

TLS

THE TIMES LITERARY SUPPLEMENT

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Et in Arcadia ego

Jonathan Bate on a classical ideal and its legacy in art and literature



Arcadian Landscape, by the circle of Nicolas Poussin, c. 1627-28 © The History Collection/Alamy

In this issue

In *The Song of the Earth* (2000), his ecological reading of English literature, Jonathan Bate saw the Romantic movement as attempting an imaginative reunification of mind and nature despite “a melancholy awareness of the illusoriness of its own utopian vision”. It’s an illusion of a lost world of idyllic bliss, a necessary dream of harmony that is shared by all humanity, even by estate agents. When Bate climbs Camelback Mountain behind his home in Phoenix, Arizona, he looks down on the housing developments of Paradise Valley and Arcadia.

Reviewing the two volumes of Paul Holberton’s *A History of Arcadia in Art and Literature*, Bate traces the refinement of a poetic dream from the eclogues of Theocritus and Virgil to Jacopo Sannazaro’s *Arcadia* (the first work to be so entitled, 1504) and on to Sidney, Fletcher, Shakespeare and Milton. Holberton argues that the development of the pastoral was primarily “a means of representing human happiness on this earth in the requited wooing of girl and boy”. But romantic longings often go unrequited, and Bate points out that Virgil’s and Christopher Marlowe’s shepherds woo boys as well as girls. Even in Arcadia lurks Death too. Judge Holden in Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian* names his rifle “Et in Arcadia Ego”.

British politicians have long dreamt of a “giving society” along the lines of the US model. The robber baron Andrew Carnegie, perhaps the richest private individual in the history of the world, argued for the return of wealth to society through philanthropy, and society answered his call. In 2021 nearly 60 per cent of Americans gave money to charity, with an average donation of \$594. Look more closely, however, and American non-profits have a dark side. Anne Nelson reviews four works about the philanthropic complex - five years ago non-profit endowments amounted to \$1.7 trillion. The rich get tax breaks for donations to Ivy League universities that favour the children of the rich, she says, while the poor go to second-rate universities, denuded of federal funding.

Auden made a distinction between Arcadians, who yearn for an idealized past, and Utopians, who look forward to a shining city of reason. Judging by this week’s crop of fiction, utopia has few takers these days. In J. O. Morgan’s futuristic *Appliance* and Jem Calder’s *Reward System*, writes Nat Segnit, the characters are “degraded by the technologies they are compelled against their better judgement to use”. Novels by Ned Beaman, Daisy Hildyard and Lieke Marsman take nature’s degradation for their subject matter. So much for pastures new.

MARTIN IVENS
Editor

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Fresh woods and pastures new

How the classical ideal of Arcadia inspired great western poetry and art

JONATHAN BATE

A HISTORY OF ARCADIA IN ART AND LITERATURE

Volume 1: Earlier Renaissance

Volume 2: Later Renaissance, Baroque and Neoclassicism

PAUL HOLBERTON

976pp. Ad Ilissvm. £80, or £50 each.

IF I CLIMB the mountain behind my house in Phoenix, Arizona, I can see the suburbs of Paradise Valley and Arcadia. Steven Spielberg began putting imaginary worlds on 8mm film while still a pupil at Arcadia High. Local realtors still trade on his name, and on that of the place itself:

Arcadia was home to one of the Greek gods and symbolizes “unspoiled, harmonious wilderness.” Aptly named, Arcadia in Phoenix ... is truly in harmony with nature. There’s majestic Camelback Mountain views. Water weaving in and out from the Arizona Canal. And an abundance of fruit trees.

In fact, the abiding influence of the name owes more to Roman history. Though it was the supposed home of Pan and the birthplace of the huntress Atalanta, Arcadia as the place where humankind lives in harmony with nature is an idea rooted in the literary and artistic traditions of pastoral. Yet in the first eclogue of Theocritus, father of the genre, Pan is asked to leave the mountainous land of the Arcadian king Lycaon and relocate to Sicily. Arcadia itself is not named. It was only with Virgil’s Latin imitations of Theocritus, the sequence of poems he called his Bucolics, that Arcadia became the *locus amoenus* (pleasant place) where shepherds sing in the shade of their various loves and losses.

“Arcadia was discovered in the year 42 or 41 BC ... the land of shepherds and shepherdesses, the land of poetry and love, and its discoverer is Virgil”: thus Bruno Snell, in a 1945 essay reprinted in his classic study *The Discovery of the Mind*. Snell got the idea from the art historian Erwin Panofsky, who had argued before the war that by transposing Theocritan pastoral to Arcadia, Virgil reconciled “hard” with “soft” primitivism - “the wild Arcadian pine trees with the Sicilian groves and meadows” - and in so doing “transformed two realities into one Utopia, a realm sufficiently remote from Roman

everyday life to defy realistic interpretation ... yet sufficiently saturated with visual concreteness to make a direct appeal to the inner experience of every reader”. There will be an analogous mix of Utopian nostalgia and realism in *The Fabelmans*, fable man Spielberg’s upcoming film based on his own Arcadian childhood.

Panofsky’s essay was called “Et in Arcadia ego.” It proposed that the tomb of Daphnis in Virgil’s fifth eclogue was the source for the inscription on the plinth holding a skull in Guercino’s baroque painting of two Arcadian shepherds confronted by the knowledge that there is mortality even in the most pleasant place. Panofsky argued persuasively that the meaning of the phrase - which recurred just a few years later in Poussin’s two paintings of Arcadian shepherds reading a tomb - was “Even in Arcady, there I am”, not (as the poet Felicia Hemans had it) “I, too, shepherds, in Arcadia dwelt”. As Poussin’s friend and biographer Giovan Pietro Bellori recognized, the words are spoken by Death. In an excellent chapter on the motif in the first volume of *A History of Arcadia in Art and Literature*, Paul Holberton also cites André Félibien, another of Poussin’s acquaintances: “Arcadia is a region that poets have depicted as a delightful land, but, by this inscription, it was intended to show that he who is in this tomb lived in Arcadia and that Death is to be found among the greatest happinesses.” The motif has endured through the centuries. Holberton reminds us of Schiller’s “Resignation” - “*Auch ich war in Arkadien geboren / Doch Tränen gab der kurze Lenz mir nur*” (“I, too, was Arcadian born, but the brief Spring brought me only tears”) - and of how “Et in Arcadia ego” was not only the epigraph to the first edition of Goethe’s *Italian Journey*, but also the shadow darkening Faust’s cry “*Arkadisch frei sei unser Glück!*” (“Arcadianly free may our happiness be!”).

He might have added that in *Brideshead Revisited* part one, entitled “Et in Arcadia ego”, Charles Ryder, Evelyn Waugh’s portrait of himself as an art student, shares the interpretation, creating his own version of Guercino’s painting in his undergraduate room: “a human skull lately purchased from the School of Medicine, which, resting in a bowl of roses, formed, at the moment, the chief decoration of my table. It bore the motto ‘Et in Arcadia ego’ inscribed on its forehead”. For Ryder, as for Waugh, Oxford can only be an idyll because it will end after

“**The Three Ages of Man**” by Titian, 1512-14

“**Panofsky argued persuasively that the meaning of the phrase was ‘Even in Arcady, there I am’. The words are spoken by Death**”

Sir Jonathan Bate is Foundation Professor of Environmental Humanities at Arizona State University. His many books include *The Song of the Earth, 2000*, and *How the Classics Made Shakespeare, 2019*

a few short years of youth and love. Those who stay there are the living dead. Paradise is by definition lost: you have to leave Arcadia, as in Virgil’s tenth eclogue and at the end of the greatest pastoral elegy in English literature, Milton’s “Lycidas”: “Tomorrow to fresh woods and pastures new.”

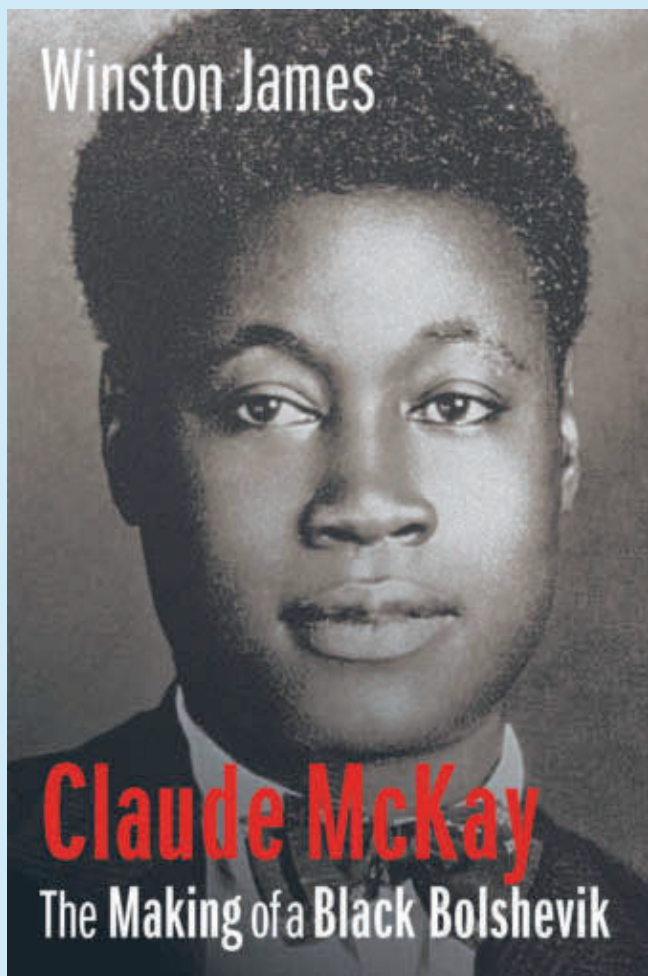
But were Virgil’s eclogues really set in Arcadia? Panofsky and Snell were challenged by the classicist Richard Jenkyns, who noted that only the elegiac closing poem - a farewell to pastoral - was explicitly located there, and that prior allusions to this Greek setting were scarce and indeterminate. He proposed that instead of asserting that Arcadia was discovered in the year 42 or 41 BC, Snell should have written “around AD 1500”, and that “for Virgil we should read the name of Jacopo Sannazaro”. Scholars of the Renaissance have long agreed that Sannazaro’s romance, written in the 1480s and published in 1504, was the first to be called “Arcadia”. Beginning on a mountainside in “la pastorale Arcadia”, it inaugurated a line of poetry and prose that extended through Jorge de Montemayor’s much-reprinted prose work *Diana* (1559) to Sir Philip Sidney’s *Arcadia* and beyond.

Holberton comes down on the side of Jenkyns. He reveals his command of the scholarship with a footnote crediting the dismantling of Snell’s position to Italian and German scholars. Unfortunately, his idiosyncratic sub-dividing and referencing makes this hard to verify - “Cagliari 1967” was the first to question Snell, he says, but I could not find Cagliari in the lengthy “Bibliographic Index”. He is correct that on the few occasions when the eclogues are geographically grounded, the location is Virgil’s native Mantua. But that does not really matter: Arcadia is a country of the mind, not a place. Snell’s term “spiritual landscape” remains apt.

Holberton describes his capacious enterprise as “Warburgian”. and his debt to the iconographic methodology of that great Institute is apparent. The book’s particular strength is its tracing of images and topoi in an impressive array of Renaissance and Enlightenment paintings and prints. In one chapter the reader is invited to linger on nude female figures, in another to trace the injunction *memento mori* across Europe and through the centuries. Curiously, though, Holberton takes issue with the notion that the key to pastoral or Arcadianism is the idea of the *locus amoenus*. This topos was tracked by E. R. Curtius in an essay reprinted in his *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, a book dedicated to the memory of Aby Warburg. According to Holberton’s introduction, it was Curtius who “coined the term”. It is, moreover, a “reductive, blanket term ... which some people will be surprised to learn, since they treat it as a perennial reference point, or at least a classical category, was invented in an article of 1942”. This is Holberton’s equivalent of Snell’s claim that Arcadia was invented by Virgil.

Here is Cicero, writing to his friend Atticus from the villa to which he retreated on the island of Asturia: “*est hic quidem locus amoenus*”. The phrase has a long afterlife: a seventeenth-century French dictionary, citing Cicero, defines a *locus amoenus* as “*un lieu de plaisance*”; Cluverius’s introduction to universal geography, published in Amsterdam in 1729, defines *nemus*, a grove, as a *locus amoenus* of shady woodland; a nineteenth-century commentary on Horace’s ode to Diana uses the phrase with reference to a mountain in Arcadia and to Tempe, that other traditional location for pastoral (as in Keats’s juxtaposition of “Tempe or the vales of Arcady” in his “Ode on a Grecian Urn”). It is hard to understand why Holberton attributes the coining of the phrase to Curtius in 1942 when, later in his study, he quotes the following passage from *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, attributed to Francesco Colonna. Printed by the Aldine press in Venice in 1499, just as Sannazaro was inventing or reviving the Arcadian idiom, this allegorical romance offers an exemplary alignment of pastoral song and pleasant place:

considerando il loco tanto amoenissimo commodissima stazione et grato reductor di pastori, loco invitabondo



Claude McKay

The Making of a Black Bolshevik

WINSTON JAMES

“Elegantly written and carefully reasoned, this is a fascinating look at the political evolution of a key literary figure.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“James is a perceptive literary critic, and his close readings are some of the most electrifying parts of *The Making of a Black Bolshevik*.”

—*Dissent Magazine*

“A powerfully relevant study about an iconoclastic Black thinker and poet who was dedicated to economic reform as well as the eradication of racism.”

—*The Arts Fuse*


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“Et in Arcadia ego” by Guercino, 1618

certamente a cantare bucolice camoene (“considering the so pleasant place a very convenient stopping-point and welcome refuge of shepherds, a place certainly of a kind to invite the singing of bucolic eclogues”).

To be fair, Holberton subsequently modifies his claim that Curtius “coined” the term, saying instead that he “took it up” from the vocabulary of late classical rhetoric. (I’d hardly call Cicero a late classical rhetorician.)

This inconsistency is indicative. One’s initial impression is that the author has been served well by his publisher: two well-stitched hardback volumes on good paper, with dozens of superb colour illustrations and a series of inlaid sections on a yellow background reproducing original texts and excellent translations of key passages from Virgil, Sannazaro, Montemayor, Cervantes and others. But then the blurb raises the alarm: “*A History of Arcadia in Art and Literature* analyses the development of pastoral as, primarily, a means of representing human happiness on this earth in the requited wooing of girl and boy.” Requited? Girl and boy?

A foundational moment in the tradition is the opening of Virgil’s second eclogue: “*Formosum pastor Corydon ardebat Alexim, / delicias domini; nec quid speraret habebat*”. In Holberton’s own translation: “The shepherd Corydon burned for the beautiful Alexis, the love of his master; but he could not have what he hoped for.” Unrequited love, that is, of man for boy. In the Renaissance the name Alexis was a byword for homoerotic desire. Richard Barnfield defended his explicitly gay sonnet sequence “The Affectionate Shepherd” (1594) by claiming that he was imitating Virgil’s second eclogue rather than expressing his own desires. When Marlowe freely translated a subsequent line in the eclogue – “*o tantum libeat mecum tibi sordida rura*” (“Come live with me and be my love”) – into the opening line of “The Passionate Shepherd to His Love”, it may well have been a way of signalling that he was addressing an Alexis, not a girl. Though Sir Walter Raleigh’s “Nymph’s Reply” assumes that it must have been a girl, and Holberton writes unquestioningly of the poem’s “female respondent”, Marlowe does not gender his addressee. He offers them feminizing clothes (cap, kirtle, gown and slippers), but dressing up boys in girls’ clothes was his theatrical stock-in-trade.

The dust jacket’s doubtful claim about requited heterosexual love makes one think that Holberton has not, after all, been so well served. By a publisher who is also Paul Holberton. And the main body of the text shies away from same-sex love via a

neo-Platonic move similar to that of an older generation of readers of Shakespeare’s sonnets who could not abide the thought of a gay Bard: “the love might be as much for beauty itself, embodied in the boy whose cheeks felt the first bloom of puberty, as for a body offering sensual pleasure; even that the subject of the poem, reading behind Corydon, might be the pursuit of beauty in poetry”. But when Shakespeare calls the object of desire in the sonnets a “lovely boy”, he is alluding to Corydon’s *o formose puer*. Had he been more ostentatious in his classicism, or less guarded in his homoeroticism, he might have openly compared the lad to Alexis.

Holberton’s range of enquiry is broad, his readings of Renaissance paintings nearly always insightful, and his accounts of influential but now little-known works such as Tasso’s *Aminta* (1573) illuminating. He is as confident a guide to Lope de Vega’s *La Arcadia* and Arcadian-set *El Ganso de oro* (“The golden goose”) as to depictions of Tasso’s story of “Erminia among the Shepherds” (an embedded tale in the *Gerusalemme Liberata*) by Carracci, Albani, Guercino and Domenichino. He introduces us to the concept of “depastoralisation” in Dutch seventeenth-century painting and drama. He ends with a modern flourish in the form of Picasso’s “La Flûte de Pan” (1923). The anthologized passages are well chosen: so, for example, there is a substantial extract, in both Spanish and English, from Cervantes’s unfinished pastoral *La Galatea*, while the “happy golden age” chorus in the first act of *Aminta* is printed in parallel with Samuel Daniel’s (unacknowledged) translation of it as “A Pastoral” in his sonnet collection *Delia* (1592).

Less impressive are the generalizations, such as: “It has been supposed that Virgil inspired the Renaissance painters’ interest in landscape; it might have been more plausible to suggest Horace, or Lucretius”. Would it not have been even more plausible to suggest Ovid, who makes only a few cameo appearances in the course of the two volumes’ thousand-odd pages? A chapter on “Courtious Love” gives ample attention to Titian’s “Venus of Urbino” and other reclining nudes that have little to do with Arcadia, yet there is no mention of his Ovidian “poesie”, gloriously reunited in a pandemic-hit exhibition at the National Gallery, despite the manifestly pastoral settings of “Venus and Adonis”, “Diana and Actaeon”, “Diana and Callisto” and “The Death of Actaeon”. It is in Ovid’s Arcadia that Pan tries to seduce the nymph Syrinx, only to find himself on the bank of the River Ladon, clutching her in the form of the reed out of which he will make his pipes. Ovid’s Arcadia is also where Jupiter

becomes a transvestite rapist, seducing Callisto by masquerading as Diana. These stories played a huge part in the history of the imagined place in art and literature, but Holberton is uninterested in their Ovidian context. The front cover of his first volume shows Giovanni Agostino da Lodi's early-sixteenth-century canvas of "Pan wooing Syrinx (and Apollo pursuing Daphne)". Inside, however, this painting and its companion piece, "The river Ladon assisting Syrinx in her metamorphosis into reeds", are discussed without reference to Ovid and are said to be "Arcadian" not "by virtue of any characteristic of their own but only because Pan is there" - which makes one wonder why one was chosen for the cover.

Equally, it is hard to see why Holberton offers an account of Milton's "L'Allegro" as a version of pastoral, while failing even to mention the fragmentary masque that is actually called "Arcades", with lines that moved A. E. Housman to tears:

Nymphs and shepherds dance no more
By sandy Ladon's liliated banks ...
Though Syrinx your Pan's mistress were,
Yet Syrinx well might wait on her.
Such a rural queen
All Arcadia hath not seen.

Another generalization: "Something also should be said of neo-Latin eclogues, or rather it should be explained why nothing much further will be said: it is because they contribute little or nothing to this further development of pastoral, which takes place in vernacular love poetry and prose". Holberton offers an account of the neo-Latin eclogues of Baptista Spagnuoli Mantuanus, but the reader is given no sense of their influence across Europe. Because Mantuan's Latin was easy, his poems were studied early on in grammar schools. Their piety enabled teachers to reconcile the eroticism of the pastoral with the Christian image of the pastor. Erasmus called Mantuan "the Christian Virgil". These are eclogues that tell of eros in order to warn against it. The third is entitled "De insani amoris exitu infelici" - the unhappy outcome of mad love.

More broadly, the neo-Latin tradition should not be dismissed: it endured into the eighteenth century and was Milton's way into poetry, as witnessed by his early "Carmina Elegiaca" and (Mantuan-influenced) "Apologus de Rustico et Hero" ("Fable of the peasant and the landlord"). Andrew Marvell, meanwhile, wrote his most celebrated garden poem in English and Latin ("Hortus"). But Holberton seems to run out of steam by the time he reaches "Upon Appleton House" and "The Garden" towards the end of his second volume: "Marvell packs more complexities and flights of wit into his apparently simple iambs, with their wondrously enlivening sight rhymes or perissos words, than can be considered here."

And if Marvell and Milton are scanted, what of Shakespeare? The accession to the throne of James VI of Scotland as James I of England should have been a triumph for the dramatist. Within weeks his company was upgraded from the title of Lord Chamberlain's Men to that of King's Men. His Majesty's Players were given lengths of red cloth for the coronation procession. Shakespeare proceeded to write plays that aligned with the king's interests: *Measure for Measure*; *Macbeth*; *King Lear*. But, perhaps because of the frequency of closure of the theatres owing to plague, perhaps because his mind was turning to family and business dealings back in Stratford-upon-Avon, or conceivably for reasons of health, Shakespeare stopped acting in his own plays and those of fellow dramatists such as Ben Jonson. He wrote at a slower pace and seems to have sought out a collaborator. *Timon of Athens* with Thomas Middleton: not a success. *Pericles* with George Wilkins: a broken-backed affair. Eventually, things worked out with John Fletcher, who had proved himself in partnership with Francis Beaumont. Shakespeare duly ended his career with the Fletcherian collaborations *Henry VIII*, *The Two Noble Kinsmen* and the lost *Cardenio* (a pastoral romance based on Cervantes). Fletcher, who specialized in royalist tragicomic romance, went on to a successful

partnership with Philip Massinger, maintaining the position of the King's Men as the premier company of the age.

His triumph was by no means assured: Fletcher first came to the attention of the play-reading public as the author of a drama that bombed. Entitled *The Faithful Shepherdess* and set in Thessaly (the location of that other Arcadia, the Vale of Tempe), it was a free adaptation of Battista Guarini's Arcadian tragicomedy *Il Pastor Fido*. Fletcher paired the chaste shepherdess Clorin with the wanton shepherdess Cloe. The quasi-magical healing powers of Clorin (influenced, Holberton reminds us, by the chastity and pastoral of Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queene*) convert all the shepherds and shepherdesses, and even a Satyr, to virtuous behaviour. Well, nearly all - a Malvolio/Jaques-like Sullen Shepherd has to be banished. When the script was published in c.1609, Fletcher added a preface explaining that because it had been branded a pastoral tragicomedy, the audience was furious at the lack of "country-hired Shepherds, in gray cloaks, with curtailed dogs in strings, sometimes laughing together, and sometimes killing one another", not to mention "whitsun ales, cream, wassail and morris-dances".

But Fletcher persevered with the genre, co-writing *Philaster: or Love Lies a Bleeding* with Beaumont

“
Nostalgia for
a vanished
green world
seems to be
hardwired
into the
human brain

▼ Stewart Sanderson
is a poet based in
Glasgow and a past
recipient of an Eric
Gregory award and a
Robert Louis Stevenson
Fellowship. His first
full-length collection is
The Sleep Road, 2021

The Water People

All that remains
are a few wet words -
*adro, a river,
*alauna, its flowing
and *idunā, the water
oscillating in it.

Another verb, *er
or *or, seems to have meant
putting in motion -
setting the world sliding
from cause towards effect
like a new burn birthed
out of last winter's snow.

A burn beginning
as the glaciers shifted
north, letting rain fall
for the first time on this landscape
they had carved: a territory
on which clouds of names
would soon break too.

No way of telling
when exactly in that long
preliterate process
of remembering and forgetting
this clutch of droplets
from a strange tongue fell here.

What we can say
is that the authors
of these terms - people of water -
knew the value of speech:
how it becomes a place
to dwell, as well
as the tool we take
to shape the silence
into something we can live with.

Note: This poem begins with four apparently pre-Celtic elements in river names from the Scottish Borders, as categorized in the University of Glasgow's online Berwickshire Place-Name Resource. In each case the asterisk marks the unattested character of the reconstructed form.

STEWART SANDERSON

(1608) for the King's Men. This play is thought by most scholars to have been a formative influence on Shakespeare's turn to romance in *Cymbeline* and *The Winter's Tale*. We must presume that Shakespeare had a part in giving Fletcher this second chance, just as he may have had a guiding or backstage hand in the King's Men's revival, shortly afterwards, of another pastoral romance, *Mucedorus*, with added scenes including one in which a clown exits pursued by a bear. He certainly seems to have read *The Faithful Shepherdess*, to judge from the closeness with which the virtuous Satyr's offer to assist Clorin anticipates Ariel's service of Prospero in *The Tempest*, written not long after Fletcher's play was published:

Shall I stray
In the middle air and stay
The sailing wrack or nimbly take,
Hold by the moon, and gently make
Suit to the pale queen of the night,
For a beam to give you light?
Shall I dive into the sea?

