an Italian, Malaparte led a life that was intimately entwined from start to finish with the twentieth century's troubled history, and only recently has it become possible to begin to separate fact from the screen of fictions with which he continually surrounded himself.

Diplomat and novelist Maurizio Serra tells the story of a precocious child who hurried to enlist in the French Army and endured the horrors of trench warfare in World War I. Taking up the pen of the journalist in the interwar years, Malaparte both allied himself and fell out with Mussolini, writing his provocative bestseller *The Technique of the Coup d'Etat* to popularize the lessons of the Bolshevik revolution and the fascist March on Rome before being sent into exile in provincial Italy.

During World War II, Malaparte reported from the Eastern Front, joined forces with the occupying Allies after Mussolini's fall, and secretly wrote the first of his two masterpieces, *Kaputt*, a record of wartime enormities and atrocities that is as stylish as it is hellish. With *The Skin*, a black comedy about the American Army in Naples, Malaparte cemented a reputation for daring and disturbing originality. A polymath and shapeshifter—fascist, communist, a converted Catholic on his deathbed—a self-mythologizer on the move between society salons, the corridors of power, and the frontlines, Malaparte is a complex and fascinating subject.

members gather from around the country. "Imagine," she said, smiling rapturously, "20,000 people all praising God!" I asked how the church financed itself, and she replied, "Worshippers are encouraged to donate 10 percent of their income but are told never to give more than they can afford."

The founder of Deus é Amor, David Martins Miranda, was a mechanic and clerk from the southern state of Paraná. "When he started out in the early 1960s," his thirty-four-year-old grandson, David Miranda Neto, told me as worshipers filed in for the evening service, "he would buy fifteen-minute radio slots to get his message across. Now we have 12,000 churches in Brazil and we're present in eighty countries. We have two thousand churches in Peru." Then, taking up a microphone, he bounded onstage and asked his youthful congregation, "What would you do if you saw Jesus here, right now? Well, he is here!"

In the 2000s evangelical leaders supported Lula, who gave them tax breaks in return. The Lava Jato investigations exposed the corruption of Workers' Party rule, and influential pastors accused the left of trying to destroy the traditional family by encouraging homosexuality—same-sex marriage was legalized in 2013—and abortion. In 2016, Bolsonaro was baptized in the River Jordan by a Brazilian pastor, and since then the alliance between evangelicalism and the far right, with agribusiness in a supporting role, has been the most potent force in Brazilian politics. While campaigning for her husband in the 2022 election, Bolsonaro's wife, Michelle, a fervent evangelical, warned that the country was engaged in "a struggle with evil, against Satan who wishes to destroy our nation."

The evangelicals preach a "theology of prosperity," which claims that God wants us to be rich. They also intervene when the state fails. Miranda Neto told me that Deus é Amor provides food and washing facilities for the poor. In Cáceres I visited a small evangelical church with a fenced-off yard where girls were happily playing football, shielded from the war that was being waged in the streets outside by the Primeiro Comando da Capital and its rival Comando Vermelho, or Red Command, for control of the co-

caine trade. While following Boulos's campaign in the São Paulo favela I was told that the shacks that serve as evangelical churches are bulwarks against the violent crime that Brazilians consistently say is the issue that matters to them most.

On a street corner in São Bernardo, Diego had put a hand on my shoulder to stop me from getting into a car that had slowed to pick us up and that I wrongly assumed to be the Uber I had ordered. As it sped off, he said, "You



just avoided being kidnapped." According to the Brazilian Forum on Public Safety, in the year ending in July 2024 reported cases of rape rose by 6.5 percent over the previous year, reaching a historic high of 83,988. In November a female Uber driver in Cuiabá, the capital of Mato Grosso, told me that three other female Uber drivers working in the same city had been raped in recent days and that earlier this year a serial killer had tortured and killed several Uber drivers, both men and women. In the fitness and self-defense classes that have proliferated in recent years, Brazilians work their triceps and learn how to disable assailants. One female university teacher, who has been the subject of intermittent harassment by a stalker for the past seven years and recently used her self-defense skills against an attacker in the street, laconically told me, "If the worst comes to the worst, you bite his jugular, and it's game over."

There is rarely a political downside to being tough on crime. This was understood by Bolsonaro, who said that criminals should die in the streets "like

cockroaches," and by Moraes, who as federal minister of justice in the middle of the last decade traveled to Paraguay, where he was filmed slashing at fields of cannabis with a machete. Brazil's latest hard-line crime fighter is Tarcísio, who has some 100,000 military policemen at his disposal and isn't afraid to use them.

Between January and September 2024 the São Paulo military police killed 496 people, an increase of 75 percent over the same period last year. On November 3 a man was shot in the back by police after stealing detergent. Two days later a four-year-old playing in the street was shot and killed by police in a cross fire. On December 2 a policeman was filmed throwing a suspect to his death off a bridge. When Tarcísio was asked about complaints that NGOs had lodged with the United Nations over a military police operation in which thirty-eight died, he replied, "I don't care."

As Lilia Schwarcz, of the University of São Paulo, and Heloísa Starling, of the University of Minas Gerais, show in their book *Brazil: A Biography*,* the lands that now constitute the Republic of Brazil have, with their bloodstained colonial past and still largely unexpected experience of slavery, rarely been less than exceptionally violent. What Bolsonaro and his allies have done is to inject this violence into the public discourse, with consequences that will endure.

On December 9, Lula was flown from Brasília to São Paulo for emergency surgery to stop bleeding on his brain precipitated by his fall in the shower in October. For a few days Brazilians feared the worst, and there was much sympathy for a president who, despite the strong feelings his record inspires, continues to personify his country's informality, affability, and warmth. As soon as Lula was up and about there was a collective sigh of relief, and Brazilians started talking about the possibility that he may not be able to run in 2026 and the lack of any obvious replacement for him in the ranks of the left. And that is the trouble with Lula. He is irreplaceable. ●

—January 30, 2025

*Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018; reviewed in these pages by Larry Rohter, December 6, 2018.

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The New York Review of Books

Letters

Great Adaptations

To the Editors:

A rather significant factual gaffe by reviewer Jessica Riskin ["Turtles All the Way Up," NYR, February 13]. She writes:

Despite such seemingly deistic moments in his writings, Darwin took a great interest in the capacity of animals to be their own creators, transforming themselves, one another, and their environment, and so influencing the course of evolution. An example is his idea of "use and disuse": animals strengthen and enhance their

body parts by using them, or weaken them by declining to use them, then pass these changes on to their offspring.

This was expressly *not* Darwin's view, but rather that of Jean-Baptiste Lamarck. For Darwin, adaptations were the result of mutations leading to trait variation among individuals in a population, which were then filtered through conditions in a local environment, favoring certain variants and disfavoring others. *The New York Review of Books*, often host to the late, great Stephen Jay Gould, who adamantly rejected genetic determinism, should know better than this!

Michael Friedman
Visiting Assistant Professor of Biology
Pratt Institute
Brooklyn, New York

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