Holberton duly quotes these lines, nicely suggesting that the Satyr recalls Robin Goodfellow in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, just as Ariel echoes the Satyr when he offers "to fly, / To swim, to dive into the fire, to ride / On the curled clouds."

The failure of *The Faithful Shepherdess* became a cause célèbre. In the words of its eighteenth-century editor Thomas Seward, it was "of all the poems in our language, one of the greatest honours and the greatest scandals of our nation":

How must each Briton of taste rejoice to find all the pastoral beauties of Italy and Arcadia transplanted by Fletcher, and flourishing in our own climate! How must he grieve to think that they were at first blasted, and since suffered to wither in oblivion by his Gothic countrymen! The Faithful Shepherdess was damned at its first appearance, and not even ... Milton's great admiration and close imitation of it in *Comus* could recommend it to the publick.

That Seward should have been so exercised a century and a half after the play was booed off the Blackfriars stage is testimony to the enduring fascination of the pastoral tradition. Nostalgia for a vanished green world seems to be hardwired into the human brain. Friedrich Schiller recognized this, arguing in his essay "On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry" that "*Im fernen Auslande der Kunst*" - in the distant foreign land of art - we hear the tender voice of our lost mother nature. But can these ancient plays, poems and paintings continue to flourish in our own climate - speak, indeed, to the age of climate change, in which no part of the planet is left untouched by human use and abuse of nature?

In Arizona, the season is approaching when the air of Paradise Valley and Arcadia will become acrid and hazy as a result of wildfires in the mountains and the Tonto National Forest. We may look in response to the wisdom - the controlled burning practices - of the indigenous tribes who have lived with this dry land for 12,000 years. But inspiration may come from the classics, too. Ovid's Jove is the embodiment of patriarchal violence when he rapes Callisto, but we should not forget what brought him to Arcadia in the first place: his desire to restore the beloved land after it had been razed by fire. In A. D. Melville's fine translation,

[Jove's] own Arcadia was his weightiest care;
Her springs and rivers, fearing still to flow,
He primed anew, gave verdure to the fields,
Leaves to the trees and bade the ravaged woods
Grow green again.

Arcadia may offer a vision neither of nostalgia nor of Holberton's requited love between boy and girl, but rather of restoration, of sustainability and of the urgent need to frame what the philosopher Michel Serres called a "natural contract": an obligation "divided into the old local law that attaches us to the ground where our ancestors lie, and a new global law that no legislator, as far as I know, has yet written, which requires of us the universal love of the physical Earth". ■

Khalil Sakakini

Tom Sperlinger praises Nur Masalha's book *Palestine across Millennia* (In Brief, June 10), whose wholly anachronistic premiss is that everything that occurred within the borders of British Mandatory Palestine down the millennia is inherently Palestinian in the modern nationalist sense, even though that is a post-1919 term, of course, and, more substantively, that identity did not exist until even later. By this logic Jerusalem's Shrine of the Book, where the Dead Sea Scrolls are housed, is a "triumphalist monument to the rise of modern Zionism", whereas, Sperlinger argues, the scrolls reflect the "mixed multicultural and multilingual heritage of ancient Palestine", rather than anything Hebraic or Jewish, let alone Israeli. By such reasoning Field Marshal Allenby was a fine Palestinian cavalry general.

Sperlinger's long final paragraph on Khalil Sakakini, described as a model humanist as well as an educational reformer, is akin to describing Reinhard Heydrich as a fine violinist. Inter alia, al-Sakakini called on his fellows to bomb and shoot the British and Jewish invaders, torch Jewish fields and orange groves, and ambush routine traffic. He praised a grenade attack on a Jewish civilian train, and another on Jerusalem's Edison cinema that left three dead.

He also became a vehement Nazi sympathizer when Rommel was advancing, i.e. when it mattered. According to Tom Segev, "Sakakini, the humanist educator, came to believe that Nazi Germany might weaken Britain and thereby liberate Palestine from the Jews. So he supported the Nazis ... Hitler had opened the world's eyes, Sakakini wrote ... The Germans had been the first to stand up to the Jews and were not afraid of them" (*One Palestine, Complete*, p411).

■ **Edward N. Luttwak**
Chevy Chase MD

Celts in history

Ever since J. R. R. Tolkien called the Celts a "magic bag into which anything could be tossed and anything retrieved", Celtic studies have struggled to escape what he called their "fabulous twilight". For outsiders this can be a voyage of fascinating discovery, for insiders often a painful argument, fuelled by the revolution of DNA archaeology. This is the argument I narrate in the first half of my *Celts: A sceptical history*.

The broad conclusion is clear. The overwhelming weight of scholarship is with Tolkien. From Grahame Clark and Colin Renfrew in the 1960s to Barry Cunliffe, John Koch, Stephen Oppenheimer, Simon James and others today, academics have come to regard as facile the idea of a coherent tribe of "Celts" charging across Europe until left clinging to its western shores. It was the product of eighteenth-century mythmaking and nineteenth-century ethnic stereotyping. The anthropologist Malcolm Chapman even proposed the name be banned. As Tolkien was brilliantly to fantasize, Celts are best left to Middle-earth.

They at least have their Sauron in Aberystwyth's Patrick Sims-Williams. His response to my scepticism is that of the foundation rhetoric of the British Isles (July 1). This has the islands overwhelmed and repopulated by "Celts" in the first millennium BC, only for them to become victims in turn of "ethnic cleansing" and "cultural genocide" by conquering Saxons in the fifth century AD. It is still taught in schools.

Of course, revisionism has rough edges, not least Sims-Williams citing the claim of Harvard's Reich Laboratory in 2018 that skeletons suggest Britain saw a "90

per cent population replacement" in about 1,000 BC. This was hotly debated by Cunliffe and others, and conflicted with most genetic evidence. This is that the majority of Britons date back to the Mesolithic period in a relatively stable continuity.

As for Sims-Williams's dismissal of the now widespread debunking of a Saxon genocide, he cannot have read Susan Oosterhuizen's 2019 study of the evidence, or total lack of it. While there were raids and settlements, the idea of the eradication and replacement of millions of "eastern Celts" in barely a century after Rome's departure is enduring fantasy. As Jared Diamond has suggested, it would have required a holocaust more fitting the age of "guns, germs and steel". Post-Roman England is now thought to have enjoyed a period of relative stability.

I am therefore not a "fantasist" in finding it implausible that easterners spoke a Celtic language under the Romans, then switched almost overnight to a Germanic one. Ideas of an "early English" round the North Sea by Peter Forster and Peter Schrijver, among others, are reasonable. As for Sims-Williams citing in aid inscriptions, they do indeed raise puzzling questions, but inscriptions travelled light.

Conjecture is what makes "prehistory" so intriguing. It may be irritating for a conservative academic to have the laity intrude on his terrain, but the joy of history is universal. It lies in watching the past shift from impossible to implausible to sometimes even probable. Nothing is more dangerous than a closed mind.

■ **Simon Jenkins**
London W8

Cato Street

A sidelight on the Cato Street conspiracy (June 17). In researching my book *The Final Curtain: The art of dying on stage* (Anthem Press), I discovered that the tragedian Edmund Kean drew on the conspirators for the death of his Richard III. He sat up the night before their execution opposite the Debtors' Door of the Old Bailey to watch them on their way to the scaffold. "I want to die like Thistlewood", he said, "and tonight I'll imitate every muscle of that man's countenance."

■ **Laurence Senelick**
Tufts University, Medford MA

Who's in, who's out

Terry Eagleton's comments evaluating Geoff Dyer's tastes in *The Last Days of Roger Federer* (July 1) reminded me of Stephen Potter's "OK Literary Names": i.e. who is vogueish and who is out. Eagleton says Dyer has a "properly low opinion" of Anthony Powell's *Dance* series and is "rightly unenthused" by P. G. Wodehouse, both authors I happen to much like. Elsewhere in Potter's *Lifemanship* series comes another link to Dyer, who says Clint Eastwood, in *Where Eagles Dare*, pulls off the feat of squinting in German (in "Broadsword Calling Danny Boy"). Likewise, Potter has Gatling-Fenn musing in French to achieve fleeting social superiority at a house party. The thought bubble above his amiably vacant countenance as he reposes in his chair irrelevantly asks: "Où est la plume de ma tante?"

■ **William Powell**
London SE27

Suze

Lisa Hilton, in her review of Abel Quentin's *Le Voyant d'Étampes* (June 24), stresses the symbolic significance of the sexagenarian narrator meeting incomprehension when he asks in Paris for Suze, made from gentian root, in a novel where roots of various sort are central, a point taken up by Neil Cooper (Letters, July 1). Symbolism here seems to have outrun realism. Although the popularity of the drink was at its peak between the two world wars (when it notably sponsored the Tour de France), it is still widely drunk. I learnt to

appreciate it when working in Le Touquet in the summers of 1961 and 1962, mistakenly thinking it was a northern drink, but found no difficulty in obtaining it in Paris subsequently, and more recently in Montpellier. Last month in Toulon the barman serving it to me was surprised only that an obvious foreigner was ordering it.

■ **Peter Cogman**
Southampton

The great inflation

Kenneth Rogoff's review of two books about central banks' influence on the economy (July 1) is complex and sophisticated, but too narrow. He uses the word "progressive" as a pejorative and leaves out some of the weird policies of the passionately anti-progressive previous US administration and their effect on current inflation: 1. trade war with China (with its disruption of supply chains); 2. regressive tax policies; and 3. too-close ties with the petrostates. The past thirty years of China's pitch to become the shop floor for the world reduced prices on all manufactured goods, simultaneously lifting hundreds of millions of Asians (in China, India, Vietnam and other countries that caught the wave) out of poverty. China's rise depleted the stock of manufacturing jobs in the US and other developed economies, but the cost of T-shirts and televisions fell to balance the adverse effect on most of the US population. Rogoff hardly mentions the costly supply-chain disruption that was triggered by the China trade war and, as magnified by the pandemic,

still plays a large part in inflation. The tariffs on Chinese goods also obviously inflate the price of those goods. Reducing tax rates for the wealthy throws cash into the market for consumer goods and, more importantly, financial assets, which, despite recent setbacks, have arguably experienced more inflation than consumer goods or gasoline. The cosiness of the Trump administration with Russia may have enabled Putin's aggression in Ukraine, which seems to have become profitable for Russia (and Saudi Arabia), since the war contributed to the rise in the price of oil, more important to Russia than trade of manufactured goods.

Rogoff fails to mention the cash giveaways in response to the pandemic, including cash payments to individuals and Paycheck Protection loans, a reasonable if heavily abused policy with inflationary consequences. Another key aspect of the current worldwide inflation left out of his analysis is the reversal of anti-fossil-fuel measures necessitated by the Ukraine war, the environmental effects of which are not reflected in GDP as currently computed. Although Rogoff discusses the dramatic shortening of the average duration of US debt (through the buying in of long-term notes in quantitative easing), he does not address the inflationary effect of the expense of refinancing the debt with increasing interest rates.

Finally, Rogoff concentrates too narrowly on GDP, which he admits is a flawed measure of whatever an economy is. Economies still move on secular trends such as the growth of manufacturing in Asia and the development of additional energy supplies, not on the past few years of fiscal policy, the focus of Rogoff's review.

■ **James Kardon**
Scarsdale, NY

Immortality

Michele Pridmore-Brown (June 24) paints a terrifying picture of the future if it's up to the likes of Warwick, Kurzweil and de Grey. As with many past projects of ultimate human mastery over nature, there is no doubt that cyborg immortality is a fantasy, but the damage it can do along the way is not. Meanwhile, if anyone wants to know what it would be like to be such a being, they need look no further than Tolkien's millennia-old Ringwraiths, with their flesh not living, but merely undead. The longer they exist, the more they both fear death and long for it. Tolkien warned of "the hideous peril of confusing true 'immortality' with limitless serial longevity". Who is really the fantasist: Tolkien or the transhumanists?

■ **Patrick Curry**
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The gift that keeps on taking

How philanthropy is making America more unequal

ANNE NELSON

BANKERS IN THE IVORY TOWER

The troubling rise of financiers in US higher education
CHARLIE EATON
232pp. Chicago University Press.
Paperback, \$27.50.

VANDERBILT

The rise and fall of an American dynasty
ANDERSON COOPER
336pp. Harper. £20 (US \$30).

THE AMERICAN JEWISH PHILANTHROPIC COMPLEX

The history of a multibillion-dollar institution
LILA CORWIN BERMAN
280pp. Princeton University Press. £28 (US \$35).

GEORGE SOROS

A life in full

PETER L. W. OSNOS, EDITOR

320pp. Harvard Business Review. £22 (US \$30).



David H. Koch Plaza, New York

AMERICA'S MAGNATES can't aspire to a place on the Queen's birthday honours list. Instead they validate their status by splashing their names across large and showy marquees. The beneficiaries are often cultural institutions, medical centres, colleges and universities, as well as entire charitable foundations, ostensibly for the benefit of the public. But the public doesn't get a vote. Would it prefer the David H. Koch Plaza at the Metropolitan Museum in New York, with its "intricate lighting palette" to "highlight the dynamism of the fountains", or a Koch-subsidized waiver for the \$25 tickets that out-of-towners must buy to see the actual art?

Philanthropy shapes Americans' image of themselves as citizens of what the news site Axios has described as "the world's most generous country". A recent Axios report (updated March 12, 2022), noted that nearly 60 per cent of Americans donated money in 2021, with an average donation of \$574. The most popular beneficiaries included the St. Jude Children's Research Hospital, the Alzheimer's Association, the American Cancer Society and a charity that provides food to hungry American children. But giving isn't always an act of pure altruism. Americans live under a tax regime that has become increasingly (if not consistently) regressive over the past century, and in which the effective tax rate for the Forbes 400 wealthiest Americans - on average 8.2 per cent in recent years - is lower than that paid by many middle-class taxpayers. This arrangement favours philanthropy, since charitable giving can be written off as a tax deduction. Deductions apply to the widow's mite as well as the plutocrat's purse, but plutocrats make the lesser sacrifice. If some of their billions could be recaptured for direct public benefit, Americans might be able to dream of a society in which parents didn't have to resort to GoFundMe campaigns to treat children with cancer, and where hungry children could be sure of getting food. But it was not always thus. New books by Charlie Eaton and Lila Corwin Berman shed light on the dark side of the American non-profit sphere, showing how dramatic changes in financial instruments and tax policy have promoted the plunder of the US public coffers - and the social safety net they support - in the name of private charity. Two other new books, on George Soros and

the Vanderbilt dynasty, demonstrate the different ways in which philanthropy can operate.

Nowhere has the gap widened more than in the realm of higher education. *Bankers in the Ivory Tower: The troubling rise of financiers in US higher education* by Charlie Eaton describes the way private equity and tax policies have become drivers of inequality in American colleges and universities. Eaton lays the groundwork by citing an influential book by the political scientists Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson, *Winner-Take-All Politics: How Washington made the rich richer - and turned its back on the middle class* (2011). Eaton reminds us:

[Hacker and Pierson] argued that a new coalition of business leaders and conservative activists since the 1970s pushed through financial deregulation and tax cuts for corporations and the wealthy, especially in the financial sector. [They] refer to the coordinated policy development, lobbying, and political campaign spending by this coalition as a thirty year war (now forty years).

It is instructive to consider this war in a broader historical context. The US has gone through repeated cycles of concentrations of wealth to which political power flows; these are followed by cycles of reform, achieved through the assertion of labour rights and tax reform. The Gilded Age of the late nineteenth century created vast fortunes for industrial innovators, financial speculators and corrupt politicians, sparking the breathless chase for status markers. In *Vanderbilt: The rise and fall of an American dynasty*, the Vanderbilt scion Anderson Cooper chronicles how his forefathers rose from the status of unlettered ferrymen to the apex of American aristocracy, in part through their philanthropy to elite universities.

During this period income inequality grew, and by 1928 the top 1 per cent earned one fifth of all pre-tax income, while the bottom 90 per cent earned just over half. In the wake of the stock-market crash in 1929, Franklin D. Roosevelt's administration, fearing social collapse, introduced a series of safety nets financed by a tax of 94 per cent on income over \$200,000. This rate fell to 70 per cent in 1965 and to 50 per cent in 1982. American income equality reached its peak in the 1970s, during the Richard Nixon administration. The American middle class prospered and the poorest benefited from

federal support for housing and education. Universities, arts institutions and public broadcasting were buoyed by tax dollars, allowing them to widen their missions to marginalized populations. Since then the pendulum has swung back, and Eaton takes on the past few decades from the narrow but significant perspective of higher education: specifically, the way shifts in the finance industry led to the accumulation of huge endowments in elite institutions, to the detriment of educational opportunities for the broader population.

The author shows how the process began with steep cuts to state and federal taxes and capital gains taxes for the wealthy. This led to substantial cutbacks in federal funding for higher education and the substitution of grants by loans for students in need of assistance. Large numbers of for-profit colleges appeared, aggressively recruiting low-income students for low-quality degrees to be financed with crippling debts. "At the end of the 1970s", Eaton reports, "a new political coalition was forged between big business, the old financial elite, and a rising conservative movement. The coalition would push the US government to deregulate financial activities and cut taxes in crucial ways for the resurgence of financier wealth and power." Technology accelerated this shift: "Computerization and new ideas from academic economists simultaneously enabled financial technicians to assess credit risks for corporate and individual borrowers and investors at a radically increased scale - and to conduct daily trades in stocks and corporate debt instruments numbering in the billions rather than the millions".

The financial deregulation of the early 1980s encouraged squadrons of hedge-fund managers to tap their social relationships with college endowment managers. Tax-deductible donations swelled the coffers of these elite institutions, while less well-connected public universities - traditionally engines of upward mobility - not only missed out on such donations, but suffered significant cutbacks in government support. The result was a form of self-dealing that has become endemic in American charitable giving. "Potential status benefits require appreciation of the gift by others who occupy the same social space, be it a country club, an alumni gathering, or a college board meeting", Eaton writes. "Educational and cultural organizations often provide social worlds in which philanthropic homophily can occur." Alumni donors reap additional benefits in the form of preferential admission for family members.

A new chapter has emerged in the character of elite colleges and universities - notably, but not exclusively, the Ivy League institutions of Harvard, Yale, Princeton and Columbia. Throughout their history these establishments have educated practitioners of various disciplines, but historical eras suggest different emphases. Founded to train Protestant clergy and lawyers, they evolved into markers of conspicuous consumption in the Gilded Age. The Vanderbilts not only sent their sons to Yale, they financed a dormitory named for one of them. Princeton, originally a seminary for Calvinist ministers, became F. Scott Fitzgerald's mythical playground for the rich, beautiful and damned. But these institutions, like many others, were energized in the postwar period by the GI Bill, which brought millions of veterans into higher education. This and other social movements promoted a more diversified meritocracy, producing generations of remarkable figures in the sciences and the arts, as well as government.

Today, the New Gilded Age is transforming these institutions, once again, into incubators of extreme wealth and status markers for privilege. Although they still educate artists, scientists and reformers,

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Eaton reminds us that 70 per cent of Harvard graduates now apply for work at a leading investment bank or consulting firm. The Ivy League graduates working in finance join powerful “old boy” networks to promote their common interests, and these networks siphon taxable income into untaxed endowments for their alma maters. In recent years they have also invested heavily in separate for-profit colleges that prey on low-income students. Eaton points to “widespread investment in for-profit colleges by nonprofit and public universities via private equity and hedge funds ... The most elite private universities invested earliest in these funds and have reaped the largest returns because of favorable terms and the size of their endowments” - increasingly through the use of shell companies.

Thanks to their profitable endowments, the elite colleges can offer “need-blind” places (i.e. ones that do not consider an applicant’s financial situation) and financial aid to half of their undergraduates. They boast of advances in racial diversity, but the economic imbalance is still apparent: in 2017 the *New York Times* reported that five of the Ivy League schools had more students from the top 1 per cent of the income scale than from the bottom 60 per cent. And while these institutions flourish financially, benefiting those fortunate enough to be able to attend them, the situation is very different at the for-profits and state universities. In recent years the latter have faced big cutbacks, and they are now routinely saddling their students with debts to cover fees of \$20,000 per annum for in-state tuition and over \$50,000 for out-of-state (plus living expenses). The situation is even worse at for-profit colleges, where, Eaton reports, the proportion of African Americans, women and veterans is generally higher than at non-profits. These students are also more likely to acquire a debt or to default (limiting their credit and housing options in the future), and less likely to graduate with a degree. Once celebrated as a path to upward mobility, American higher education is increasingly becoming an obstacle.

Universities aren’t the only casualty of the “forty years” war. The underlying economic factors that changed the course of higher education have transformed the philanthropic landscape as a whole. This case is cogently laid out in Lila Corwin Berman’s *The American Jewish Philanthropic Complex: The history of a multibillion-dollar institution*. Like *Bankers in the Ivory Tower*, this is a solid academic work published by an academic press, but Berman’s lively prose serves her argument well. The author is actually telling two stories here. The broader tale describes how changes to the non-profit tax regime in recent decades have encouraged private equity to subvert the mission of philanthropies of every variety. The narrower subject is the way these processes have played out in American Jewish communities - which, as a Jewish beneficiary of various Jewish foundations, Berman describes with some soul-searching.

At the heart of this story is the phenomenon of the donor-advised fund, which allows donors to contribute to an account and receive an immediate tax deduction while delaying the designation of the recipient - and obscuring the identity of the donor. Some of these vehicles, including the Koch-backed Donors Trust and the fundamentalist National Christian Foundation, have been accused of providing “dark money” to the radical right, but the mechanism is used by donors on both sides of the political divide.

Berman explains that many philanthropic organizations originated as religious mutual aid societies for struggling immigrants in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In an era when anti-Catholicism and antisemitism were rife, and state support for the poor was next to nonexistent, these associations served as a lifeline for their respective communities. There was no question of stockpiling assets; money was raised from the community and promptly disbursed to its needy. As Berman writes, “Jewish and Catholic philanthropic institutions

regarded their yearly fund-raising as a mandate from the people, and their quick distribution of those dollars to meet material needs served to legitimate the following year’s campaign”. She continues:

In the wake of the Gilded Age, which saw the rise of striking inequality, many Americans maintained a distrust of stockpiled wealth. Even Andrew Carnegie, the consummate industrial capitalist, denounced the practice of holding vast fortunes in perpetuity, and in his famous late-nineteenth century essay, “The Gospel of Wealth,” he argued for the return of wealth to society through philanthropic distribution.

Understandably, charities based on religious and ethnic communities were prime candidates for the self-dealing that Charlie Eaton calls “philanthropic homophily”: Catholics supporting Catholics, Jews supporting Jews and so on. Yet Jewish philanthropies, Berman shows, were affected by two specific historical developments.

One, of course, was the Holocaust, which presented American Jews with a world of need among European Jewish survivors and sparked an intense commitment to the new state of Israel. The second was the notable progress of Jews in American society. Antisemitism gradually abated after the Second World War, as did the *numerus clausus* quotas that limited Jewish entry into universities and the professions. Various Pew studies find that American Jews are now the wealthiest and best-educated religious cohort in the US. But assimilation comes at a price. While the “Jewish-connected” population has remained relatively stable at 2-3 per cent of the total, American Jews have become increasingly secular - more than 40 per cent of married Jews have a non-Jewish spouse.

These developments have challenged the original mission of Jewish charities. Some groups have shifted their support to needy non-Jewish populations; others have not. Berman quotes the president of the board of New York’s federated Jewish philanthropies at a meeting in 1972, where he noted the rise of a “substantial interest in projects relating to Jewish identity and Jewish life in other Federations, even to the point of beginning to cut back substantially on health services and child and family care agencies in order to provide funds for Jewish education and Jewish identity projects”. This turn was able to come about because several of the Jewish philanthropic federations played a substantial role in revising the tax code governing their operations. The Nixon Tax Reform Act of 1969, drafted in part by Norman Sugarman, a legal adviser to the Jewish philanthropies, beginning with the federation in his home city of Cleveland, Ohio, allowed “public charities to absorb gifts of appreciated property, including private foundations, without compromising the favourable tax treatment they received, even if they designated these gifts as part of restricted endowment funds named for individual donors”. This was, in other words, an open invitation to philanthropic homophily and vanity projects - for donors of every sector. These tax exemptions allowed the wealthy to shelter vast amounts of money in endowments at the expense of tax-supported public programmes. As a result, Berman writes, “the 1969 Tax Reform Act laid the groundwork for both philanthropy and the US tax system to back away from a commitment to progressive and state-mandated economic redistribution and, instead, to entrust private entities to hold public goods”.

Taken together, Eaton and Berman’s books suggest that the US’s non-profit tax policy is a dangerously underestimated factor in the country’s national divide. According to *Philanthropy Daily* (July 27, 2020), as of 2017, non-profit endowments amounted to about \$1.7 trillion (roughly the GDP of Canada). That’s \$1.7 trillion dollars withheld from economic activity, and many billions of tax dollars withheld from the public purse. As Berman writes:

[Jewish philanthropic] federations’ turn toward the tools of finance is intelligible only in the framework of similar transformations in the American state that saw public interests increasingly beholden to

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Once celebrated as a path to upward mobility, American higher education is increasingly becoming an obstacle

market-driven models of growth and progress. Through tax reform, cuts to social welfare spending, and policies to deregulate and subsidize the financial industry, the American government steadily put the public good in the hands of private entities that controlled and benefited from the market economy.

The results reveal the splendours and miseries of modern America. The wealthy enjoy the benefits of state-of-the-art medical research and technology, housed in gleaming facilities bearing their names. The less fortunate lack access to basic care, resulting in the parents’ GoFundMe appeals on Facebook to raise money for their children’s treatment. The elite universities are billed as the best in the world, while in rural and inner-city schools children study in crumbling classrooms and their underpaid teachers are abandoning the profession in droves.

Conservative donor networks such as the Koch and DeVos organizations have in effect worked to undermine public education, public health and public media in favour of private enterprise. Others, such as the Gates and Soros foundations, are known for promoting public institutions and other liberal causes. But from the standpoint of democratic participation, any of these institutions can be problematic. *George Soros: A life in full*, edited by Peter L. W. Osnos, is a festschrift celebrating the financier, written by eight prominent authors, most of whom have worked for or benefited from their subject’s various philanthropies. Not surprisingly, the essays are largely admiring, even if they convey notes of caution.

The sinologist Orville Schell describes Soros as “the head of a ‘stateless state’ that nonetheless has its own foreign policy and embassies around the world”. That power played out in the financial arena, where, as Sebastian Mallaby writes, a single hedge fund - such as Soros’s Quantum Fund - “employing fewer than fifty people, might muster financial firepower comparable to a government’s”. In 1992 the Quantum Fund took on the British pound and won. “With each passing hour”, Mallaby writes, “the wealth of British taxpayers flowed into the coffers of currency traders. It was the perfect illustration of the fortune to be made from betting against governments.” Buffered by these and other forces, markets plunged and the pound was devalued. Soros channelled many of his resulting huge profits into philanthropic democratization and cultural projects in eastern Europe - without any mandate accorded by the British taxpayer. In subsequent years he turned to US concerns, investing heavily in support for African Americans and women’s and LGBTQ causes, as well as other minority causes and domestic politics.

Soros, who confesses to messianic tendencies, emerges here as a complex figure, a man who would prefer to be remembered as a philosopher king than a financier. But Socrates required his philosopher kings to spend thirty-five years in education and an additional fifteen toiling in lesser offices to learn administrative realities. Billionaires, be they Soros, Koch or Gates - not to mention Jeff Bezos, Peter Thiel or Elon Musk - rarely have any experience in government or public service, while their keen minds, mastery of new technologies and grasp of market forces tend to lend them a worrisome sense of their own omniscience.

It is the age-old question: do we invest our hopes in our flawed democracies, even as we watch voters make one disastrous blunder after another, or cede actual governance to these masters of the universe, whose power derives from the market, not the ballot box? It’s a bipartisan dilemma: Democrats may blame Republicans for promoting a neo-feudal society, but the long war of the tax code against the public sector has been waged by Democratic and Republican administrations alike. The results are clear: when, as Lila Corwin Berman writes, “the public good is placed in the hands of private entities that controlled and benefited from the market economy”, it is those private entities, not the electorate, who shape our lives. ■

Tragedy in the making

Forty years of failure to take climate action

BILL MCKIBBEN

FIRE AND FLOOD

A people's history of climate change, from 1979 to the present

EUGENE LINDEN

336pp. Allen Lane. £20 (US, Penguin, \$28).

IN MARCH, TEMPERATURES in Concordia, in eastern Antarctica, reached levels 40C above normal for three consecutive days. At the Russian research station at Vostok - known as the "South Pole of Cold" because it boasts the lowest temperatures ever recorded - the mercury beat the previous March record by 15C, itself a record for the greatest leap witnessed on Earth. And all the while, on the other side of the planet, the Russian army - funded by fossil-fuel sales and using the gas tap as its weapon against western Europe - continued to pulverize Ukraine.

As Eugene Linden makes implicitly clear in this useful history of the global warming era, both of

these events - and a million more tragedies - could have been avoided if we had taken the scientific warnings and engineering possibilities seriously a generation ago. We knew decades ago that we had to get off coal, oil and gas, but we let vested interests and inertia keep us locked in, and now we are in a desperate effort not to stop global warming, but simply to stop it short of the place where it renders civilization impossible.

Linden, who was a journalist at *Time* magazine during much of the era he describes in *Fire and Flood*, provides a fairly standard reading of the history, though he brings a particularly keen eye to the matter of where we went wrong. Readers could probably dispense with the first sixty pages. The early governmental reports on climate change during, say, the Jimmy Carter administration don't much matter because they never reached the stage of public debate. (I can say this with some confidence; my book *The End of Nature*, 1989, is usually regarded as the first on the topic for a general audience; had it been a public issue earlier, that would not have been the case.) It is with the Nasa scientist Jim Hansen's congressional testimony in 1988 that the story really begins, and it is Linden's account of the subsequent decade that really matters.

In those earliest days it really seemed as if we might respond - *Time* didn't name a Man of the Year in 1988, instead choosing Earth as its "Planet of the Year". The Republican president George H. W. Bush, promised to fight the "greenhouse effect" with "the White House effect". But the fossil-fuel industry (whose scientists had been providing in-house warnings about the pending climate catastrophe since the late 1970s) swiftly circled the wagons, building an expensive and powerful architecture of denial and disinformation.

Linden is acute in his critique of the Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the



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global scientific body that on the one hand scrambled to build an authoritative understanding of the crisis, but on the other did so in such a careful and circumscribed way that its "bland assurances took the wind out of any sense of urgency". Because it "wanted to be a big tent", the IPCC "allowed special interests first to apply direct and indirect pressure to shape the scientific consensus, and then call into question those parts of the consensus they had not been able to influence".

Linden also has appropriately harsh words for the economists of this era, especially William Nordhaus of Yale University, who won a Nobel prize for his work on climate. His early studies were arguments for inaction. In 1991 he calculated that if the planet warmed by 3C it would cost Americans a barely perceptible loss in income. This was based on his reasoning that, because almost all of the US economy happened indoors, it wouldn't suffer.

The result of oil-industry sabotage and academic error was that we missed crucial opportunities. "Had not cheap oil driven renewables to the fringes for several decades, there is no question that solar, wind, geothermal and tidal would have become economically viable much sooner." And had that happened, China might, at least to some degree, have leapfrogged coal and oil. "Billions of tons of greenhouse gases that are now in the atmosphere might not have been emitted."

Instead we have emitted more carbon dioxide since the late 1980s than during all of previous human history. And a host of oil-powered despots such as Vladimir Putin have been enriched and emboldened. The belated realization that fossil fuel stands to wreck both our planet and our politics offers us a real chance at finally taking that long-delayed action. If we act - or if we don't - any future remaining historians are likely to regard this moment in the early 2020s as the final great decision point. ■

Overkill

The destruction wreaked by the Soviet whaling industry

KATE BROWN

RED LEVIATHAN

The secret history of Soviet whaling

RYAN TUCKER JONES

304pp. University of Chicago Press. \$30.

STUDYING IN LENINGRAD IN 1987, I visited the dark and empty cafeteria in the dormitory just once. When I requested breakfast porridge, the server asked if I wanted "maslo", pointing to a vat of liquefied margarine. I declined. She muttered something about war and famine, and poured a cup over the porridge anyway, making it inedible. Reading Ryan Tucker Jones's *Red Leviathan*, I realized the margarine probably came from whale blubber pried from the oceans by Soviet ships with murderous efficiency. Over the course of the twentieth century - and primarily in the second half, when whole species of whale had been hunted to near extinction - Soviet whalers killed more than 500,000 of the planet's largest animals. Jones asks why the Soviets embarked on this irrational and destructive journey, and how they got away with it - until they didn't. One answer (worth bearing in mind in view of the latest battleground over gas pipelines and wheat fields in Ukraine) is that pride, competition and a sense of historical injustice motivated Soviet whaling far more than commercial considerations.

Russia, a land-based power, was slow to turn to whaling. In the first half of the nineteenth century it was American whalers who plied the seas off the coast of Siberia, killing bowhead, grey and right

whales. In response, Russian and later Soviet officials made some of the first arguments for whale conservation and for the protection of indigenous hunting grounds, as indigenous Siberians depended on these mammals for subsistence. Soviet scientists were also the first to recognize whale intelligence, communication and intimate familial relations. Yet, as Jones shows, the Soviets' political and scientific knowledge did not stop their taking part in the destruction of whale populations.

In the 1950s the USSR had only one modern whaling ship, while the big whaling nations, Japan and Norway, had entire fleets. The Soviets made up for the deficit by cheating. They would arrive in the Antarctic seas weeks before the hunting season officially opened. If a rival ship happened upon them, they would scurry to hide dead whales they had caught off-season behind catcher vessels, small gunboats that chased down whales. Everyone knew about the illegal whaling, but they also knew that if the Soviets walked out on the International Whaling Commission (IWC), an intergovernmental body founded in 1946 to try to conserve whale populations, the organization would fold.

Once an enterprise invests in the infrastructure of extraction, no amount of restraint or knowledge of annihilation eclipses the logic of return on investment. In the 1960s, as other whaling countries were reducing their operations, the Soviets built three whaling fleets: floating factories the size of football fields. Soviet whalers killed 40 per cent of all hunted whales during those years - thousands annually - while reporting to the IWC kills of just a few hundred in a season. The shortfall puzzled cetologists, who wondered what had happened to



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humpback migrations. Jones drums up Garrett Hardin's "tragedy of the commons" as an explanation for the unrestricted destruction. Hardin, a conservative ecologist writing during the Cold War, sought to promote private property as the apex of environmental stewardship. But the Antarctic seas were hardly a commons - spaces where people with local ecological knowledge collectively manage natural resources so that they thrive. The Soviets were lying about their catches, so the IWC's collective control of the ocean commons had no chance. Jones is simply describing extractive capitalism at its most banal.

He points out that slaughter on that scale was overkill. Whale meat was impossible to market in the USSR because most Russians would not eat it. Instead whale flesh flowed into a growing processed food industry. Bone meal fattened industrial animals. Whale blubber became margarine and lard for pastries and mayonnaise. A good portion was wasted (like my bowl of porridge). The industry operated at a loss, yet the Soviets still went whaling to show that they were modern, that production numbers were growing and that they could make brute-force technologies pay off.

Ultimately it wasn't economics or ideology but a growing spotlight on these practices that put an end to the carnage. In 1974 environmentalists called for the boycott of Soviet goods, the first ever. Soon after, Greenpeace activists began hunting a Soviet whaling fleet that was circulating off US shores, filming it just as it hauled in a dead whale and left the carcass of her calf to sink to the depths. The campaign that followed pressured the Soviets to agree to a moratorium on whale-hunting in 1987. In 1993 Russian scientists revealed the true extent of Soviet killing, information that invalidated historical estimates of whale populations. Thirty years later, as whale populations begin to revive, Ryan Tucker Jones shows the power of a handful of environmental activists on tiny inflatable Zodiac boats, pushing back against a tide of destruction. ■

The awe and terror of this new garden

How Emerson and Thoreau went walkabout

JAMES MARCUS

THE CALIFORNIA DAYS OF RALPH WALDO EMERSON
BRIAN C. WILSON

240pp. University of Massachusetts Press.
Paperback, \$26.95.

SIX WALKS

In the footsteps of Henry David Thoreau

BEN SHATTUCK

175pp. Tin House. \$22.95.



Detail of "Mount Starr King, Yosemite" by Albert Bierstadt, 1866

RALPH WALDO EMERSON had little use for tourism. The great essayist preferred to conduct his transcendental rambles from the comfort of his rocking chair in Concord, Massachusetts, where he spent most of his adult life. It's true that he crisscrossed the American heartland for decades as a fixture of the lyceum lecture circuit, but that was an economic necessity for a man whose books sold in measly numbers throughout much of his career. Travel on its own terms, for pleasure, was mostly a bust - "a fool's paradise", he declared in "Self-Reliance".

On just a few occasions, though, travel jolted Emerson back to life. In 1832, reeling from the hammer blows of his first wife's death and his abandonment of the ministry, he sailed to Europe and returned a changed man, who soon noted in his journal: "I please myself with contemplating the felicity of my present situation". By 1871 he was ripe for another rejuvenating journey. The sixty-seven-year-old author had just delivered a series of lectures at Harvard called "The Natural History of the Intellect", which had been a notable flop. Stung by this failure, and anxious about his fading memory and command of language, he was soon persuaded to join a healing expedition to the west. The idea, Emerson informed his friend Thomas Carlyle in a letter, was to "carry me off to California, the Yosemite, the Mammoth trees, and the Pacific".

This trip, which was organized by the railroad baron John Murray Forbes, lasted just six weeks. It was, in other words, a brief chapter in a long, complicated, spiritually (if not geographically) restless existence, which Brian C. Wilson has brought to life in *The California Days of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. As he notes, the travellers profited from a brief shining moment in the history of American infrastructure. Although the recently completed transcontinental railroad had finally made such journeys practical, the flood of tourists to California had not yet begun. Emerson could travel in comfort, surrounded by friends and family, while still enjoying the solitude he so valued.

He could also observe, from the window of his Pullman carriage, the nation he had once described as a "poem in our eyes", whose "ample geography dazzles the imagination". The Nevada desert reminded Emerson "of the Bible and Asia", while

his exposure to the redwoods at Yosemite (where he declined to have one of the giant trees named after himself) prompted an awed epigram: "The greatest wonder is that we can see these trees and not wonder more".

Yet some of the most telling encounters, Wilson reminds us, were with human beings. In Salt Lake City, Utah, Emerson paid a call on Brigham Young, the president and prophet of the Mormon Church. He was impressed by his host, a stubby man with a damp reddish comber, and later declared him a "sufficient ruler & perhaps civilizer of his kingdom of blockheads". Still, he failed to recognize the ways in which Young's enterprise ran parallel to his own: they were both the Yankee founders of religious movements, one predicated on individualism and the other on what Wilson calls a "rigorous, theocratic communitarianism that was designed to last into eternity".

Emerson's meeting with the pioneering conservationist John Muir was similarly shot through with ambivalence. The young, hirsute, hero-worshipping naturalist struck him as perhaps *too* devoted to nature. Muir had literalized Emerson's poetic tirades against the madding crowd, living in a kind of man-sized birdhouse in Yosemite and sulking when his idol refused to bed down outdoors on a pile of branches. What he lacked was Emerson's gift for binocular vision - his tendency to turn every thought on its head. That was, after all, what enabled Emerson to view California itself as both a paradise and a potential disaster area, whose ethnic diversity might well drive off Anglo-Saxon paladins like himself.

"There is an awe and terror lying over this new garden", Emerson wrote, "all empty as yet of any adequate people, yet with this assured future in American hands." Hoping for a Yankee diaspora that never quite materialized, he seems to have envisioned a balmier New England with oranges and extra sunlight. This was not a shrewd reading of history or demographics. It was hardly a stretch, however, for a man who always viewed the natural landscape as a projection of the self, and Wilson effectively conveys Emerson's cultural myopia, along with its late-Victorian context.

Emerson's friend, disciple and occasional antagonist Henry David Thoreau was a less sedentary

creature. He had a horror of remaining indoors, which he vanquished by walking, preferably away from humanity. "I can easily walk ten, fifteen, twenty, any number of miles", he insisted, "commencing at my own door, without going by any house, without crossing a road except where the mink and fox do." In *Six Walks: In the footsteps of Henry David Thoreau*, the painter and essayist Ben Shattuck takes the baton from his worthy predecessor. Sometimes he literally retraces one of his hero's extended strolls - along, say, the outer beaches of Cape Cod, which Thoreau traversed several times between 1849 and 1855. Despite his reputation as a no-frills woodsman, Thoreau brought substantial gear on these walks, including a parasol, sewing materials and a plum cake. Shattuck, who departed with little more than a hunk of cheddar cheese, describes him as a "country saunterer, handsomely dressed and carrying with him all the items for misadventure, like a flowery battleship".

Shattuck's Cape Cod expedition was a mixed bag. At the time of his departure he was coping with a bad break-up, stuck in a morass of "doubt, fear, shame, and sadness". As he studied the detritus on the beach, including a dead loon, a bunch of Legos and an assortment of baseball hats, he also recognized the truth of Thoreau's epithet for the place - a "vast morgue". His attempt to commune with the dead, however, was less successful. When he located the oysterman's cottage where Thoreau had spent the night nearly two centuries earlier, he "felt no connection, no insight, no sudden power". His blistered feet had merely carried him one step further into disillusionment.

Such irony is the occupational hazard of a book like this. How seldom does the present - frenetic, footsore, knowledge-glutted - live up to the past! Yet we sometimes connect in surprising ways. Shattuck's second walk, up the steep slopes of Mount Katahdin in Maine, took place in the middle of a health crisis, while he was battling Lyme disease with a nearly disabling course of antibiotics. His rickety physical condition somehow brought him closer to his predecessor, if only because Thoreau was highly suspicious of his own body, noting in his account of the ascent: "This matter to which I am bound has become so strange to me".

On at least one occasion, at Walden Pond, Shattuck and his avatar threaten to merge. Entering the replica of Thoreau's cabin, the exhausted author slumps into a chair - and is immediately mistaken for a historical re-enactor, ready to spout platitudes about growing beans or civil disobedience. Horrified, he beats a quick retreat, wondering whether his misanthropic-seeming exit might actually be in character.

In the end, though, Shattuck recognizes that the best homages are often indirect. Hence his decision, halfway through *Six Walks*, to deviate from his fealty to Thoreau's experience. His rambles in the second part of the book are more loosely connected to his predecessor, or not at all. They are sometimes excursions into his own past - or into a more blissful future. We learn that ten years have elapsed between the two halves: Shattuck is no longer the wretched Thoreauvian hermit of his earlier days, but a happy, married man with a child on the way.

He wonders at one point whether his old misery made him more receptive to the poetry of the natural world. "Was being troubled a requirement of seeing meaning?" he asks himself. "If I felt content, was there something that seeped away from the clouds and the dune grass?" Perhaps alienated human beings do bring something special - an intensity of attention and tenderness - to the surrounding landscape. But in the course of his beautiful and delicate book, Shattuck seems to have gained more than he has lost. It was Thoreau who declared that habitual walkers were "prepared to send back our embalmed hearts only as relics to our desolate kingdoms". The image is clever, and also sad, an emblem of Thoreau's otherworldly isolation. Yet one of the lessons that Ben Shattuck took from his hero was to dwell among the living, and to judge from *Six Walks*, his heart is beating nicely to this very day. ■

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Muir had literalized Emerson's poetic tirades against the madding crowd, living in a kind of man-sized birdhouse in Yosemite

James Marcus is the author of *Amazonia, 2004*, and six translations from the *Italian*. He is working on his next book, *Glad to the Brink of Fear: A portrait of Ralph Waldo Emerson in sixteen installments*



Harlem shadows

A portrait of a Black revolutionary

DOUGLAS FIELD

CLAUDE MCKAY

The making of a Black Bolshevik

WINSTON JAMES

464pp. Columbia University Press.

Paperback, £25 (US \$32).

I WISH the *Times [Literary] Supplement* or *Athenaeum* would give me a review”, Claude McKay said in 1920 after the publication of his third volume of poetry, *Spring in New Hampshire*. In a letter to a friend, the philosopher Charles Kay Ogden, McKay complained that British literary magazines “give much space to all kinds of American poetry but ignore me altogether!”. The previous year he had made a name for himself in radical transatlantic circles with the publication of “If We Must Die”, still his best-known poem. Penned during the “Red Summer” of 1919, the poem ends with the lines: “Like men we’ll face the murderous, cowardly pack, / Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!”. It became, in the words of the historian J. A. Rogers, the “Marseillaise of the American Negro”. Born in Jamaica in 1889, McKay moved to the United States in 1912. “Gripped by the lust to wander and wonder”, he spent just over a year in London between 1919 and 1921, later travelling to Soviet Russia, continental Europe and North Africa before returning to the US, where he lived until his death in 1948.

As the Harlem Renaissance gained momentum during the 1920s, McKay became a central figure, albeit in absentia. His fourth collection, *Harlem Shadows* (1922), received glowing notices, while his first - and most successful - novel, *Home to Harlem* (1928), a celebration of Black working-class culture, famously scandalized W. E. B. Du Bois, the leading man of African American letters. (Du Bois claimed the experience of reading the book made him feel “like taking a bath”.) *Banjo* (1929), a picaresque tale of Black dockworkers in Marseille, and a sequel of sorts, influenced writers and intellectuals far beyond McKay’s native Jamaica or his adoptive United States. For the French-Martinican poet Aimé Césaire, one of

the founders of the Négritude movement, McKay’s novel was “one of the first works in which an author spoke of the Negro and gave him a certain literary dignity”.

Notwithstanding his influence on coteries of the Black intelligentsia in the 1930s, scholarship on McKay - with the exception of Gary Edward Holcomb’s fine study, *Claude McKay, Code Name Sasha* (2007) - has been mostly unwilling to engage with McKay as a Black, queer and transnational writer. He is usually glossed as a key figure of the Harlem Renaissance - as mischievous as Zora Neale Hurston, more politicized than Du Bois. In the last few years, however, McKay studies have flowered, prompted by editions of two previously unpublished novels, *Amiable with Big Teeth* (2017) and *Romance in Marseille* (2020). Another biography is due in the next two years, along with a selection of McKay’s poems and the first significant collection of the author’s letters. The reasons for his hitherto uncertain place in history - his queerness, radical politics and Black internationalism - now make him a rich contemporary subject.

Winston James’s earlier book *A Fierce Hatred of Injustice: Claude McKay’s Jamaica and his poetry of rebellion* (2001) explored the ways in which the poet’s early publications, *Songs of Jamaica* and *Constab Ballads*, penned in Jamaican creole, were formative Caribbean texts. Now, in *Claude McKay: The Making of a Black Bolshevik*, James tackles the first thirty years of his subject’s life, from his upbringing in rural Jamaica to his migration to the US and trip to Britain. McKay called the Russian Revolution “the greatest event in the history of humanity”, but so far, James contends, there has been no appraisal of his “political philosophy ... his world view”. To remedy this, the early chapters trace the roots of McKay’s family, peasants who became prosperous farmers, and the poet’s emerging awareness of colonial and economic injustice - of, in James’s words, “the peculiar salience of colour and its imbrication with class [that] persisted in the post-slavery period”. In contrast to scholarship that stresses the importance of the British author Walter Jekyll in McKay’s political and intellectual development, James makes a strong case for considering Uriah Theo, the poet’s older brother, as a key influence in his political and cultural evolution. (McKay was tutored

Grigory Zinoviev, Claude McKay and Nikolai Bukharin, 1923

“**His queerness, radical politics and Black internationalism now make him a rich contemporary subject**

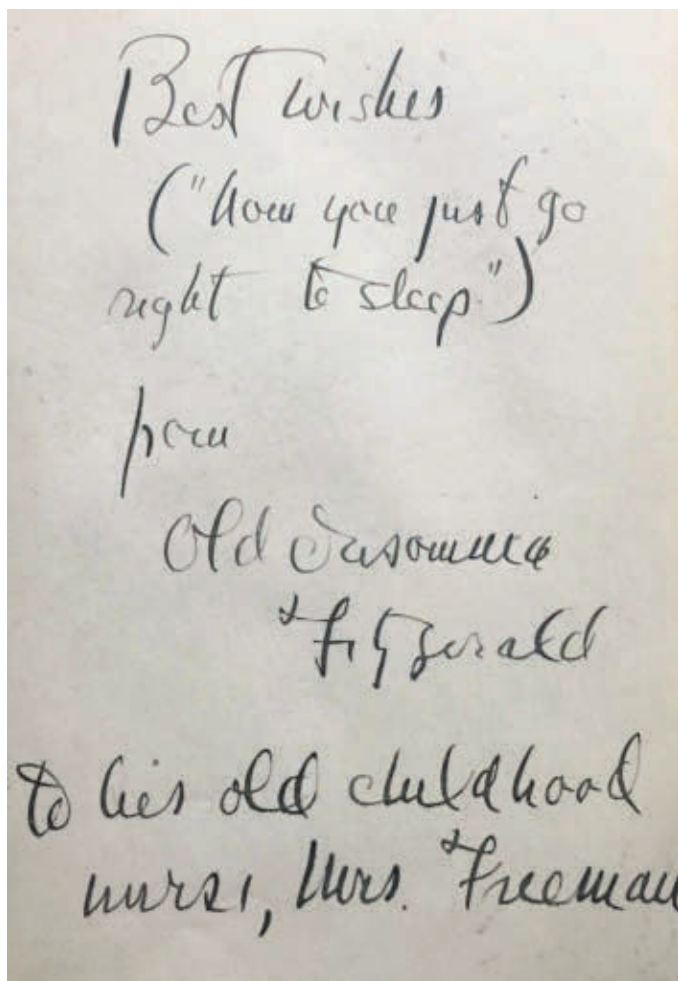
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by his brother, whom the Jamaican press deemed to be “one of the most radical of his generation”.) After a short spell working in a match factory, McKay joined the Jamaica Constabulary, a job that he despised, but which furnished him with material for *Constab Ballads*.

To understand McKay, James says, we need to appreciate the political economy of Jamaica, the struggles of its peasants and the rapid urbanization that took place on the island during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. To that end he provides a detailed account of banana cultivation and taxation. There are many passages in this vein, all meticulously researched, but they displace the human subject at their supposed centre. “Our interest is not in the poems as such,” James explains, “but in what they reveal about McKay’s political thought and feelings.” Such an approach flattens the craft and is at odds with the poet’s views on culture and politics, which chimed with those of Leon Trotsky in *Literature and Revolution* (1923): “Every peasant is a peasant, but not everyone can express himself”. In his 1937 autobiography, *A Long Way from Home*, McKay said: “I cannot be convinced of a proletarian, or a bourgeois, or any special literature or art ... whenever literature and art are good and great they leap over narrow group barriers and periods to make a universal appeal”.

McKay left Jamaica a committed freethinker, atheist and socialist, with a lifelong commitment to the advancement of women’s rights - but none of this prepared him for the “manifest, implacable hate of my race” that greeted him in Alabama. McKay’s experience at Tuskegee and Kansas State Agricultural College had a profound effect on his ideology. As James explains, “exposure to this virulent and pervasive strain of racism heightened his political consciousness and quickened his radicalization”. Fabian socialism, which fed his early politics, was sloughed off in favour of “an internationalist revolutionary socialism”. McKay skipped graduation and moved to New York City in 1914; entering Harlem was “like entering into a paradise of my own people”. After the First World War he became more radical; his beliefs manifested in the “openness, and the uninhibited rage and sorrow” of his poetry. When the *Nation* condemned Du Bois for urging African Americans - including returning Black veterans - to fight for their rights, McKay’s reply was unequivocal: “I am deeply interested in knowing what reasonable course it would advocate for the American Negro in helping to destroy the national pastime of lynching”. McKay was not the only person of colour to embrace the radical left, but he “had the added ability and distinction to give his ideas on Bolshevism poetic expression”.

McKay’s stay in London began with, as he put it, “the greatest difficulty” in securing lodgings; it was marked by repeated discrimination, and he was “badly mauled” on one occasion. Within weeks of his arrival in 1919, McKay was at work on Sylvia Pankhurst’s newspaper, the *Workers’ Dreadnought*, where he wrote articles on racism among the British working class, also publishing poems and book reviews. Recalling his time in this “nest of extreme radicalism”, he described the Internationalist Socialist Club as a hotbed of “Socialists, Communists, anarchists, syndicalists ... scribblers [and] editors of little radical sheets”. London was the crucible in which McKay’s “Pan-Africanist and anti-imperialist identification” took shape. His time in England destroyed any sense of his Britishness and he formed a profound interest in African history and culture. The book ends with the poet sailing back to New York from Southampton in 1921. McKay’s most productive years of engagement lay ahead of him, and may warrant a second volume by Winston James. (Such an undertaking may well succeed in replacing Wayne Cooper’s excellent biography, *Claude McKay: Rebel sojourner in the Harlem Renaissance*, 1987, as the standard biography.) What is needed now, besides research, is a portrait of McKay in his full maturity that captures his iconoclastic style, his political fervour and his considerable wit. ■



Medical advances

How F. Scott Fitzgerald's nurse inspired a fictional romance

ANNE MARGARET DANIEL

ON NOVEMBER 3, 1934, the *Saturday Evening Post* published "Her Last Case", a short story by F. Scott Fitzgerald. His relationship with the magazine was coming to an end. The Great Depression and Fitzgerald's personal difficulties were to blame. From late 1934 to the end of 1935, he published just a few more stories: his wife, Zelda Sayre Fitzgerald, remained hospitalized for mental illness at the Sheppard-Pratt Hospital in Baltimore, and Fitzgerald himself was either hospitalized or needing care at home as his drinking intensified. Many of the stories from the early to mid-1930s have, as a consequence, medical settings, or feature doctors and nurses as characters. The nurses minister to damaged, distressed, sick but still attractive men. Such wish fulfilment is most apparent in the series Fitzgerald began about a student nurse nicknamed Trouble; in "Nightmare (Fantasy in Black)", much revised, and unpublished until 2017; and in "Her Last Case".

"Her Last Case" is a quasi-romance - a pastiche of past and present of the sort Fitzgerald managed so well in *The Great Gatsby*. A beautiful young nurse named Bette Weaver, "born and bred in a desolate little streak of wind and rain on the Pennsylvania border of Maryland", arrives at the Virginian plantation home of a sick man, Ben Dragonet. It will be her last case, for she is engaged to an earnest young doctor and about to give up her profession. Dragonet is a wounded veteran of the First World War, but the ghosts of the distant past and the Civil War have done the real damage. His ex-wife (also his cousin), an irresponsible woman who feeds on Ben's goodness "like a vampire feeding on his blood", abandons their young daughter, Amalie, to his care. Bette wants out of this turbulent situation, but her fiancé insists she see it through - an error, for by now she has fallen in love with Dragonet. "Her Last Case" is available online only behind a paywall, via the *Saturday Evening Post* website, and is hard to find in print: it last appeared in the Cambridge Fitzgerald volume *A Change of Class* (2016), in hardback, and can currently be obtained for about £100.

The setting - the town of "Warrenburg" - was inspired by several trips Fitzgerald made to Middleburg, Virginia, in the summer of 1934. Zelda was in hospital and their daughter, Scottie, was staying with Fitzgerald's cousin Cecilia and her family in Norfolk, Virginia. After a drunken week in New York in early July, Fitzgerald was gathered up by his friend and editor Maxwell Perkins and taken south. Perkins's adoring cousin Elizabeth Lemmon owned a 1770s plantation in Middleburg called Welbourne. She took Fitzgerald and Perkins on a tour of Civil War monuments and battlefields, driving as far as Appomattox, where the war ended in April 1865. Fitzgerald returned in August and September, and sent Lemmon a draft of "Her Last Case" in early September: "This is the story that I got out of 'Welbourne,' with my novelist instinct to make copy out of social experience. I don't think for a moment that this does any justice to 'Welbourne' but it might amuse you as conveying the sharp impressions that the place made on me". Lemmon lived on the grounds until shortly before her death at 100. In Fitzgerald's Ledger - the detailed chronicle of his earnings and life events - he confirms that he wrote "Her Last Case" in August 1934, in between visits to Welbourne. In the same chronicle he makes a number of allusions to people and events that have long puzzled scholars.

He mentions a "collapse at home" in Baltimore after the trip to New York in July. Then comes a reference to the "first Welbourne trip", annotated thus: "Wolfe + Perkins" and "Gallant Pelham". Thomas Wolfe had been invited to Middleburg, but stayed in New York. John Pelham was a young Confederate officer who died in the Battle of Kelly's Ford, forty miles south of Welbourne. Pelham, given his posthumous nickname by his commanding general, figures prominently in "Her Last Case." In August Fitzgerald mentions "Another Welbourne trip" and "Hospital again. The nurse who was the doctor's wife ... 'Her Last Case.' Two days only in hospital (three?)".

Scholars have assumed "the nurse who was the doctor's wife" to be a mistake on Fitzgerald's part, since Bette Weaver, in "Her Last Case", is engaged to a doctor, but not yet married. It's no mistake. There was indeed a nurse who was a doctor's wife, and she was Fitzgerald's nurse at the time. Her name

F. Scott Fitzgerald's inscription to Carma Kaufman Freeman; Carma in her nurse's uniform

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Scholars have assumed 'the nurse who was the doctor's wife' to be a mistake on Fitzgerald's part. It's no mistake

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was Carma Kaufman Freeman, and the inscriptions in the books Fitzgerald gave her, still in her family's possession, shed fascinating light on "Her Last Case."

Carma Kaufman was born in Baltimore in 1904. Her family owned the Kaufman Beef Company, a specialist butchers that stayed in business until the 1980s. She graduated from Johns Hopkins Hospital Training School for Nurses on May 26, 1927, and shortly thereafter married George Freeman, a young doctor from Spokane, Washington, who was a medical student at Hopkins. George did his residency in New York City at St. Luke's Hospital, and the couple moved to Seattle. But the Freemans, and particularly Carma, returned to Baltimore often during the early 1930s. There she tended to her younger brother Gordon, who had tuberculosis. While visiting her family, Carma worked part-time as a private nurse at Hopkins. Graduation photographs show a serious young professional woman; the family portraits of her from the same period give better indications of her warmth and charm.

Fitzgerald was her patient in Baltimore in the summer of 1934. Her copy of *Tender Is the Night* reads "For Carma Freeman with the gratitude + best wishes of the author F. Scott Fitzgerald, Marburg 1934." (The Marburg Building was the impressive domed brick centrepiece of the Johns Hopkins Hospital, built in 1889.) In the copy of *This Side of Paradise* he also gave her, Fitzgerald let his sense of humour show. He liked wordplay and was an impressive physical comic. The inscription to Carma in his first novel reads: "Best wishes ('Now you just go right to sleep') from Old Insomniac Fitzgerald to his old childhood nurse, Mrs. Freeman". Ill or well, Fitzgerald was indeed a chronic insomniac, as we learn in "The Crack-Up" (1936), his essay for *Esquire*.

Carma received letters from Fitzgerald, but didn't keep them. She did, however, save an untitled poem that he wrote out for her. It is undated, on letterhead paper from "Cedar Top", in Ruxton, Maryland, the summer place of D. K. Esté Fisher, Sr., a Baltimore lawyer, and his wife, Sally. Fisher, Jr. was an architect who coincided with Fitzgerald at Princeton. The author was possibly a guest at Cedar Top for a late-summer party, or maybe an overnight house guest, availing himself of the stationery. The poem is "The Other Side of the Moon," by the American novelist and poet Edgar Fawcett (1847-1904). Published in *Songs of Doubt and Dream* (1891), "The Other Side of the Moon" was much anthologized in the early 1900s. It is a conversation between an adult and an eight-year-old girl about the far side of the moon, from which heaven may be seen.

Why *this* sentimental poem? Perhaps because Fitzgerald and Carma had discussed Scottie and his worries for her; the little girl with golden hair in "The Other Side of the Moon" seems to recall his daughter, as does Amalie in "Her Last Case." Perhaps, too, because he and Carma had spoken of the first child she and her husband were expecting. Carma never spoke in depth about her conversations with Fitzgerald; she took patient confidentiality seriously. But when Carma showed her grandson the inscription in *This Side of Paradise*, she confirmed that "Now you just go right to sleep" was what she usually said to Fitzgerald after he'd taken his medicine. In "Her Last Case" Bette Weaver similarly orders her patient: "You must go to bed".

Did Fitzgerald send Carma a copy of "Her Last Case"? Impossible to say. We know that he identified with his characters, and particularly the leading men. As he wrote in his *Notebooks*, "I am an only child. Gatsby my imaginary eldest brother, Amory my younger, Anthony my worry. Dick my comparatively good brother but all of them far from home." Surely the elegant shoes and well-tailored clothes of Virginia gentleman Ben Dragonet appealed to him. Surely, too, Fitzgerald turned his appreciation for the nurse who cared for him at Hopkins - but who, as a happy young wife, wasn't at all interested in her alcoholic patient - into fiction. ■

Thanks to Carma Freeman's grandson George for sharing Carma's story, and for the images used here



Till we have built Jerusalem

Mining landscape art for political perspectives

CLARE GRIFFITHS

RADICAL LANDSCAPES

Tate Liverpool, until September 4

RADICAL LANDSCAPES

Art, identity and activism

DARREN PIH AND LAURA BRUNI, EDITORS

288pp. Tate Publishing. £25.

WHAT ARE WE TO DO with landscape? For so long turning land into a view was what landscape art was about. Artists in recent decades have often been more inclined to make art from the land itself, offering interventions and repurposings, documenting the experience of being in a location and their own relationship to it. Even the term “landscape” has become ambiguous, having slipped between reference to place and ideas about its representation. Tate Liverpool’s *Radical Landscapes* exhibition occupies that ambiguity, pushing the bounds of what landscape art might be while also exploring the British countryside as a setting for concerns about heritage, nationality, race and belonging. In ditching any purely decorative or complacent associations with landscape art, the curators have prioritized political statement and engagement: landscape art intertwined with and contributing to trespass, protest and change.

The first object to greet the viewer is a faux road sign: a work from 2019 in which Jeremy Deller offers no destination to the traveller, but simply a road number - A303 - and, instead of a place name, the statement “Built by immigrants”. Roads, and the building of roads, feature prominently in the exhibition as do questions about who lives in these landscapes, and to whom those landscapes belong. The exhibition was developed during the pandemic, when concerns about access to open space became urgent; themes of access, control and use of land, and the relationship between landscape and identity, provide an interpretative framework for works dating largely from the twentieth century to the present day.

This is scarcely a new approach to looking at depictions of landscape. On one wall early in the exhibition, John Berger expounds his ideas on how messages about private property and ownership underlie seemingly straightforward landscapes, as illustrated in his analysis of Thomas Gainsborough’s portrait of “Mr and Mrs Andrews”, posed amid their rolling acres. Berger presented this way of seeing in his landmark television series in 1972, but it still stands up as a radical reading, and no one has articulated these ideas more forcefully. More recently landscape has been mined for hidden narratives about race and colonial exploitation, rather than for stories about class and landed privilege. Ingrid Pollard’s “Oceans Apart” (1989) assembles family photographs of seaside holidays alongside documentary material on the history of slavery and migration. In “Whop, Cawbaby” (2018), Tanoa Sasraku films herself on the wilds of Dartmoor with a flag drawing on her Ghanaian heritage. Some of the most striking works in the exhibition are those that reflect on the merging of culture and identity. In “Double Grille” (2008), Hurvin Anderson overlays a rich green ground with ornate patterning that evokes security fencing in his parents’ homeland, Jamaica. Traditions in Islamic art are referenced in Anwar Jalal Shemza’s “Apple Tree” (1962). Anthea Hamilton adorns a Japanese kimono with pictures of native British grasses (2015).

There are some new works included here, among them Delaine Le Bas’s spectacular photographic self-portrait, “Rinkeni Pani (Beautiful Water)” (2022), in which she depicts herself in woodland, in a glorious multicoloured hooped dress. But one surprising feature of the exhibition is that some of the best-known examples of historical landscape art in the Tate collection fade into the background. It is not the well-known and often reproduced landscapes by Constable or Nash or Ravilious that immediately catch the eye, but the banners from the women’s camp at Greenham Common, Deller’s neon take on the chalk-cut giant at Cerne Abbas, or his smiley emojis drawn on hay bales, and Tacita Dean’s vast black-and-white oak tree (“Majesty”, 2006). Some of the installations literally cry out for attention, as house music blares from blurry film montages about rural raves. In the midst of so many bold statements it is sometimes the quieter pieces that intrigue: the

“Green Tree Form: Interior of Woods” by Graham Sutherland, 1940, from the exhibition under review

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Barbara Hepworth said that there is no landscape without the human figure

Clare Griffiths is Professor of Modern History at Cardiff University

morphing colours of Yuri Pattison’s “sun[set] provisioning” (2019), that tracks levels of pollution in the air and transposes the information digitally in a vision of sea and sky; the slow rotations of a silver birch trunk in David Medalla’s “Sand Machine Bahag - Hari Trance #1” (1963-2015), forever drawing circles through fine white sand.

Barbara Hepworth said that there is no landscape without the human figure, and embodiment and the process of inscribing oneself in the landscape feature prominently in the later section of the exhibition. Connections between the land and gender and sexuality are traced through works such as Claude Cahun’s photographic self-portraits and Gluck’s painting “Flora’s Cloak” (c.1923), in which a naked figure leaps wide-mouthed over curving green and gold fields, a dense fabric of flowers at its back. Stonehenge, Cerne Abbas and Avebury recur as sites that resonate with ideas about spirituality and connection to place. But more than anything the exhibition revels in the visual strangeness of people’s engagement with the countryside. A group of photographs by Homer Sykes from the 1970s document idiosyncratic English local customs: the King on horseback at Garland Day in Castleton, Derbyshire, is almost entirely obscured by flowers as his mount is led down a wet country road by a man in a macintosh smoking a pipe. In newly invented rituals, costumed kinsmen of the Kibbo Kift were photographed by Angus McBean in 1929, processing up the slope of Silbury Hill as if scaling an Egyptian pyramid.

The sheer variety of the selection makes for a stimulating and thought-provoking show. But *Radical Landscapes* is a complicated exhibition, and it is not always clear how all these works belong together: strange, vibrantly coloured papier-mâché botanical models from the beginning of the twentieth century, and a mesmerizing and mysterious set of black-and-white studio photographs of fruit and vegetables, resonate visually with the surrealist statements around them, but it is difficult to view them as part of an art of landscape or of radicalism. The Victorian Marianne North’s exquisite illustrations of exotic flora in their native settings also sit uneasily as art that celebrates empire rather than offering a critique of it. The activist artist Gustav Metzger’s “Liquid Crystal Environment” (1965) occupies an entire room, but its projections of shifting colour patterns take us into very different landscapes of science and flux: his “Till we have built Jerusalem in England’s green and pleasant land” (1998), with its dramatic frame of caterpillar tracks, fits much more directly with some of the exhibition’s dominant themes, alongside documentary photographs of protests against the building of the M3 through Twyford Down in the early 1990s and more recent images of activism in the face of HS2.

Cabinets filled with displays of archival material offer a social history of engagement with the countryside, complementing the artistic explorations of trespass and belonging. The first part of the show, meanwhile, relating to the protests around Greenham Common, often strays into a history of the women’s movement and a survey of the atomic age, rather than questions about land. Contributors to the accompanying book have taken their cue from the objects on show, but the personal and fragmented nature of the commentaries tends to reinforce the impression of a project that is trying to encompass many different things.

The final room, in a section on “radical gardening”, creates the sensation of walking out into an open courtyard. Ruth Ewan’s “Back to the Fields” (2015 and 2022) represents radical gardening indeed: a living installation that illustrates the revolutionary calendar created under the French republic in the 1790s. Each day of the reimagined twelve months has its own object attached, a peach or turnip, a shovel or sieve, a lettuce or moss, all set in borders around the room. The whole display is an entrancing diorama, a product of ingenuity and some careful tending. There is a feeling of calm, despite the crowded juxtaposition of the symbols of these republican days. ■

Letting magic in on daylight

A hundred years of painting *en plein air*

RUTH SCURR

TRUE TO NATURE

Open-air painting in Europe 1780–1870

Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, until August 29



“Corot at his Easel, Crécy-en-Brie” by Eugène Decan, 1874

TRU E TO NATURE is a perfectly timed exhibition. The European trend for landscape painting *en plein air* between 1780 and 1870 resonates with the resurgence of interest in the natural world that the lockdowns inspired, as well as contemporary concern for our threatened habitat. The exhibition of more than 100 oil sketches is thematically arranged across three of the Fitzwilliam Museum’s sizeable rooms. Academic and curatorial interest in the “contours of a discrete genre coming into focus” dates back to an original exhibition of *plein air* sketches at the Fitzwilliam and the Royal Academy in 1980 and 1981, *Painting from Nature: The tradition of open-air oil sketching from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries*. Philip Conisbee, then a young history of art professor at the University of Leicester, wrote the catalogue entries and spent the next forty years participating in the rediscovery of the *plein air* tradition. The new exhibition and accompanying catalogue continue the work of Conisbee and others. The result is a vibrant celebration of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century artists who packed up their materials and set off into the fields to get better acquainted with nature and paint.

Landscape oil sketches, painted direct from nature, were often produced as *aide-mémoires* for more formal compositions, not for exhibition or sale. The opportunity to purchase paint in tubes, as opposed to mixing it in studios, made painting outdoors straight onto canvas considerably easier after 1841. *True to Nature* opens with the portable paintbox of Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot (1796-1875). The broken string handle and tightly squeezed tubes of oils look as if they were used only yesterday. Inside the lid are carefully arranged miniature oil sketches: land, sea, skylines and a woman brooding over a bunch of cut flowers. Hung alongside is a portrait from 1874 of Corot, box in hand, painting in the open air, by his friend Eugène Decan. The sense of male camaraderie, an artist painting an artist painting a tree on a boys’ day out, is countered by the next exhibit: Louise-Joséphine Sarazin de Belmont’s “Views of the Pyrenees”, nine miniatures framed together in a way that visually echoes the interior of Corot’s paintbox.

Sarazin de Belmont (1790-1870) was barred from the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris, which did not admit women until 1897. Instead she studied under Pierre-Henri de Valenciennes, the landscape painter whose influential treatise *Éléments de perspective pratique à l’usage des artistes* (1799-1800) elevated the academic status of *plein air* painting by codifying approaches to *études d’après nature*. He urged artists to plunge into nature as a man might into a river on a hot summer day - and Sarazin de Belmont

followed his advice. She has three further paintings in the exhibition: “The Roman Theater at Taormina”, “Grotto in a Rocky Landscape” and “Rocky Coast with Bathers”.

“The Roman Theater at Taormina” is one of many paintings here in the tradition of the Grand Tour. It is displayed together with “Scene Near Naples” by Thomas Jones (1743-1803), “View Near Naples” by Simon Denis (1755-1812) and “View of the Bridge and the Town of Cava, Kingdom of Naples” by Jean-Joseph-Xavier Bidauld (1758-1846). Paintings of Rome and of the Roman Campagna dominate the first of the exhibition’s three large rooms. There are two remarkably similar views of Santa Trinità dei Monti, the church at the top of the Spanish Steps. Louis Dupré (1789-1837), painted the view in high summer, André Giroux (1801-79), in winter, with a rare dusting of snow. Both paintings were probably done from within the artists’ bedrooms during residencies at the French Academy at the Villa Medici. One of the exhibition’s curators, Mary Morton, imagines Giroux waking up and “hurrying to transcribe [the snow] before the sun melts it all away”.

Valenciennes became professor of perspective at the École des Beaux-Arts in 1812 and created the Prix de Rome for historical landscape painting four years later. He included a chapter on aerial perspective in his treatise, with separate sections on sky, clouds, vapours, fog, rain and storms. His “View of Rome” is half skyscape and his “Study of Clouds over the Roman Campagna” is about four-fifths sky. The first room of the exhibition ends with “Skies and Effects”. John Constable, who coined the term “skying”, has five paintings on display, two of them contrasting skylines: “Cloud Study: Stormy Sunset” (1821-2) and “Sky Study with a Shaft of Sunlight” (1822). A copy of the meteorologist and chemist Luke Howard’s *Essay on the Modifications of Clouds* (1803), which gave us the names cirrus, stratus, cumulus and nimbus, is included as “the first successful way to classify” clouds.

Chapter eight of Valenciennes’s treatise is on the application of linear perspective in painting and includes sections on bodies of water, rocks, volcanoes and trees. The second and third rooms of the exhibition focus on these subjects. Although Valenciennes’s historical painting “Eruption of Vesuvius Starting on 24 August 79 AD” (1813) is not included (perhaps because he relied very little on his sketches to produce it), there are depictions of Vesuvius erupting by Giuseppe de Nittis (1872), Johan Christian Clausen Dahl (1820) and Anicet-Charles-Gabriel Lemonnier (1779), together with paintings of the volcano in a less dramatic state by Giroux (c.1827) and Jones (c.1778). The years 1780-1870 were ones of immense political upheaval,

“Corot at his Easel, Crécy-en-Brie” by Eugène Decan, 1874

“Claude Lorrain liked to lie in the fields from daybreak to sunset to help him penetrate nature”

ending in the establishment of the French Third Republic and the Franco-Prussian war, but looking at the display of fragments collected from Vesuvius in 1794 - mineralized iron lock, window glass, carbonified bread and scoria - the revolutionary Terror in Paris and the death of Maximilien Robespierre seem very far away. None of the bloody battles, executions or regime changes of those years intrude on an exhibition devoted to the natural world.

As curator Jane Munro points out, “painting outdoors could be a solitary activity, communing directly with the natural world. But it could also be a sociable one, with groups of artists painting together on the same site”. She mentions the naysayers, among them Edgar Degas, who thought the *plein air* painting trend misguided: “the air one sees in paintings ... is not the air we can breathe”, he remarked. Discussing Claude Lorrain’s *Pastoral Landscape with Lake Albano and Castel Gandolfo*, included in the exhibition despite being dated 1639, Munro explains that the artist liked to lie in the fields from daybreak to sunset “to help him ‘penetrate’ nature” and represent it accurately. The final painting was done back in Lorrain’s studio, with field studies of light and colour to hand. Lorrain is widely considered the father of *plein air* painting.

Sarazin de Belmont’s four contributions, together with “Misty Landscape” by Rosa Bonheur (1822-99), are the only works attributed to women in an exhibition of seventy artists and 118 paintings. This is not a complaint, just a fact. As Virginia Woolf wrote, “for most of history, Anonymous was a woman”, and perhaps the splendid unattributed paintings in *True to Nature* - “Clouds Passing through a Valley”, “A Terrace on the Isle of Capri”, “The Weeping Rock”, “Study of a Tree” - were also by women. Even so, the overwhelming impression is that the *plein air* painters, alone or in groups, were mostly men with academic accreditation and support.

The curators have commissioned a wide range of responses to the exhibition, which are displayed on viewpoint boards alongside the paintings. Participants in the Fitzwilliam’s Age Well initiative, for example, reflect on two depictions of a beech wood with gypsies by J. M. W. Turner: “I see their majesties, the energy of the trees. They are living things like us”. Liz Hide, director of the Sedgwick Museum of Earth Sciences in Cambridge, reacts to Wilhelm Kyhn’s “Landscape in the Haute Savoie, with an Artist Working in the Open Air”: “This painting captures so much of the geological history of this part of the French Alps, where sediments accumulated on the bed of a warm sea were scraped up, stacked up and folded like a crumpled rug as Africa and Europe collided”. It is almost impossible to spot the artist against the rocks.

The final room is devoted to trees. Constable’s “Salisbury” (possibly 1829) is a familiar painting seen anew in this context: the brilliance of the artist’s perspective and positioning of the cathedral spire to the extreme left of the painting, almost lost among the trees. An etching from the series “Delineations of the General Character, Ramifications and Foliage of Forest Trees” (1789) by John Robert Cozens is displayed with a label quoting Constable’s remark that Cozens’s sentimental portrayal of trees is “all poetry”.

Visitors leave *True to Nature* through the last room of the Fitzwilliam’s concurrent exhibition, *Hockney’s Eye*. The room, which becomes a pivot between the two shows, displays the artist’s hypnotic “Woldgate Woods, Winter, 2010”: nine synchronized digital videos, a mosaic of images representing a journey along a road in East Yorkshire. Hockney argues that “with this technique I could not only draw in space, I could also draw in time”, overcoming the limitations of a single viewpoint or camera lens. Here is another visual echo of Sarazin de Belmont’s nine views of the Pyrenees assembled into a single artwork, bringing *True to Nature* full circle. ■

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Whimsical and cruel

A tale of capitalism, penance and species extinction

DAVID ANNAND

VENOMOUS LUMPSUCKER
NED BEAUMAN

304pp. Sceptre. £20.



A lumpsucker
(*Cyclopterus lumpus*)

IN THE 1980S the American literary critic Tom LeClair identified what he called the “systems novel”, a genre of fiction concerned with the characters, acts and situations of the conventional novel while simultaneously speculating on the complex social structures - economic, sexual, ideological - that underpin the realities of those characters. LeClair was talking in the first instance about Don DeLillo (see *In the Loop: Don DeLillo and the systems novel*, 1988), but the label has since been applied to Thomas Pynchon, Jonathan Franzen, Margaret Atwood and other writers whose work looks to dramatize the collision points of society’s many systems, from the nuclear family to nuclear threat.

Ned Beaman’s work sits slightly adjacent to this body of work. Certainly, he has always been concerned with the grand sweep of history, its parallels and patterns, but one gets the sense that he is suspicious of attempts to grasp it all, to alight on a definitive reading. His books are too impish to be classified as systems novels: they range too gleefully in and out of genres, delight too readily in paradox, exult in arcane knowledge as an end in itself and find too much joy in coincidence and unexpected comedy.

In his first two books, *Boxer, Beetle* (2010) and *The Teleportation Accident* (2012), Beaman romped all over the place, collapsing time and pulling together seemingly unrelated phenomena. In the subsequent *Glow* (2014) and *Madness Is Better Than*

Defeat (2017), his focus narrowed considerably (to, respectively, a drug-addled London and a late-1930s Honduras, by way of Hollywood), and this process is continued in his new novel, *Venomous Lumpsucker*, which has in its sights a single, if weighty, phenomenon: mass extinction.

Set in the near future, the novel imagines an environmentally degraded Europe relentlessly exploited by transnational corporations adept at manipulating environmental legislation. Unsurprisingly, life on earth is much diminished. Corrosive waters and searing heat mean that the little food that still grows tastes abysmal. The UK has withdrawn so far into itself that it is now known as the Hermit Kingdom, and the US is such an embarrassment that no one talks about it in polite company.

But the global population is still capable of spasms of self-reproach, such as the one that follows the death of Chiu Chiu, the last of the giant pandas. The World Commission on Species Extinction is immediately created to ensure that “Chiu Chiu will be the ending of endings”. In turn this spawns the “extinction credit” - and the industry that sprouts up to trade in them.

Intimately involved in this new industry are the novel’s two main characters: Mark Halyard, a self-serving mining executive, and Karin Resaint, an ideologically driven biologist. Both are desperate to establish whether the (fictional) fish of the novel’s title is already extinct. Halyard has made a

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The UK is now known as the Hermit Kingdom

David Annand’s debut novel, *Peterdown*, won the 2022 McKitterick prize

bad bet on the price of extinction credits and the species’ demise would be financially ruinous for him. Resaint’s motivations are more complex: she suspects that the venomous lumpsucker might be so intelligent as to understand the possibility of its own extinction, and that it might therefore be capable of provoking the penance she craves on behalf of humanity. The pair reluctantly team up and set off on a caper that takes them to blighted Estonian nature reserves, migrant labour camps on the Finnish coast and Surface Wave, a libertarian seastead that looks like an “ugly modernist chandelier”, where the wilder extremes of the biotech world can flourish beyond the scope of regulatory frameworks.

Beaman is a perceptive critic of carbon credits and other market solutions to the climate crisis, but this book is really about our relationship with animals and how we might grapple with the enormity of what we’re doing to them. The author manages to balance a lack of sentimentality about the inevitability of extinction in any entropic system with a controlled rage at the carelessness with which humanity is currently dispatching unique lifeforms. And, rather than dividing its characters into cartoonish deniers and right-minded environmentalists, he lets no one off the hook.

He is good, too, on the sublimity of evolution: “a monstrous maker, a blind heedless thing inching along in no particular direction, the whole disaster fuelled by spilled blood and wasted effort, Amazon rivers of both”. This same phenomenon created *Adelognathus marginatum*, a parasitic wasp that controls the minds of spiders with counterfeit hormones. “Somehow inert matter had organised itself into something so convoluted and delicate and whimsical and cruel. If, somewhere in space, a scattering of asteroid fragments had happened to drift into the shape of a perfect tetrahedron a thousand kilometres wide, it would be no greater miracle.”

With its imaginative world-building, antic plotting and brilliant gags, *Venomous Lumpsucker* fits neatly into Beaman’s existing oeuvre, yet it also feels like something of a departure. It isn’t as vivid as his carnivalesque earlier work, but, to borrow a phrase from David Foster Wallace (speculating on the next generation of “literary rebels”), it has the “gall ... to instantiate single-entendre principles”. That it does so without being didactic can only be applauded. ■

Killing kittens

A lampoon of the bleak world of content moderation

PHILIP WOMACK

WE HAD TO REMOVE THIS POST
HANNA BERVOETS

Translated by Emma Rault
144pp. Picador. £12.99.

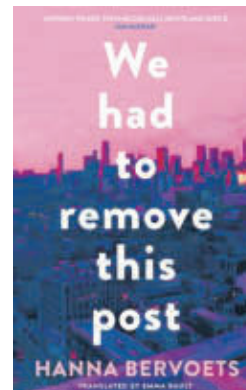
HANNA BERVOETS’S slim, compelling novel *We Had to Remove This Post* addresses the foetid morass of social media. Having first appeared last year in Dutch, and now translated with great clarity by Emma Rault, it asks: if you are steeped in immorality, can you resist becoming immoral? Who has a duty to protect us? And who watches the watchers?

The book is framed as a confessional letter to a lawyer, written by its protagonist, Kayleigh (“short hair and wrinkled NoFX T-shirt”). In early adulthood

she finds a job as a content moderator at a social media network that she isn’t allowed to name outside the office. She comes into the profession with open eyes: “for twenty percent more pay I would have been happy to pick up garbage”. Her employer is a contractor, Hexa, and her working life is indeed accursed. Kayleigh is a “quality assurance worker” and her role is to view posts flagged for disturbing content.

The finely graded distinctions she must use to carry out this work pose a number of problems, and the hideous apparatus of a company desperate for the attention of its users is quickly revealed. It is, for example, fine for viewers to watch footage of a woman knocked off a scooter, but only if they can’t see blood, and only if the situation is “clearly comical”. A discussion about a video of “some nutjob” playing with two dead kittens is particularly gruesome. In a previous banned video, the nutjob had filmed himself killing the kittens. The moderators leave the second post up: “Provided there’s no cruel caption, that is. If there’s no text, it complies with the guidelines - that previous video doesn’t count”.

Kayleigh is a good pupil, adept at applying these rules to the steady stream of pornography, killings, mutilations and other assorted instances of violence: post after post of the saddest, most debased acts of humanity that pour onto her screen. And Bervoets is often acidly funny, especially when demonstrating the workers’ mordant, jockish humour as they “jokingly” insult each other, inspired by the racist and homophobic content they

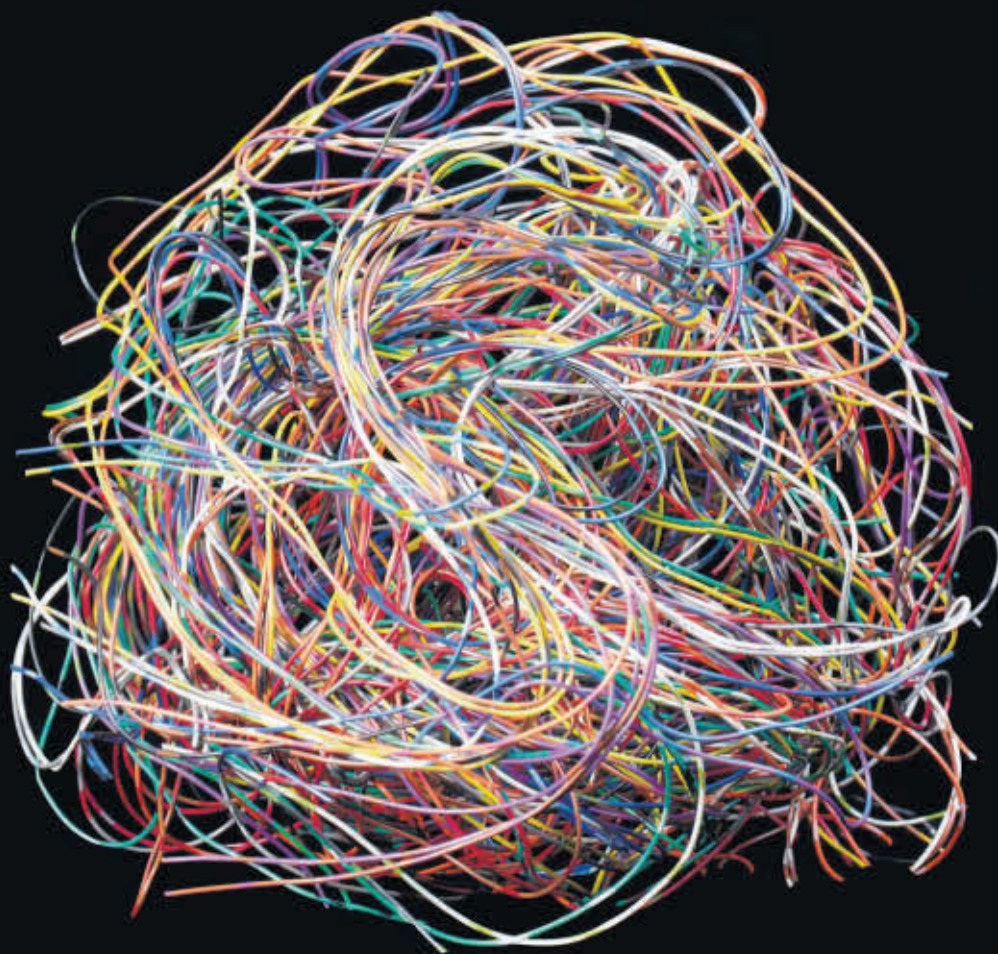


Philip Womack’s latest novel for teens, *Wildlord*, was published last year

encounter online. They are from a wide variety of backgrounds and sexualities. “I don’t think any of us feel offended”, says Kayleigh.

The employment conditions are hellish. The workers’ loo breaks are timed from the moment they stand up. No psychological help is provided. Gradually, their mindsets are altered. When they see someone standing on top of the office block opposite, they immediately assume he is going to jump. In fact, he is simply mending the roof. When Kayleigh’s colleague and girlfriend, Sigrid, sees a girl carefully cutting her face online, she becomes obsessed with the girl’s safety and longs to help. They discuss the guidelines. “If it was a livestream, we weren’t allowed to intervene: As long as the person’s followers could theoretically still help them, you had to let them carry on.” None of the staff members copes. One Taser his boss. Others, exposed to endless flat-earth and Holocaust-denial posts, become conspiracy theorists. Kayleigh herself is an unreliable narrator. There is no virtuous centre here.

Bervoets invites us to assess our own standards. Are they as arbitrary as those imposed on the workers? And if they are, then what is to stop all forms of ethical conduct being undermined? The corporate peons at Hexa are robbed of their individuality, becoming vessels for the slogans and attitudes they stumble across online. To what extent are the rest of us any different? *We Had to Remove This Post* offers a mightily bleak vision, with deeply troubling implications for the world at large. ■



Blind faith

Fictional critiques of cutting-edge tech

NAT SEGNI

APPLIANCE
J. O. MORGAN

208pp. Cape. £16.99.

REWARD SYSTEM
JEM CALDER

216pp. Faber. £14.99.

OVERSEERING HER HOUSE MOVE, the elderly Mrs Carter is worried about her jewellery being damaged in transit. Emma, from the removals firm, tries to reassure her. "It's all just gold and silver and gemstones!", she says. "They each have a very uniform, a very well-defined, crystalline structure. They show up really beautifully on the analysis ... Very clear, very hard points of data." Mrs Carter's belongings are not to be loaded on a lorry and driven to her new home. They are to be teleported there via a machine whose development from an ungainly prototype, resembling "nothing quite so much as a large grey refrigerator", to the cable-less second-generation model, capable of instantaneously transporting minerals from the moon, links the eleven otherwise discrete stories that comprise the Scottish poet J. O. Morgan's first novel.

What marks out *Appliance* from other sci-fi treatments of teleportation is its setting in an indeterminate near-future that nonetheless has a strong, Formica-ish whiff of midcentury Britain to it. In the opening story, "Bring It Inside", Mr Pearson, who works in personnel for the appliance company, has been asked, along with his disapproving wife, to test the prototype at home. It successfully transports a

disposable plastic spoon. Mr Pearson sees the potential of the technology for the transportation of raw materials. His wife suspects trickery: a vacuum tube system. The tone is of the suburban surreal, the comedy of offended petit-bourgeois sensibility. We are present at the dawn of a revolutionary technology, but in their apron strings and old leather slippers, unscrewing the machine's side panel to examine its interior, the Pearsons might be characters from an N. F. Simpson play, *Quatermass* meets the kitchen sink: "It looked like a lot of bright red worms, all writhing over one another, seething in a great mass ... It was like a highly complicated switchboard".

Several of the stories grapple with the implications of teleportation. Mrs Carter is convinced that, once transported, her treasured portrait of her grandfather will be a fake, a copy, even if atomically identical. A sinister character called Mr Jacks insists that no travel is involved in the transportation process: anyone teleported by the machine is destroyed by it before being replicated by the receiving unit. It is through these speculations that Morgan mounts his critique of contemporary tech, its abolition of spatial and temporal distance, its replacement of the concrete with the virtual and, perhaps most of all, our unthinking embrace of it. "The real issue is our acceptance of a system that nobody quite understands", says Mr Jacks. "It's a matter of blind faith ... We'll go on using it no matter what anyone might say. So what does that make of us?"

So far, so inarguable - and one might further argue that, as a correlative for current technologies, the "machine" is a little on-the-nose, insufficiently inscrutable. This might be more of a serious problem were it not for Morgan's prose, which, in its poetic precision, its Nicholson Baker-ish hyper-attentiveness to the felt surfaces of the world,

achieves the oneiric uncanniness that the book's central premiss lacks. In "Trial & Error", two kids slip under a fence into a disused airfield to play with a model airplane, "a simple spindly thing, with a slender balsa wood dowel for a fuselage and wings of painted polystyrene foam". The boy winds the propeller: "The rubber band curled into waves and the waves closed upon one another to form a tight rubber tube, a double helix in which the power for flight resided. When ugly little knots began to form on top of that perfection Lochan stopped". Again, the *donné* risks overdetermination - kids flying a primitive balsa wood plane on an airfield made obsolescent by technology - but the specificity redeems it. How good those "ugly little knots" are: the toy plane is intensely seen. Ultimately, Morgan's descriptions of the physical world defy the dematerialization effected by technology. Where *Appliance* most succeeds is in its little riot of the real in the face of digital abstraction.

Space and time are likewise flattened in Jem Calder's debut book, *Reward System*, a collection of six stories marginally more linked than Morgan's in that several of the characters recur throughout. In the first, "A Restaurant Somewhere Else", Julia, a twentysomething sous-chef at a trendy small-plate restaurant, begins dating the head chef, twenty years her senior. We are probably in London. The setting for the fourth story, "Excuse Me, Don't I Know You?", a gentrified area that "seemed to be in the process of being re- or hyper-gentrified", where Julia bumps into an ex carrying a houseplant, seems a lot like the part of Shoreditch near Columbia Road. We could equally, however, be in New York or San Francisco, despite the use of terms such as "pavement", "supermarket" and "betting shop". The name of Julia's restaurant, Cascine, has a distinctly American ring to it. We learn that her ex could never get "acclimated" to FaceTiming. Julia denies being "mad at" a friend. Do British millennials all speak American?

If these mordant, intellectually agile stories of young love, life and work are indeed set in London, then it is the London of a lover of American literature. As such, the idea (promoted in the publisher's blurb and elsewhere) that *Reward System* is a notably fresh, ultra-contemporary take on the tech-inflected tribulations of the author's generation is somewhat misguided. Rather, Calder has adapted the literary modes of previous generations to present circumstances. Comparisons to David Foster Wallace are for emergency use only, but here I must grasp the little hammer and break the glass. "The celerity with which she accordingly swiped right on his profile card": Calder's prose splices archaism and tech-speak in a manner strongly reminiscent of Foster Wallace's *jolie-laide* patchwork of registers. The long fifth story, "Search Engine Optimisation", owes much to Foster Wallace's unfinished last novel, *The Pale King* (2011), in its evocation of corporate boredom; the office PA, Chloe Daley, so pretty she "has the power to enter people's dreams", is a ringer for Foster Wallace's "wrist-bitingly" attractive, hyper-idealized female figures such as Meredith Rand in *The Pale King* and the P.G.O.A.T (Prettiest Girl of All Time) in *Infinite Jest*. There is a recurring and typically Foster-Wallacean concern with feedback loops and, in Calder's phrase (though it might have been Foster Wallace's), "ouroboric logic". That said, for all that Calder borrows from his forebears, he does it exceptionally well. The third story, "Distraction from Sadness Is Not the Same Thing as Happiness", deftly traces the loops of doubt and self-deception that a "male user" and "female user" - again, names straight out of the Foster Wallace playbook - employ in the task of online dating. As in J. O. Morgan's novel, the characters in *Reward System* are degraded by the technologies they are compelled against their better judgement to use. And to what purpose? For Mr Jacks in *Appliance*, the supposed benefits of the machine are illusory. "We'd be better off simply pretending, wouldn't you say? You know, we could use cardboard boxes and taut string." ■

“
Where
Appliance most
succeeds is in
its little riot of
the real in the
face of digital
abstraction

Nat Segnit's most recent book is *Retreat*: The risks and rewards of stepping back from the world, 2021

Detritus of a lifetime

A novel of nature, degradation and the derangement of scale

CLARE PETTITT

EMERGENCY
DAISY HILDYARD

224pp. Fitzcarraldo. Paperback, £12.99.



EMERGENCY IS A KIND of Bildungsroman concerned with growing up in a semi-rural place that is “falling out of circulation”. From her contemporary vantage point, the narrator reflects on her 1980s childhood in a town where the local quarry, which has supplied gravel for Norwegian motorways and new cities in China, is exhausted; workers must now head out to the rigs at sea to extract minerals for consumption. Every spring, the white lilac tree overhanging the garden of her friend Rebecca’s “dropped [its scent] down to fill the narrow lane as a bath fills with water”; but, we are told, this place “wasn’t pastoral, in spite of the meadows and the herds and the flocks”. The narrator turns her focus equally on the lilac and the litter gathering on the grass verges, “sprouting chocolate-bar wrappers from which the decoration and brand-name had washed away, leaving only a silver slip with the original colours in its deepest creases”.

In this setting, the boundaries between nature and litter, care and cruelty, the organic and industrial have been violently breached. Perhaps they were never there to begin with. As a child, the narrator once collected the orange ring pull from a limited-edition can of Fanta; as an adult, she “saw this same ring pull in an image of a dead seabird”, where it had

become fatally lodged in the bird’s throat. “Meanwhile”, she reflects, “particles of plastic from packets I opened when I was a child are circulating, right now, through the bodies of newly hatched birds.”

Emergency flits between the narrator’s 1980s and her present, and these temporal compressions are mirrored by spatial ones. In an “empty and brown” field, the child sits patiently “for a space of time”, until she “could see earwigs and woodlice ... The field stretched out untended in the background, every part full of these involvements which were only visible up close”. Putting her face up to the trunk of an ash tree, she notices that “the very outer surface of the wood was green and powdery with a moss whose bright dry grains looked bushy ... like a rainforest seen from above ... the rotting wood was much darker, with bright orange and tiny white pinpricks on it, like a city at night seen from an aeroplane”. The derangement of scale is this book’s real theme. We come to learn that the adult narrator is in a city in lockdown during the pandemic, and is hyper-visualizing her childhood memories. “A place exports and circulates over distances”, she explains, “just as memory moves the past through the present and changes it.”

Clare Pettitt is Professor of Victorian Literature and Culture at King’s College London. Her most recent book is *Serial Revolutions 1848: Writing, politics, form, published this year*

The vast scale of the global shrinks individuals to bodies, then to mere pollutants. The Bildungsroman collapses. The clever cow, Ivy, is given more of a narrative arc in this novel than any of its human “characters”, but when the farmer realizes she has learnt to open the gate, he shoots her. In her book-length essay, *The Second Body* (2017), Hildyard claimed that “we are un-discovering the individual - we are realizing that our concept of the existence of an individual being could, in a technical way, be wrong”. From the quarry in *Emergency*, “stones, single hairs, and skin-flakes from the workers’ bodies ... travelled the globe”. When we put on the kettle or switch on a light, we enact the “slow violence, systemic violence, remote violence” that, the narrator reflects, “are the most widely generated by-products of my lifetime”. But she is suspicious of some green politics - “I have noticed how expressions of care for the environment are often outlets of hatred for other humans”, particularly “poorer and indigenous and local people” - and her tone remains forgiving and humane, even in the face of the “emergency”.

In reviewing Hildyard’s debut novel, *Hunters in the Snow*, for the *TLS* (August 4, 2013), Lucian Robinson was reminded of W. G. Sebald’s fiction; but, he remarked, while Sebald’s “personal histories circle like vultures over the inexplicable terror of the Holocaust ... the central flaw in Hildyard’s novel is that it lacks any comparable anchor”. Hildyard’s more recent work has been circling around the terror of climate change, inexplicable because of its sheer scale. *The Second Body* ends with an emergency: Hildyard’s house is flooded by a river and, escaping to a Mediterranean island to recover, she encounters another emergency: “orange lifeboats and a Customs and Immigration Portakabin, and two Red Cross tents”. *Emergency* closes with a fire in the flats opposite, perhaps a sly reference to Grenfell. The narrator’s smoke alarm has been bleeping for months, so she does not notice when it bleeps again. This emergency unfolds unheeded under her nose.

If this ending feels rather neat, it does not diminish the author’s broader project. Daisy Hildyard has confronted our new nature and, bravely, compellingly, makes our shared emergency visible. ■

Letters on the doormat

A tale of climate change, rooted in the mundane here and now

PABLO SCHEFFER

THE OPPOSITE OF A PERSON
LIEKE MARSMAN

Translated by Sophie Collins
224pp. Daunt. Paperback, £9.99.

“THE WEATHER WAS ONCE a reason to stay home. Today, it’s a reason to take to the streets”, muses Ida, the protagonist of Lieke Marsman’s cerebral first novel, *The Opposite of a Person* (which first appeared in Dutch in 2017). Ida certainly spends a lot of time indoors. While half of her university cohort have accepted jobs with Shell, we find her, at the book’s opening, in her Amsterdam apartment, browsing the internet, fantasizing about nuclear warfare and worrying about her relationship with her girlfriend, Robin.

In lucid prose, collaged with poems and essays - all sensitively translated by Sophie Collins - Marsman maps out Ida’s sprawling anxieties. She frets about her friendships, career, sexuality and the prospect of impending climate doom. The author holds a degree in philosophy, and her protagonist frequently quotes philosophers and thinkers, from Aristotle to Naomi Klein, as she despairs at the state of things: “Even if everyone in the world were to agree simultaneously that something must be done to combat global warming, no one would put themselves forward as the first or only national government to commit to the huge expenses that inevitably come along with the attempt to heal the environment”.

Hoping to get out of her rut, Ida takes up an internship at a research institute in the Italian Alps. The institute is preparing to demolish a defunct dam, and Ida’s job is to generate media attention for the event. She attends a climate conference. But we never see her talk to a journalist. Instead, she ponders big ontological questions. What does it mean to be a human? What is it that distinguishes us from other forms of existence? As the plot builds to a surprising and not wholly convincing climax, Ida tries to imagine a world of ecological non-hierarchy in which “people are no more important than anything else”, and “history is as much a history of objects as of people”.

“Cli-fi” often tends towards the speculative, but *The Opposite of a Person* is rooted firmly in the mundane present. The book moves between the “predictable” surroundings of Ida’s student flat, the “somewhat uninspiring” dam reservoir in Italy (its water “far less blue than it appeared in the photos”) and the suburbs of Ida’s childhood. Marsman writes



Pablo Scheffer is an assistant editor at the *TLS*

with tenderness and wit about the provincial Netherlands, with its expanses of white-brick new-builds, its pressure washers and caravan holidays to the North Sea coast, “stretch[ing] out forever like the sea but without the sea’s ability to fulfil that promise”. Against this backdrop, the author conjures up a refreshing depiction of our experience of global warming as a psychological, as much as natural, phenomenon. “I feel guilty”, Ida confesses. “I feel like someone who has stopped opening her bills - day after day the climate leaves an unopened letter on my doormat: *You’re too late!*”

The Opposite of a Person is Marsman’s second book to appear in English, following her dazzlingly clever collection of poetry, *The Following Dazz Will Last Five Minutes* (2019), which appeared in Dutch in 2018. Inspired by Marsman’s diagnosis with a rare form of cancer at the age of twenty-seven, the poems urgently documented not just the medical but the political experience of illness. “I had to write about politics in order not to be subsumed by the cancer”, Marsman stated in a coda to the collection. A sense of political urgency also courses through *The Opposite of a Person*. Ida’s thoughts repeatedly blur into manifestos: on the incompatibility of free-market capitalism and effective climate reform; on the social policing of queer identities; on the destructive nature of human exceptionalism. After a while, this begins to feel relentless. Does Ida’s singing along to a Joni Mitchell song really have to turn into a discussion of Meghan Daum’s essay on the “Joni Mitchell Problem”? Thankfully, the author remembers to keep her protagonist in check: “As I guiltily put on a more challenging Joni song, Robin comes out of the bedroom to ask if I can turn it down a little”. ■

Critic to the core

The essays of a towering figure in German letters

DEBORAH VIETOR-ENGLÄNDER

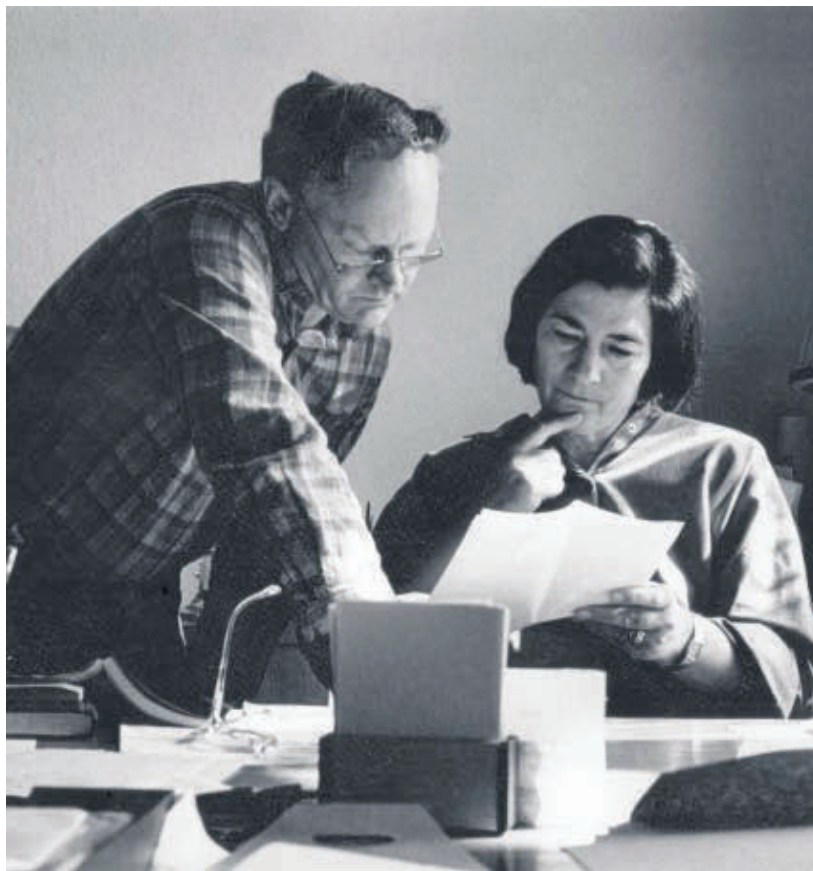
SÄMTLICHE ESSAYS UND REDEN

Band 1: Lesen und Schreiben (1961–1980).

Band 2: Wider den Schlaf der Vernunft (1981–1990). Band 3: Nachdenken über den blinden Fleck (1991–2010)

CHRISTA WOLF

Edited by Sonja Hilzinger
1,800pp. Suhrkamp Verlag. €36.



Christa and Gerhard Wolf, 1984

CHRISTA WOLF, one of the most important German novelists of the twentieth century, died in 2011 at the age of eighty-two. It has taken ten years for a major publisher to tackle her speeches and essays, but the results, in three volumes, each with an afterword (but no index), are worth the wait. The editor, Sonja Hilzinger, imposes a developmental chronology: Wolf was celebrated as a novelist, but her nonfiction shows that she was also a passionate critic, able to communicate the significance of her wide reading and to connect developments in the GDR, and later the whole of Germany, to her own work and that of others.

The first entry, “Probleme junger Autoren” (“Problems for Younger Writers”), from March 1961, five months before the Berlin Wall went up, asks if young authors can be expected to write books for both parts of a divided Germany and warns of the dangers of provincialism. This was an unusual, provocative stance to take at the time. Four years later the 11th Plenum of the Central Committee of the SED (the East German Communist Party), would turn into a discussion of cultural policy, exerting tremendous influence on literature in the GDR – many books, films, plays and compositions were immediately banned – and Wolf’s “Diskussionsbeitrag” (“Contribution”) makes clear her opposition to censorship. Other writers have characterized Wolf differently – according to Helga Schubert, Wolf had totalitarian ideas and supported both Hitler and Stalin – but here is proof to the contrary. Wolf wanted a dialogue between East and West; she was critical of officialdom and prepared to say so in print. At one point in her writings she rails against the Schriftstellerverband (Writers’ Union) in the GDR: “Woher kommt es eigentlich, dass die Kritiken so unlebendig und so schematisch sind?” (“Why is it that their reviews are so lifeless and schematic?”)

One consequence of her preparedness to make enemies was that she and her husband, Gerhard, were unable to make films after 1965. Another was the novel *Nachdenken über Christa T.* (1968; *The Quest for Christa T.*), which concerns two friends reunited in East Germany. Its title character is determined not to accept the system unquestioningly and instead highlights the gap between the GDR’s rhetoric and life as it really is in the country. The story does not end well for her.

In the long title essay of the first volume, “Lesen und Schreiben” (“Read and Write”), which was written in 1968 but suppressed until 1972, Wolf makes a plea for literature that depends not on any one political system, but on describing human beings as they are. It is followed by an essay on *The Seventh Cross* (1942) by Anna Seghers, the story of a concentration-camp breakout led by a heroic communist. In subsequent pieces collected here, Seghers – a moral analyst of the Second World War and a key

figure in the postwar German literary diaspora – emerges as one of Wolf’s key influences. From her autobiographical story of prefiguration and destruction, “Der Ausflug der toten Mädchen” (1946; “The Outing of the Dead Girls”) – in which the narrator unflinchingly describes the beating of her university classmates by the Gestapo – Wolf says you can “learn what prose is”. In a piece on Seghers’s novel *Transit* (1944), an existential literary odyssey through wartime France, Wolf finds herself shadowing the protagonist as he journeys from Paris to Marseille, and there is a fine appreciation of Seghers’s doctoral thesis on “Jude und Judentum im Werke Rembrandts” (1924; “The Jew and Jewishness in the Work of Rembrandt”), in which Wolf explains how, as the daughter of a Jewish art dealer, Seghers was better informed than the average student of her age.

Wolf drew particular attention, as others in East Germany did not, to the achievements of German women writers and correspondents: Seghers, of course, but also her forebears, the “unfeminine” Romantic Karoline von Günderode and Bettina von Arnim, the writer, composer and Goethe obsessive. Perhaps von Arnim’s political interventions on behalf of Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, helping them to professorships in Berlin after their dismissal from the University of Göttingen for insubordination, appealed to Wolf as a model of prestige activism: she, too, protested when the singer-songwriter Wolf Biermann was stripped of his East German citizenship in 1976, and again in 1979, when Stefan Heym and eight others were excluded from the Schriftstellerverband. In 1987 Wolf once more reproached the Schriftstellerverband, speaking out against the effect Biermann’s treatment had had on her own writing, and the way the association made pariahs of others, including the Polish-born screenwriter Jurek Becker and the poet and critic Günter Kunert.

In her Frankfurt am Main poetry lectures (given in 1982), Wolf turned her attention to a classical figure – the prophet Cassandra. The following year she published a novel with the same title, perhaps her most important, reinterpreting the Trojan War as a battle for regional economic supremacy and the death knell of patriarchy. In this telling King Priam’s eldest daughter has no claim on any role apart from that of wife and mother, no chance of power. Apollo, whose advances she has rejected, curses her: she will prophesy disaster and never be believed, only blamed. Wolf describes in fascinating detail the process of writing the novel: she wanted, she said, to rescue Cassandra from pure myth and return her to a landscape with social and historical co-ordinates; to show that women writers can, with effort, escape the unrealism of their existence. The Frankfurt lectures were of critical importance to the peace and women’s movements worldwide, but the problem with escaping unrealism is that,

Christa and Gerhard Wolf, 1984

“**Wolf wanted a dialogue between East and West; she was critical of officialdom and prepared to say so in print**”

Deborah Vietor-Engländer’s books include a biography of Alfred Kerr, 2016. She has also published extensively on Hermynia Zur Mühlen

at some point, it forces reality on you. When the Wall came down, Wolf’s Stasi file turned up – forty-two volumes of it, from 1968 to 1980. She also “discovered” that she had been an unwitting informant between 1959 and 1962, before her first novel appeared. She published the files. Wolf claimed to have forgotten the few meetings she had with agents of what her biographer Jörg Magenau called “[what] had yet to become *the Stasi*” – and she was clearly shaken by this revelation. Her novel *Stadt der Engel, oder The Overcoat of Dr. Freud* (2010; *City of Angels, or the Overcoat of Dr. Freud*, TLS, May 17, 2013), written while she was in Los Angeles, deals with it head on: “I want to figure out who I was back then. Why I talked to them at all. Why I didn’t send them away right at the start”.

There were prizes – the Heinrich Mann prize in 1963, the Georg Büchner prize in 1980, the Thomas Mann prize in 2010. On receiving the last of these Wolf asked herself Mann’s question in *Doctor Faustus*: what price must artists pay for the work they write? In Mann’s case the answer was clear: exile. Nazi Germany was no longer his country. Stripped of citizenship and honours, he fled first to Switzerland, then to LA. Wolf, too, spent time in LA – as a Getty Fellow in 1993, and later while writing *Stadt der Engel* – and she tried to think her way into the situation of exiles, without ever feeling that she was doing so successfully.

She made mistakes. Accepting the Hermann Sinsheimer prize in Freinsheim in 2005, she emphasized in her speech Sinsheimer’s close relationship with his home town. But although the Jewish critic for whom the prize was named made several trips to Germany from his London home after the war, he was not, as he himself put it, a “lifelong Freinsheimer”. When he heard that the Nazis had set fire to a Jewish old people’s home and driven the inhabitants into the forest, where they were murdered, he vowed never to return.

Questions of memory and conduct in the light of atrocity run through the whole of the third volume, its title taken from the powerful concluding essay, “Nachdenken über den blinden Fleck” (“Think About the Blind Spot”), published here for the first time. In it Wolf considers Brecht’s great poem of salutary distraction, “Reminiscence of Marie A.” (1920), and Proust’s madeleine, as well as *Wenn die Erinnerung kommt* (1978; *When Memory Comes*, 1979), Saul Friedlander’s foundational text on mass murder and the possibility of healing after Auschwitz. The Nobel laureate Nelly Sachs, whom Wolf cites, spoke more than once of the neighbours, colleagues and fellow citizens who witnessed the savagery of fascism and the sufferings of its victims. Hitler, she wrote, thought that conscience was a Jewish invention. No memory, no conscience. And too many Germans, in Wolf’s judgement, were apt to take refuge in the “*blinder Fleck*” that such catastrophe invites – the inability to absorb the memories of Jewish survivors and in so doing confront themselves.

These three volumes ultimately affirm that Christa Wolf was far more than a novelist. They establish her as a figure of enormous importance in German literary and cultural history. ■

THE EDWIN MELLEN PRESS

The Geopolitical Unification of Europe, Russia, and Central Asia: Creating a Unitary Transcontinental Multinational State

by Dr. Alexander Jacob

University of Toronto

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Creating a moral order

How religion created the ties that bound early civilizations

KAREN ARMSTRONG

HOW RELIGION EVOLVED

And why it endures

ROBIN DUNBAR

352pp. Pelican. £22.

ROBIN DUNBAR, professor of evolutionary psychology at the University of Oxford, has looked back to the distant past to discover why we believe in a transcendent world or supernatural gods. This, he argues, is not a mental aberration, but a function that draws otherwise quarrelsome and unruly human beings together, and improves our health and wellbeing. Beneath the veneer of current doctrinal orthodoxies there lurks an ancient and universal belief in a transcendental world and a divine power that can help us - a yearning and conviction that is part of our human nature. From a very early period men and women have cultivated mental states that transcend their physical experience by means of music, fasting, meditative techniques and dance that can lead to *ekstasis*, a “bursting open like a ripe pod” and intense emotion; a kind of heat or psychic energy that can be painful and frightening as well as ecstatic. Care and sorrow, however, fall away and adepts emerge with a sense of calm and peace.

Humans band together socially to form religious congregations. Dunbar argues that for centuries these groups usually consisted of no more than 150 people - a number that enables members to know each other personally and enhances a sense of belonging that can be lost in a larger community. Researchers have found that this applies not just to religious networks, but also to secular and social networks. Primates form similar groups to protect themselves from external threats.

Religion, however, also requires what us to conceive of the gods, who are fundamentally different from us humans, through what Dunbar calls mentalizing (the ability to step back from the world as we experience it directly and, using our imagination, to reach out to the existence of a realm that transcends our own and is inhabited by purely spiritual beings).

Our belief in them, he explains, is fed by rituals that change the way we experience the world, in rather the same way as play educates animals. We learn not by a notional acceptance of a set of doctrines, but by performing physical actions - kneeling, bowing and dancing - that propel us into a different mental state. Ritual also helps us to cultivate a sense of belonging within this community. When you make the right gestures and speak the correct words, you demonstrate and enact your commitment publicly. Everyone stands, sits or prostrates at the same time - a physical expression of bonding, not unlike laughter, singing and dancing.

We cannot be sure, Dunbar explains, exactly when the formal religions with larger congregations first appeared, but by about 2000 BCE in Mesopotamia, priestly classes had emerged, together with priestesses who took part in rituals that, they believed, brought the gods intimately in touch with humans and sanctified their new cities. Modern scholars have tried to explain the emergence of these urban deities in purely secular terms, denying that they are the result of a mystical or visionary experience and arguing that they had a purely political function: some believe that these “gods” merely personified the new, sophisticated military and agricultural technology; others maintain that they personified the new empires that were beginning to emerge, replacing the older city states; while a smaller-scale study suggests that these superior beings merely illustrated the new class system of social stratification. Dunbar agrees with this somewhat perversely secular interpretation of what were almost certainly religiously inspired visions.

Dunbar therefore assumes that personalized gods were simply a symbolic stabilizing factor in what is known as the Axial Age (c.800-200 BCE), so called because it was pivotal to the spiritual and intellectual development of our species and brought into being world religions that continue to nourish humanity: Confucianism and Daoism in China, Hinduism and Buddhism in India, monotheism in Israel and philosophical rationalism in Greece. We have more information about this period than any of the earlier eras, and many scholars, researchers and historians have written about it. But Dunbar has a different - if somewhat simplistic - understanding of this important stage in religious history.

Buddhist monks, Indonesia

“**Religion requires us to abandon our preoccupation with self and reach out empathically and tirelessly to a suffering world**”

Karen Armstrong's books include A History of God, 1994. Her most recent book, Sacred Nature: How we can recover our bond with the natural world, was published last month

The new Axial societies, he argues, coincided with the rapid growth of cities and the rise of new priestly castes who replaced the old tribal rites. In other regions, which had a less favourable climate, people were either trapped in hunter-gatherer economies or constrained by disease and sociopolitical fragmentation. In the Axial regions, however, agriculture could prosper and the disease burden was low, allowing for rapid population growth and a different type of ideology. Essential to Axial Age religion, Dunbar argues, was the rise of what he calls “Moralising High Gods”, who supervised the ethical behaviour of their worshippers and punished wrongdoers.

These gods, Dunbar argues, were originally confined to tribal groups with a pastoral or agricultural economy: the monotheistic religions, for example, had emerged in peoples who tended flocks and herds, as Abraham had done. There had been a long phase of ritual complexity and propitiating worship, but in the large new Axial civilizations, with their dramatic increase in sociopolitical complexity, these gods developed a moral ethos to regulate violence, theft and insurrection, and to enable humans to move beyond face-to-face societies and lay the foundations for the mega-politics that we have today. But this interpretation is too limited. Yahweh, the God of Israel, might seem to fit what Dunbar calls the “Moralising High God” profile, but the other Axial civilizations looked beyond gods to an ineffable principle that was both superior to and more fundamental than the gods. They mystically intuited a sacred force that permeated the whole of reality - the Dao or Qi in China or Rta and the Brahman in India - and was ineffable, indescribable, yet endlessly immanent in every single person, creature, or object. Dunbar's notion of the divine is far too limited. And instead of merely regulating violence and theft, all the Axial religions, without exception, made the Golden Rule, of treating all others as you would wish to be treated yourself, their fundamental moral principle. In most traditions gods were minor figures, revered chiefly by the common people; and in some traditions, such as Buddhism or Jainism, the enlightened human being is superior to the gods.

Dunbar's approach is largely political and social: he argues that religion has been unable to succeed politically, and that what we call “God” does not really alleviate human suffering. In the chapter entitled “Why Believing Might Be Good for You”, Dunbar argues - correctly - that religious practice might make people more honest, but it does not necessarily make them more altruistic. The best kind of deity, Dunbar argues, is a Moralizing High God, who is supposed to take an active interest in the wellbeing and behaviour of worshippers and help to preserve community cohesion. But this God is only a blown-up reflection of a human being, whereas “God”, Brahman or Dao as properly conceived in the main world faiths is a transcendent reality and beyond human comprehension. Why, then, do the world faiths persist in this seemingly pointless quest?

The answer, I believe, is that at their best, each one in its own specific way, the religions help us to face up to the suffering that is endemic to human life, learn to live with it productively, creatively and compassionately, and, in so doing, perhaps achieve a measure of peace. Hence the importance of the Golden Rule, which Confucius insisted must be followed “All day and every day”, to all the Axial Age religions. That - rather than the “comfort and joy” of the Christmas carol - is what the world religions tell us. They require us to abandon our preoccupation with self and instead reach out empathically and tirelessly to a suffering world. We do not find this in Dunbar's book. We usually see the Buddha sitting alone in blissful tranquillity, but in fact, after achieving Nirvana, he spent the rest of his life travelling through the villages and cities of northern India, trying to help every suffering human person - or animal - he met to deal with their pain. ■

Beyond the damaged ego

Poetry that detaches us from the world of instant gratification

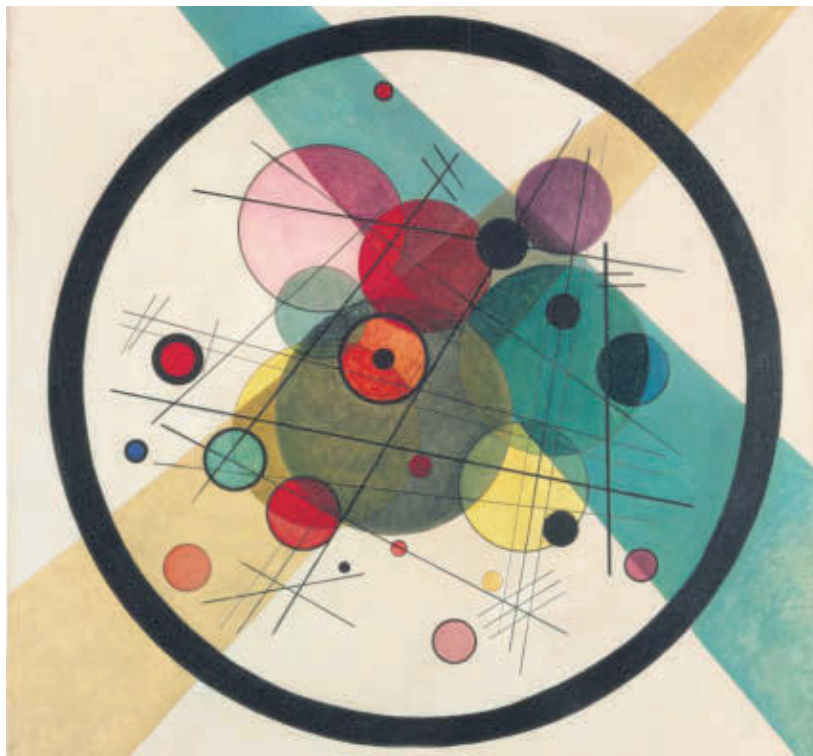
ROWAN WILLIAMS

THE PENGUIN BOOK OF SPIRITUAL VERSE

110 poets on the divine

KAVEH AKBAR, EDITOR

400pp. Penguin. £20.



"Circles in a Circle"
by Wassily Kandinsky,
1923

IN A MOVING INTRODUCTION to this rich collection, Kaveh Akbar, an Iranian poet living and teaching in the United States, writes of his history of alcohol addiction, and of the part played in his recovery by both the writing and the reading of poetry. In a particularly thought-provoking passage, he says: "My active addiction was a time of absolute certainty - certainty of my own victimhood, of my convictions, of what I was owed by a universe that had split me from the land of my birth and dropped me into an America that was actively hostile to my presence". In contrast to this kind of certainty, poetry habituates us to another sort of thinking and feeling - not a blandly or indulgently picturesque sensibility, as opposed to the definiteness of the resentful ego that he has described, but an awareness of the "history, density, integrity" of language itself. Poetry is language so constructed that it lets us see beyond the trivial, exploitative, weaponized uses of words that are deafeningly present around us. Akbar implies that this hectic reductionism is itself a kind of addiction and certainly nurtures addictive behaviours. Poetry "asks us to slow down our metabolization of language"; a clear analogy with detaching from the world of instant and transitory gratification through addiction. And the poetry we call "spiritual" is, for Akbar, poetry that so erodes the barrier between the listening self and the abidingly real that our own agency as speakers and thinkers is transformed into a more patient, more receptive, more wondering mode.

The image of sacred poetry as "thinning the partition" between the human subject and the given, inexhaustible environment that generates wonder and profound attention recurs several times in the notes on the pieces gathered here. It is not that this kind of poetry offers solutions, not even that it offers useable resources for psychic healing - though it clearly does so in some respects. Its importance is in the way it insists unarguably on a quite independent rhythm and energy of action, running alongside, beneath, ahead of, the life of the damaged and confined ego. Akbar coins the expression "a divine" to designate the kind of stimulus that opens such a perspective; he is, he tells us, not sure what he means by "God", but is compelled to use the word as a "placeholder" for this totality of rhythm and energy, which is sensed as deeply other to us, and is yet in some way our proper native territory.

In the light of this, Akbar casts his net wide. He rightly says that most anthologies of this kind that readers will have encountered tend to be Eurocentric and male-dominated, and he does a fine job of avoiding this bias in his own selection, including

not only a wealth of material from East Asia, but a sampling of indigenous and shamanic composition as well ("The Midnight Velada" by the female Mexican shaman Maria Sabina, who died in 1985, is a wonderful example, as is the semi-liturgical divinatory and oracular song from sixteenth-century Yorubaland). He is happy to present some robust satire by the great nineteenth-century African American campaigner Fredrick Douglass alongside Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" and the second of the *Duino Elegies*.

Each of the 110 poems is prefaced with a short comment, sometimes locating the poem against its background, sometimes simply nudging the reader about what to look out for. Many of these are illuminating; many are just tantalizing, in instances where we really could use more guidance about context. For instance, the extract from a thirteenth-century CE epic from Mali is baffling as it stands, since the translation is obviously using deliberate anachronisms and the vernacular refrains are left unexplained. The note does nothing to help us here. Occasionally a note seems rather to miss the point; thus, the beautiful "Mind of Absolute Trust", from a Chinese Buddhist source around the sixth century, is introduced as presupposing an unresolved dichotomy between "wisdom and holiness" ("no clear winner emerges") - but the force of the text is surely that what we call "wisdom" and "holiness" are alike radically displaced by *enlightenment*, the perception of non-duality, the transcending of both assertion and denial. John Donne's erotic imagery in his "Batter my heart" sonnet is described as if it would have been shocking to his contemporaries, when he is deploying what was, even for many Protestant writers, part of a familiar symbolic repertoire. And there is a comment on the closing phrase of a piece by the modern Iraqi poet Nazik al-Malaika - "To whom will we pray ... but to words?" - that leaves me puzzled. Akbar refers to this as "a succinct crystallization" of the whole anthology; but his general introduction has encouraged us to think of language as a densely fluid medium in the negotiation of which we are brought into touch with what is not and cannot be "ours". In what sense, then, are words the *object* of prayer? This note is suggestive of woolly poeticizing or cutting some tough corners, and is all the more noticeable because it is so untypical of the book.

Full disclosure: I have lately been putting together an anthology of spiritually oriented poetry from the past century, so have some sense of editorial temptations and challenges - and some empathetic consciousness of all the sorts of things prickly reviewers might say about an editor's

choices. Why nothing from x? Why include y? So I shall try not to question the actual selection; an anthology is bound to be, as Akbar plainly says, a personal statement of some kind, and an invitation to a continuing conversation rather than a last word in identifying what's worthwhile. I shall make just one exception. Akbar gives us a short extract from a homily of Shenoute of Atri (a notable Coptic writer of the fourth/fifth century); it is hard to see quite why this belongs in an anthology of spiritual poetry, since it is simply an angry denunciation of "pagans and heretics" - very characteristic of its notoriously ferocious author. If the point is to include material from the non-Greco-Latin world of early Christianity, there is a wealth of outstanding poetry in Syriac, and indeed plenty of useable Coptic compositions from both orthodox and heterodox Christian communities. It seems a missed opportunity. I also wondered briefly about the inclusion of a couple of texts that are very obviously prose compositions - one from Ethiopia, one from a medieval Jewish mystical compilation, the Zohar; but on reflection it is hard to deny that these amply meet the editor's criteria about "thinning the partition".

Dante's *Commedia* has an indisputable place in any overview of spiritual verse, and Akbar gives us a full canto from the *Inferno*. But his chosen translation is the controversial rendering by Mary Jo Bang, full (like the translation of the Mali epic mentioned earlier) of deliberate, spectacular anachronism and highly inventive transformations of the original. I suspect that there will be a wide variety of responses among readers: I found myself both uneasy with this choice and captured by the energy and lucidity - and indeed poignancy - of Bang's version. It reads magnificently; but at moments it simply does not say what Dante says ("primitive love" is rather different from "primordial love", for example). The introductory note, once again, does not tell us what is going on with this translation, and I'd be happier with the choice of version if Akbar had explained his rationale.

All that being said, this remains a profoundly valuable (and finely produced) collection, full of fresh perspective, and opening doors into all kinds of material that has been routinely neglected or patronized. Akbar's deeply personal framing of such a varied collection helps the reader pick up the threads of continuity through immense cultural diversities, without reducing any of these texts to blandness. ■

◀ Rowan Williams is a poet and theologian, recently retired as Master of Magdalene College, Cambridge

▼ Tishani Doshi publishes poetry, essays and fiction. A God at the Door, her fourth collection of poems, was shortlisted for a Forward prize in 2021

Amor Mundi

For years I'd throw myself at a rock and say, *Catch!* I'd see a hole and try to shapeshift into it. I won't lie, there were gardens I briefly revelled in until I saw the train tracks, and estuaries at the edge of which I almost began a civilization. Something always pulled me back. Meeting you in that winged lonely century was like moving to a border town and understanding the fallacy of a wall. Evening does not always have to mean defeat. Night cedes to dew and dew to heat. Darling, I do not know how it happened that we found a world to name and love, how this many-drawer cocoon of longing grew, but I want to tell you, the tree outside our window has erupted with bright orange goblets from which a pair of parakeets—emerald-bodied luminaries—feed and feed.

TISHANI DOSHI

Take no prisoners

An incident in the Anglo-Irish War, and what it meant

JACK HEPWORTH

KILMICHAEL

The life and afterlife of an ambush

EVE MORRISON

292pp. Irish Academic Press.
Paperback, £17.99 (€19.95).



“THERE ARE SOME who will blush at the mention / Of Connolly, Pearse, and MacBride / And history’s new scribes in derision / The pages of valour deny.” This was the stanza added in 1998 by the Cork poet Patrick Galvin to John F. Hourihane’s ballad commemorating the IRA ambush at Kilmichael on November 28, 1920, in which seventeen British Auxiliaries and three republicans were killed. Hourihane’s original verse lionized “the boys of Kilmichael, who feared not the might of the foe”. More than seven decades after this pivotal moment in the Anglo-Irish War, Galvin charged Ireland’s revisionist historians with disrespecting its revolutionary generation.

His polemic targeted especially the pioneering, controversial work of the late Canadian historian Peter Hart. Before his untimely death in 2010, Hart produced a series of essays and books identifying sectarianism in the republican campaign in west Cork during the Irish War of Independence. His assessment of the attack at Kilmichael contributed to his provocative critique. In *The IRA and its Enemies* (1998), for example, Hart contradicted the IRA commander Tom Barry’s heroic version of events. In his famous memoir *Guerilla Days in Ireland* (1949), Barry had claimed that the Auxiliaries

staged a false surrender, causing republican fatalities and compelling the IRA to give no quarter. Citing anonymized interviews with republican veterans, Hart’s book rejected Barry’s account, arguing instead that the Auxiliaries had surrendered sincerely, only for IRA volunteers to put them to death ruthlessly in a “massacre”. Sparking acrimonious arguments about the methods and ideologies of Ireland’s revolutionary generation, the Kilmichael debate became a *cause célèbre*, animating historians, commentators, politicians and the veterans’ descendants.

Eve Morrison has been a protagonist in these historiographical disputes for more than a decade. Her chapter in David Fitzpatrick’s edited collection *Terror in Ireland, 1916-1923* (2012), for example, endorsed Hart’s questioning of the “false surrender” account. In the letters pages of Irish newspapers several correspondents took Morrison - and the late Hart - to task. Claim and counterclaim grew increasingly rancorous. As Morrison notes in *Kilmichael: The life and afterlife of an ambush*, the furore surrounding the ambush has generated more heat than light.

Eschewing the “misinformation and slander” of those bitter historiographical exchanges, Morrison synthesizes her vast research on early-twentieth-century Irish republicanism, seeking both to clarify the historical record of the attack and to assess more fully its contested memory. Connecting comprehensive reading of the 1,773 witness statements - by which, from 1947, the Bureau of Military History collected veterans’ accounts of the conflict - and a perhaps unique trawl of republicans’ correspondence, private papers, and oral and written testimonies, Morrison is an authoritative voice. Throughout the book she marshals her sources to illustrate not only what activists and historians thought had happened at Kilmichael, but what they thought it meant throughout the twentieth century, as post-revolutionary Ireland struggled to define its foundation story and international position.

Morrison begins by reconstructing the ambush, situating its context at a pivotal stage of the Anglo-Irish War. Addressing the Lord Mayor’s banquet at the Guildhall in London on November 9, 1920, David Lloyd George, the prime minister, claimed that his government had “murder by the throat” in Ireland. Within three weeks, the ambush at Kilmichael - the single greatest loss of life suffered by crown forces during the war - signalled the hollowness of this boast. The following summer, with a truce agreed, Lloyd George met the president of Sinn Féin, Éamon de Valera, in London to propose a negotiated settlement. As Morrison shows, the momentous events at Kilmichael in November 1920 dismayed those in Whitehall who believed they were comprehensively winning the war, though she stops short of arguing that it brought the British to the table.

Her command of detail is undeniable, especially in her opening reconstruction of the attack. The

The memorial on the ambush site at Kilmichael, Co Cork

most thought-provoking aspects of the book, however, are the chapters that trace how the ambush has been retold, remembered and contested in Irish political life, both in the complex republican tradition and in vernacular memory. Alternately celebrated and vilified, Kilmichael figures here as what the French historian Pierre Nora called a *lieu de mémoire*, whose contentiousness illuminates the ambiguous and often uneasy place of Ireland’s “revolutionary decade” in the national story. Morrison’s book is especially welcome at the difficult conclusion of Ireland’s “decade of centenaries” - a century on from the internecine civil war that divided erstwhile republican comrades.

This forensically researched book details with acuity how even IRA volunteers in west Cork disagreed about the course of events and their wider ramifications. Veterans telling their war stories, Morrison argues, were generally loath to contradict their commander, Barry. For the most part republicans “wanted” to believe in the “false surrender ... not the chaotic, merciless event that much of the veterans’ testimony describes”. The close reading of activist memoir that Morrison offers is vital for unpacking and understanding these dissenting voices. There is a detailed discussion, for example, of *Towards Ireland Free* (1973), the incendiary memoir of the west Cork veteran Liam Deasy, whose brother Pat died at Kilmichael. Deasy’s version of events drew a blistering riposte from Barry, who described the book as a “travesty of history”.

Throughout Morrison’s book Barry appears as the principal guardian of the “false surrender” account. As she notes, throughout his long life his retellings of the ambush varied to a degree. But he maintained his central assertion: the Auxiliaries’ false surrender forced him to take no prisoners. Morrison’s evocation of the “polarising” Barry captures both his cachet within republicanism and his idiosyncrasies: “To some, he was the ‘man who would do things’, a ‘good bloody man’ and a ‘great soldier’. Others remembered an abrasive individual, respected but not particularly liked, who was notorious for wanting ‘to be top dog in everything’, bragging about his military prowess and dramatic entrances: ‘Do you know who I am?’”.

Especially after his bestselling memoir was published in 1949, Barry enjoyed his reputation as a renowned republican guerrilla. Yet throughout his life tactical dilemmas collided with his unshakeable ideals: like so many of his comrades, he resolutely endorsed republicans’ objectives while questioning their methods. He fervently opposed the Anglo-Irish Treaty, but by the spring of 1923 urged anti-Treaty IRA Irregulars to end what he considered a futile campaign against the nascent Irish Free State. In 1938, after a significant tactical disagreement on the General Army Convention, he resigned as IRA chief of staff. In the early 1970s Barry lauded the Provisional IRA’s insurrection against British

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rule. But he became increasingly critical of the Provisionals' tactics, not least after the Birmingham pub bombings in 1974, when twenty-one civilians were killed.

After the disputes that stemmed from *Towards Ireland Free*, Barry stopped attending official commemorations, instead simply laying a private wreath at the site of the attack. Representatives of the Republic of Ireland's two largest parties, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, eulogized the commander on his death in 1980. Only Hart's inquiries in the 1990s precipitated wholesale reassessment of Kilmichael.

Illustrating the unease and silences that have characterized many retrospectives of the ambush and its place in the republican campaign, Morrison skilfully elucidates how the outbreak of conflict in Northern Ireland in 1969 complicated ideals of national independence. Grandees in Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil alike routinely lauded the previous generation's struggle, but became anxious about the implications of republican insurgency in the north. During the 1970s and 1980s many of the "old IRA" veterans who glorified Kilmichael were at pains to distinguish themselves from the Provisional IRA volunteers who claimed to be continuing

the same struggle. Commentators who upheld the legitimacy of the "old IRA" sharpened their distinctions from the "terrorist" Provos. The late University College Cork historian and independent senator John A. Murphy, for example, positioned the Kilmichael ambush as part of a "story of resistance by a sturdy people to the oppressors of their class and nation", in contrast to the "terrorist" campaign of the Provisionals, who "disgraced" republicanism's name.

Morrison positions her "reasoned inquiry and honest disputation" as an antidote to the "toxic analytical framework" of the "revisionist-anti-revisionist" dichotomy that has, for many, defined Irish historiography since the mid-twentieth century. Yet despite its expert detail, *Kilmichael* sometimes misses the opportunity to explore explicitly the fundamental question of why the search for veracity has proven so sensitive and so acrimonious. The degree of controversy generated by the events in west Cork a century ago - or, rather, by their retrospective narration - surely illuminates much about the perennial controversies of nationhood that continue to resonate in Irish politics today. It is hard to disagree with Morrison's

assertion that it is "impossible to know exactly what happened at Kilmichael". The attack took place in a febrile atmosphere charged with ideology, suspicion and recrimination. Veterans subsequently disputed the events in which they had participated. There is, Morrison avers, "very little evidence" to support Barry's account of a false surrender. But nor do the sources wholly support Hart's depiction of a ruthless republican "massacre". Perhaps, as so often, the truth lies in between. The intractable discord surrounding Kilmichael reveals more about the chaotic context of the Irish War of Independence - and the continual contestation of its meaning - than about the precise sequence of events.

Nonetheless, Morrison's book constitutes above all a valuable illustration of how historians' interest in memory continues to enliven and enhance writing about the Irish past. As Ireland's decade of centenaries draws to a close, *Kilmichael* demonstrates how examining collective, contested memory, in all its complexity and contingency, enhances understandings of difficult pasts. Eve Morrison here provides a propitious lens through which to assess the disputed legacies of the Irish revolution more broadly. ■

Death at the door

How an adopted Ulsterman became a martyr to his province

EUNAN O'HALPIN

GREAT HATRED

The assassination of Field Marshal

Sir Henry Wilson MP

RONAN MCGREEVY

464pp. Faber. £20.



Detail of a portrait of Sir Henry Wilson by Sir William Orpen, 1919

THE DOORSTEP ASSASSINATION on June 22, 1922 of Field Marshal Sir Henry Wilson, a newly minted Ulster Unionist MP and recent chief of the imperial general staff, presents several paradoxes. A man born in Ireland was done to death by two men born in England, both wounded First World War veterans. Wilson died a martyr for a newly created province comprising only six of the nine counties of historic Ulster. Yet by rights he was a southern unionist. He was born in Currygrane, Longford, not even in a border county; it was by choice that he became an Ulsterman.

Wilson's killers, Reggie Dunne and Joe O'Sullivan, were second-generation immigrants born in London, and experienced IRA men. Each had also served voluntarily in the Great War, where O'Sullivan had lost his right leg below the knee. Having no getaway vehicle, they were pursued and captured by a posse of civilians and police, on whom they fired repeatedly until their ammunition was exhausted. Two constables and a civilian were wounded. The assassins were unequivocal and unrepentant. They said they acted on their own initiative in response to relentless attacks on Catholics in Belfast, which the new Northern government did nothing to discourage, and in which its new local security forces were implicated.

A particular strength of this gripping and handsomely illustrated book is the light it sheds on the killers. Dunne had attended a Jesuit secondary school, was training to become a teacher, and in prison took great solace in his knowledge of the classics and of music; O'Sullivan's family had somehow found the money to send him to a Catholic boarding school in Hertfordshire. (Among its alumni

was Cardinal Francis Bourne, Archbishop of Westminster from 1903 to 1935.)

What was Wilson's killing supposed to achieve? As Britain's military chief between 1918 and 1922, he had exercised a pragmatic and restraining influence on the conduct of security operations in Ireland. He thought it madness to fight terror with indiscriminate terror, recording in his diary his disgust at the private endorsement of "murder" by the prime minister, David Lloyd George. Like most professional soldiers of his era he believed that the military could subdue Ireland ruthlessly and efficiently given the resources to do so, within clear parameters rather than through murder by sleight of hand. Wilson was also sceptical of the establishment of the Ulster Special Constabulary in the autumn of 1920, predicting that this force would be an undisciplined, sectarian militia.

The killers' trial was brief but not unfair. Perhaps the defence might have argued that the presiding judge, Sir Montague Shearman, was parti pris: he had been a member of Lord Hardinge's shoddy inquiry into the 1916 Rising, which had completely ignored unionism's foundational role in the militarization of Irish popular politics since 1912. Shearman was not kind to the defendants, refusing Dunne's efforts to give a carefully composed speech from the dock. But the jury's verdict was never in doubt. The two men died together in Wandsworth prison on August 10, 1922. Their executioner, the Rochdale barber and newsagent John Ellis, was no stranger to Irish rebels: in 1916 he had hanged Roger Casement, and in 1920 Kevin Barry (this reviewer's great-uncle).

No one knows for sure why Wilson was killed in June 1922. As McGreevy and previous writers have

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shown, he had been on the IRA's target list for assassination before the Truce: to kill Britain's serving military chief would have been a notable propaganda coup. McGreevy's argument that Michael Collins was directly implicated in the assassination decision relies on a document reportedly seen briefly in 1999 by another researcher in the Irish Military Archives. It has since gone astray. In any case, its putative author Frank Thornton became something of a garrulous yarner, always at pains to set aside civil war differences despite his own brother's death at IRA hands. Even if Collins was not instrumental in the killing, however, his reported delight was juvenile: what possible benefit could Wilson's assassination confer on nationalists in Northern Ireland, already under the lash? And what could the British government do to ensure implementation of the Treaty, other than demand that Collins either crack down on the anti-Treaty IRA or stand aside while the British army did so?

If Wilson's murder was the spark that lit the fuse of civil war, that conflict turned out to be a rather damp, dismal squib. Independent Ireland emerged an imperfect but functioning democracy, and so it has remained. For that at least we can be grateful. ■

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WAR

THE ENORMOUS ROOM

E. E. CUMMINGS

288pp. NYRB Classics.

Paperback, \$16.95.

In 1917, fresh out of Harvard, E. E. Cummings volunteered for a private ambulance corps at the front in Europe, a popular move among Americans (such as Ernest Hemingway and John Dos Passos) who wished to help the war effort, but wanted to avoid conscription. In September Cummings and his fellow *conducteur volontaire* William Slater Brown were arrested under suspicion of espionage and sent to the French detention camp La Ferté Macé. *The Enormous Room*, now republished by NYRB Classics, is named for the space in which Cummings and Brown - "C." and "B." in the book - were held until their release in December.

C. and B. share the Room ("about 80 feet by 40") and its environs with detainees of all genders, ages and nationalities. Those inmates are forced to use pails as a toilet; many are infected with syphilis and still more are plagued by fleas. Yet against the odds, as the editor Nicholas Delbanco notes in his introduction to this edition, Cummings turns his incarceration into "a bit of a lark". C. finds the space "unmistakably ecclesiastical in feeling". His eye reveals fanciful and poetic details amid the misery, as when he writes of the crowding ("I felt like a glorious microbe in huge, absurd din irrevocably swathed") or of the appalling bread, which "smelled rather much like an old attic in which kites and other toys gradually are forgotten in a gentle darkness".

The canonical works of the First World War are most frequently concerned with the squandered lives of young men, yet Cummings's report invaluablely expands the reader's grasp of the catastrophe. One evening his bed breaks and he spends the night on the cold floor, waking "in the whitish dawn perfectly helpless with rheumatism". His effervescent boyishness temporarily deflated, he contemplates how those not blessed with the endurance and vitality of youth could possibly survive the Room: "If it is marvellous that old men and sick men can stand this and not die, it is certainly miraculous that girls of eleven and fifteen, and the baby which I once saw being caressed out in the women's *cour* with unspeakable gentleness by a little *putain* whose name I do not know ... can stand this and not die".

The Enormous Room was originally published before Cummings's debut collection of poems, *Tulips and Chimneys* (1923), and exhibits much of the fragmentary style and lively spirit for which his poetry

would become known. Yet beneath these flourishes lies a sincere and biting critique of those responsible for the conflict, which rings as true now, in the book's centenary year, as it did then. "Let us, also and softly, admit", Cummings writes, "that it takes a good and great government perfectly to negate mercy." **Kathleen Rooney**

LIBERALISM

NOT THINKING LIKE A LIBERAL

RAYMOND GEUSS

224pp. Harvard University Press. £23.95 (US \$29.95).

Is his new memoir, *Not Thinking Like a Liberal*, the philosopher Raymond Geuss recounts his journey towards critical theory and explores his relationship with liberalism. He starts with the observation that liberal capitalism has been unravelling over the past decade or so, yet it remains the basic framework structuring political, economic and social thought in the English-speaking world. Geuss wants to examine the alternatives, the intellectual currents and trajectories that fall outside liberalism. The project complements a previous work, *Philosophy and Real Politics* (2008) in which he critiqued liberal political philosophy (and particularly Rawlsianism, his fellow American philosopher John Rawls's theory of justice as fairness). Geuss's strategy here is not to refute the mainstream view from an external position, but rather to trace the intellectual path of his life as he moved away from a belief in the liberal consensus to something quite distinctly different.

He recounts his education at a Catholic boarding school in Pennsylvania in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Sent there by his father, a steelworker, and mother, a secretary, he found a world of "dense and highly theoretically reflected history", with intellectual foundations different from those that dominated the US in the postwar period. The school was staffed (and attended in large part) by Hungarian exiles; the Piarists, the religious order who maintained the school, were devoted to teaching. As Geuss vividly describes it, they ascribed great weight to the value of education, with a particular focus on a kind of "existential Catholicism" - "Heidegger, together with Dostoevsky, Nietzsche, Freud, Sartre, and (especially) Camus, were simply an integral part of the atmosphere we all breathed in my boarding school". The experience left Geuss questioning the central concepts of liberalism, such as reason, the sovereign individual and a liberal understanding of authority. It also gave him quite a

different set of intellectual referents and tools from those available to most anglophone theorists. He goes on to recall his time at Columbia University and in Freiburg, Germany, reading the work of Theodor W. Adorno.

By intertwining autobiography and conceptual critique, Geuss underlines the idea that in order to gain a critical perspective on liberalism, it is necessary to become almost bilingual: able to speak the language of liberalism while also becoming fluent in the vocabulary of its critique. **George Hoare**

AUTOFICTION

DIEGO GARCIA NATASHA SOOBRAMANIAN AND LUKE WILLIAMS

240pp. Fitzcarraldo.

Paperback, £12.99.

In 1973 the British government forcefully evicted the people of Chagos (an archipelago of seven atolls that, as a territory, had been detached from the sovereignty of Mauritius eight years earlier) in order for the US to use one island, Diego Garcia, as a military base: Camp Justice. The International Court of Justice and the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea have since called for Britain to "bring an end its administration in Chagos as rapidly as possible". Britain has continually ignored this, as well as the pleas of Chagossians still unable to return home.

Diego Garcia, a collaborative novel about "real events" by Natasha Soobramanien and Luke Williams, follows two authors, Damaris and Oliver Pablo, who are struggling to write about a missing Chagossian friend. As much a critical enquiry as a piece of fiction, the novel asks what "fiction as solidarity look[s] like" and how "you tell a story that needs to be shared, if it is not *your* story". As the publishing industry places increasing value on "own voice" stories, *Diego Garcia* - a joint autofiction about writing "the other" - shuns notions of writers having "unimpeded extractive rights to the world's narrative resources" and instead experiments "with how to be accountable to the communities that [outside writers] document".

After a meandering start during which the reader is the one to feel like an outsider, eavesdropping on the narrators' in-jokes and private language, Damaris begins to write from a Chagossian perspective, fictionalizing two "real" stories in a voice that is not her own. Oliver then critiques her: "it's just a story she says. Yes but not *yours*".

Soobramanien and Williams complicate the ownership of voice on the sentence level, writing in a

third-person plural. But this shared voice often splits into "he" and "she", reflecting a larger fracture in the narrators' friendship. The sense is of a novel composed of fragments, restlessly shifting. *Diego Garcia* ends with an email chain in which the "we" becomes "I" and "you"; Damaris quotes widely from other voices to produce two opposing answers to the novel's central question. On the one hand there is the *écriture publique*: the public writer who works as a scribe for the illiterate. On the other there is the need to "inhabit" the stories of others. Damaris quotes the Mauritian author Shenaz Patel, who has written both fiction and nonfiction about Chagos: "solidarity is to write from the *inside*".

Is writing in solidarity, then, a question of writing *for* the other or writing *from the perspective of* the other? The questioning is the point. As an experiment in "fictive criticism", this is a new type of social novel, one that avoids stable conclusions. Instead it demands the reader's own critique. **Gurnaik Johal**

SMYRNA

SMYRNA IN FLAMES HOMERO ARIDJIS

Translated by Lorna Scott Fox

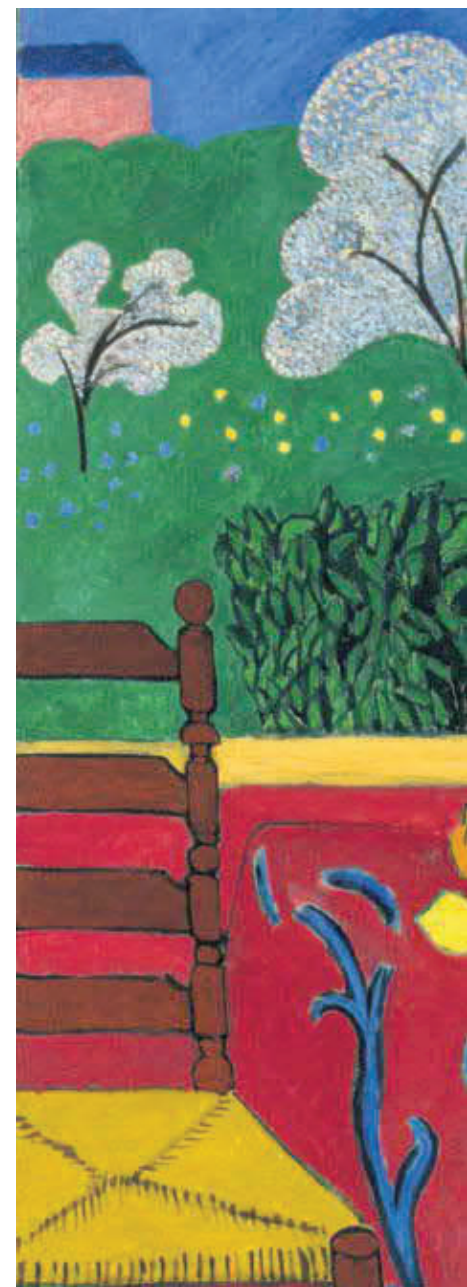
166pp. Mandel Vilar Press.

Paperback, £14.99 (US \$19.95).

September 13, 2022, marks the centenary of the horrific Great Fire of Smyrna. It might be expected that scores of books and articles on the topic will be published. What might not be expected is a harrowing novella-cum-family memoir by the Mexican author Homero Aridjis.

Aridjis, a poet, novelist and environmental activist, is half Greek. His father, Nicias, ended up in Smyrna at the end of the Greco-Turkish War, as part of the retreating Greek army, and witnessed the inferno. When the ancient port city was set ablaze - by pro-Turkish forces, according to most accounts - its Greek, Armenian and Levantine quarters were reduced to ashes and rubble over a period of nine days. It is thought that as many as 100,000 died, not just as a result of the conflagration, but also from slaughter by Turkish troops, suicide and drowning, as panicked inhabitants crowded onto the quay, hoping to escape. Allied warships stood at anchor in the harbour, maintaining a chilly neutrality in the face of humanitarian disaster. The horrors Nicias Aridjis witnessed led him to emigrate to Mexico, never to return.

This distressing history is retold by Aridjis in *Smyrna in Flames*, which draws on his father's experiences as well as scholarship and



"Harmony in Red (The Red Room)" by Henri Matisse, 1908; from *Matisse: The Red Studio* by Ann Temkin and Dorte Aagesen (224pp. MoMA. \$55.)

other eye-witness accounts, including the memoir of the US consul, George Horton. There is a danger in historical fiction of disaster tourism (there are many graphic rape scenes included here, for example), but Aridjis maintains an artistic distance. He uses literary tropes - the names of ships at anchor recall the catalogue of ships in the *Iliad*; a Cavafy poem becomes the literal writing on the wall - and there is an element of the surreal. At one point a group of escapees from a mental hospital wanders through the burning city. They imagine themselves to be early saints. In another striking scene Georgios Hatzianesti, the Greek commander-in-chief who oversaw the defeat, is afraid to stand up because he believes his legs are made of glass. What seems like magical realism or metaphor turns out to be fact: reportedly, Hatzianesti did suffer from this delusion.

While the Kemalist Turkish forces and Çetes (brigands who did much of the dirty work) are sometimes rendered as orientalised caricatures, Aridjis reserves some of his harshest criticism for the "neutral" western powers, who stood idly by as the disaster unfolded. The book is not all devastation, however. There is an



interlude in which Nicias recalls his father's delight in growing figs.

As a plotted novel, *Smyrna in Flames* doesn't always hold together, but as a lyric exploration of human failings and cruelty it is honest and powerful. Complete with footnotes, photographs and maps, it is a genre-blurring work, lucidly translated by Lorna Scott Fox. The book's final photograph illustrates how Aridjis's family adapted to a life away from Smyrna. It shows an elderly Nicias in his orchard in Mexico, cradling an armful of figs.

A. E. Stallings

ANGLOPHONES

VERNACULAR ENGLISH

Reading the anglophone in postcolonial India
AKSHYA SAXENA

232pp. Princeton University Press. Paperback, £28 (US \$35).

This is a book that states the obvious: that the English language in India exists, and has existed for a long time, as “a people's language”, outside school-rooms, the curriculum or elite society. Those who have spent any time in India can see this, yet this insight has not yet robustly and substantially made its way into academic theorization. That lacuna will no doubt be filled by this book, as it places “vernacular” and “English” not in opposition to each other,

but in a complex relationality. Akshya Saxena, who teaches at Vanderbilt University in the US, begins with a preface that startles by juxtaposing two radically disparate figures: India's current prime minister, Narendra Modi, and Rohith Vemula, a young Dalit student who died by suicide in 2016 while protesting against caste prejudice. Modi's occasional use of the English language (his mockery in 2017 of Amartya Sen, a fierce critic, for “belonging” to Harvard rather than, like him, to a place of “hard work” isn't mentioned in the book) and Vemula's eloquent suicide note are placed side by side to emphasize the book's theme: “the life of the English language in post-colonial India”.

Saxena investigates how millions of Indians who do not speak or understand English “experience its ubiquitous presence”. She is not merely asking for English to be considered as another Indian language, but suggesting that scholars try to understand “what becomes intelligible as English” to those who do not speak it. To do so she looks at “Law” (the construction of English as an administrative language); “Caste” (in the way “touch” manifests itself in Dalit writers' use of the language, and as “desire” in the work of Mulk Raj Anand and Aravind Adiga); “Sound” or orality (as a language of protest for Manipuri women and in the work of Arundhati Roy and Mahasweta Devi); and “Sight”, or what she calls “cinematic English”, through

two popular recent films set in Mumbai, *Slumdog Millionaire* and *Gully Boy*.

In its scope, then, Saxena's book covers the familiar ground of postcolonial and cultural studies. It sticks emphatically to post-independence India, although there is no reason why colonial India should not be included in its ambit. It would have been interesting to look at examples of wonderfully vernacular English in books such as Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* or R. K. Narayan's *Swami and Friends*. To elide print culture and the “literary” writer's participation in the world of vernacular English – apart from doing so somewhat instrumentally, as with Srilal Shukla or Devi – is a loss, but inevitable, perhaps, in a book formed within the American academy, given its particular concerns.

Rosinka Chaudhuri

HOMELAND

HOME/LAND

A memoir of departure and return
REBECCA MEAD

240pp. Grove Press UK. £14.99.

“It was time for movement”, writes Rebecca Mead – the author of *The Road to Middlemarch: My life with George Eliot* (2014) and a long-serving staffer at the *New Yorker* – of her difficult decision to

relocate to the UK with her husband and teenage son in 2018. Her reasons were varied and complex: the deteriorating political situation in America, along with a desire to “make a change ... before unsought change was visited upon us”, and an urge to nurture her son's “native cosmopolitanism”. Aware that the move would involve upheaval and displacement, giving up “comforts and continuities” – Mead had lived in New York City for thirty years – she nevertheless “hoped and trusted that we would be stimulated by placing ourselves in a new context”.

Mead arrives in London, where she was born and lived briefly before her family moved to the seaside town of Weymouth, aware that the city has always been for her “a concept rather than a place”. She finds the streets quiet, the skies “mutable”, the gardens overrun by cats and foxes, and the knife-crime rate exceeding that of New York. In precise, elegant prose she describes the bracing delights of Hampstead Heath's bathing ponds, and is liberated by walking London's streets and squares, meditating on the city's famous chroniclers – Charles Dickens, Virginia Woolf, Graham Greene, painters such as Walter Sickert – and her own working-class roots. “I am captured by a fantasy of ancestry”, she writes, after becoming “a deracinated New Yorker”.

Indeed, NYC is never far from Mead's thoughts, despite the fact that she always regarded her residence there as provisional. The pre-9/11 city in which she arrived as a young woman is vividly evoked: “exhaust fumes, hot-dog smoke, watermelon, rot”. In one outstanding paragraph she recalls buying a red cashmere swing coat, which swirled around her as she “strode along Forty-Second Street ... the thrilling costume of my independence and ambition”, only to give it to a thrift store later; then, in middle age, finding a replacement in London, in a Kentish Town charity shop: “woody green ... muted and subtle ... the negative image of the confident scarlet coat of my twenties”.

Restlessness and a sense of “never quite feeling at home in my home”, stalks the narrative. From her base in London, Mead makes raids “like a Viking in reverse” on coastal towns, including Weymouth, where she muses on Thomas Hardy, the Saxon princess Saint Hild and even Morrissey, whose song “Everyday Is Like Sunday” ignites a sharp nostalgia for her teenage self.

Home/Land wanders at a gentle pace, “sifting through fragments”, making at times tenuous imaginative leaps, but succeeds as a lyrical, often elegiac inquiry into the nature of place and identity. Ultimately, Mead writes, “home is not merely where one lives ... it can also be the place that one has carefully, imaginatively made into one's own”.

James Cook

BLACKPOOL FC

HOW NOT TO RUN A FOOTBALL CLUB

Protests, boycotts, court cases – the inside story of Blackpool FC

NATHAN FOGG

254pp. Pitch. £16.99.

In an age when football clubs have become playthings for billionaire oligarchs and investment opportunities for sovereign wealth funds, the expectations and responsibilities of club owners are the subject of much debate and scrutiny. Thus, Nathan Fogg's thorough examination of the recent off-field history of Blackpool FC, and in particular its ownership by the Oyston family, which might at face value seem like a local story, tells us much about the state of the modern game.

Fogg writes with the passion of a fan; his love of Blackpool is evident. Yet this does not cloud what is a meticulously researched, clinical dissection of a turbulent period in the club's history after it was bought in 1986 by Owen Oyston, a local businessman and self-made millionaire. Ten years after the purchase, Oyston, then sixty-two, was convicted of the rape and indecent assault of a sixteen-year-old girl. While he was in jail, first his wife, Vicki, then their son, Karl, took over the reins of the club. Despite the latter's parsimonious approach, over the space of a decade the club enjoyed a fairy-tale rise from the bottom tier of the Football League to the Premier League.

They were relegated after just a year, and two more relegations followed in the next six seasons. Fans of other clubs might have thought this was simply the story of a “small” club that had overreached, but a judge subsequently determined that Owen and Karl Oyston had “illegitimately stripped” the club of £26.77 million. In many respects that figure is abstract – it is the numerous stories alleging disregard for players, staff and fans that hammer home the owners' apparent attitude (and, given that the text underwent an “invaluable legal edit”, one has to wonder if more was left out).

For the Oyston family, money talked. So the fans began to speak their language, refusing en masse to attend games or buy merchandise, thus denying the owners revenue. It was the only way they could fight back while never truly turning their back on the club. This long-term boycott was cited by the High Court judge who eventually removed Owen Oyston from the board and placed the club into receivership so that it could move on. (Blackpool finished 16th in the Championship in the 2021-2 season.) It was proof, if proof were needed, that no matter who owns a football club, the fans are its true custodians. ■

Roger Domeneghetti

Too much information

The growth and development of social technologies

N. J. ENFIELD

INFORMATION

A historical companion

ANN BLAIR ET AL, EDITORS

904pp. Princeton University Press. £50 (US \$65).



MARSHALL McLuhan declared that, with the advent of television and mass electronic media, the 1960s ushered in an “age of information”. But this claim can be faulted by at least an order of magnitude, according to the editors of this remarkable compendium. Of course television was transformative. But then so was radio before that, the telephone before that, the telegraph, printed newspapers, movable type, block printing and so on, going back to the invention of writing itself.

The historical scope of *Information: A historical companion* coincides roughly with two key developments in the fifteenth century: the uptake in Europe of movable type in printing and the dawn of a global information economy inaugurated by Columbus’s journeys to the Americas. This rollicking tome covers

enormous ground in mostly miniature forays, letting the reader dip in or dive deep at will. Thirteen full-length chapters trace histories of information in Europe, East Asia and the medieval Islamic world, exploring the growth and development of the information networks, technologies and practices that have transformed the world in the past five or so centuries. These are followed by more than a hundred bite-size mini essays on diverse topics, from Lists to Letters, Book Catalogues to Bells and Scribes to Scrolls and Rolls.

I rushed to consult the entry on Professors, where I learnt that I am “a handler of information for the purpose of creating new information”. This injunction to generate new information is the great driver not only of professors’ pleasures, but also of our

Innovative rotating file columns, c.1955

pressures, required as we are to publish or die. (To gain some insight into how universities foster this, consult the entries on Bureaucracy and Surveilling.) But merely publishing academic papers does not necessarily create new information, at least not of the right kind. The professor must go beyond mere commentary or recycling if she wishes to avoid being judged “a tasteless compiler”, as Alexander von Humboldt warned. This fear has driven the creative ambitions of professors for centuries.

As one tours the extraordinary breadth of topics covered in the volume, a breezy sense of fascination gives way at a certain point to exhaustion as the feeling emerges that information has thoroughly taken over our minds, lives, daily and lifelong occupations. We have embraced information and in turn it has colonized us. We now spend our lives seeking it, creating it, sharing it, regulating it, selling it, stealing it, coveting it and hoarding it.

Each “age of information” owes its revolutionary flavour to changes in the way data travel from mind to mind. Before the era of readily distributed print, if you wanted certain information you had to know who possessed it and where they could be found, and then you had to go there. This created many of the early opportunities and innovations surveyed in this book. For example, when, in nineteenth-century Munich, the philology professor Eduard Wölfflin oversaw the construction of a collection of “millions of slips documenting the use of Latin words”, he wagered that “numerous scholars will be forced to seek out the university in Munich”. Thanks to generations of obsessive visionaries, you can now access the vast Latin vocabulary database that began with Wölfflin from anywhere on the planet with an internet connection. The information - once uniquely inscribed on Wölfflin’s yellowing library slips and now hosted on the website of the Bayerische Akademie der Wissenschaften - can be beamed up and reconstructed elsewhere, as if in an episode of *Star Trek*.

Such beaming of information seems magical, but it is merely a variation on a fundamental theme in the economy of information. Language itself - the original social technology - allows information to be passed among humans by just such a protocol for reconstruction. We don’t literally receive packets of information; rather, we encounter sounds, gestures, ink marks or other impressions and build meaning. By giving us a way of “instructing the imagination”, as the linguist Daniel Dor has put it, language delivered the greatest information revolution of all more than 50,000 years ago - at least two orders earlier than the historical scope of this book. If language is so important, does it matter that none of the essays in *Information* address it directly, and that there is no entry on language in the glossary, nor even in the forty-page subject index? Perhaps this omission is because language is so central to virtually every study, from Accounting to Xylography, of the recording and conveying of information in human affairs. Still, it is as if a team of fish had convened a 900-page companion to the world’s rivers and oceans, then seen fit to omit an entry on Water. ■

“**We have embraced information and in turn it has colonized us. We now spend our lives seeking it, creating it, sharing it, regulating it, selling it, stealing it, coveting it and hoarding it**”

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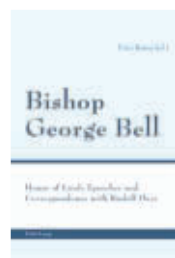
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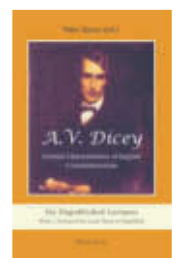
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Memory loss

CRAIG RAINE

TRANSIENT GLOBAL AMNESIA (TGA) is a temporary loss of memory. It can erase immediate short-term events and semi-permanent fixtures such as PIN numbers. The impairment isn't associated with epilepsy or stroke. It is more like an everyday computer catastrophe, an arbitrary event: screen blackout, then rebooting, self-repairing and (usually) recovering lost information. There aren't many poems about it - but there are poems that approximate, involving forgetfulness of fundamentals, the elimination of essentials.

Wordsworth's "Surprised by Joy" is a famous and still freshly painful example. In it, he turns instinctively to share some astonishing, unspecified experience with his daughter. He has forgotten the unforgettable - that she has died, aged three. He is incredulous that this permanent open wound should have surreptitiously, unaccountably, shamefully, have receded into the shadowy margins, usurped by excitement. He is stunned by the impossibility of what has stealthily taken place in his mind. "But how could I forget thee? Through what power, / Even for the least division of an hour, / Have I been so beguiled as to be blind, / To my most grievous loss!"

The sonnet is a parable of consciousness and the blank interstices of its apparent unbroken continuity. We can forget even trauma. Sometimes the trauma is so painful it is unthinkable: Emily Dickinson's "There is a pain - so utter - / It swallows substance up - / Then covers the Abyss with Trance - / So Memory can step / Around - across - upon

it - / As one within a Swoon - / Goes safely - where an open eye - / Would drop Him - Bone by bone."

In A. E. Housman's "XLII A. J. J.", "When he's returned I'll tell him", Housman forgets the death of Adalbert James Jackson, the younger brother of his beloved Moses Jackson: "When he's returned I'll tell him - oh, / Dear fellow, I forgot: / Time was you would have cared to know, / But now it matters not. // I mourn you, and you heed not how ..." It's a slight poem, touched with sentimentality - "that heart of gold, / That grace, that manhood, gone" - and its laconic tone is likely to seem perfunctory. A resignation quite different from Wordsworth's renewed pain.

We aren't in complete control of our minds. The mind has a mind of its own. Isaac Bashevis Singer, in his memoir *Love and Exile*, describes how, on board ship to America, speaking only Yiddish, he leaves his cabin for food - and forgets the cabin number, then remembers it, only to forget it again. He is resigned to spending the rest of the voyage wandering around the ship. Singer is something of an aficionado of memory hiatus. In his novel *Enemies: A love story*, Masha halts her headlong delivery: "Why am I bringing this up? Oh, yes!"

In *Love and Exile* Singer repeats this trope three times. Gina is telling him about her astral experiences: "Why am I telling you all this? Yes ..." There are four more examples in *The Family Moskat*, *Shosha*, *The Slave* and the short story "The Joke". These repetitions render the original acute observation - the lost thread - threadbare. Ironically, they also show Singer himself failing to remember the observation's previous outings. That's why I'm telling you this! It seems incredible that Singer didn't

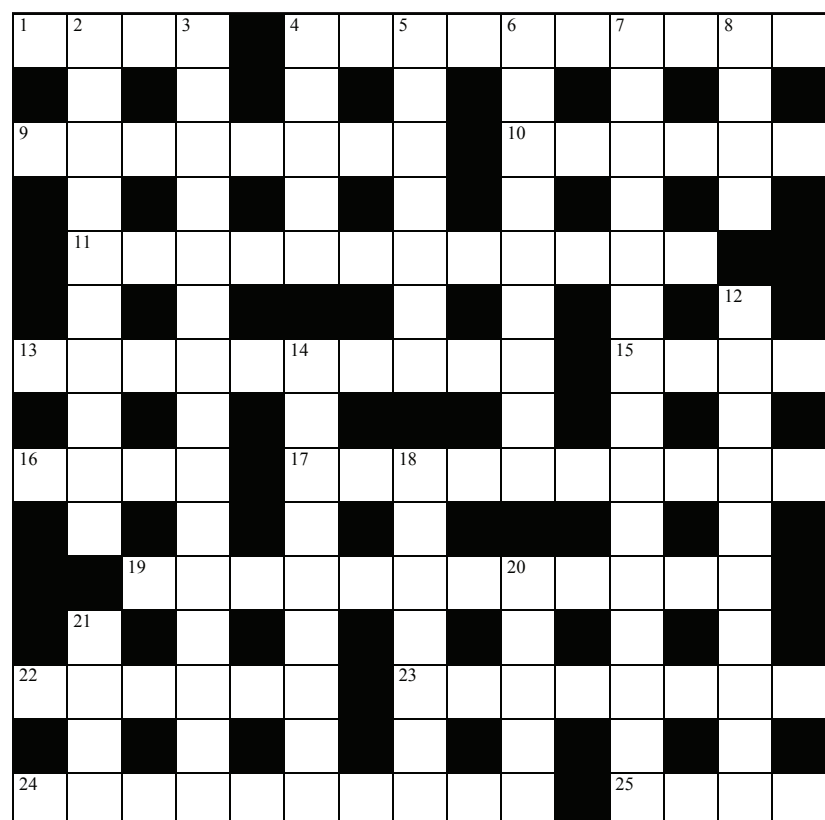
notice how often hiatus - stop and search - occurred in his fiction.

But we can forget anything. One of the great moments in *À la recherche du temps perdu* is, counterintuitively, a moment of forgetting. In *The Guermantes Way*, Marcel reflects that we always see the people who are dear to us in "the perpetual motion of our incessant love for them". There is a good deal of pious, wordy meditation and exculpation before Proust finally discloses the damning admission that, in the interval of not seeing his grandmother, he has forgotten what she looks like. He has forgotten, too, his habitual, unconscious strategies for disguising the unforgivable truth: "for the first time and for a moment only, since she vanished very quickly, I saw, sitting on the sofa beneath the lamp, red-faced, heavy and vulgar, sick, day-dreaming, letting her slightly crazed eyes wander over a book, an overburdened old woman whom I did not know." The truth here is painful - "red-faced, heavy and vulgar" - so painful that even at the moment of truth, there is reflex dilution, diversion and mitigation - "day-dreaming, letting her slightly crazed eyes wander over a book".

Coda: when my play *1953* was performed at the Glasgow Citizens Theatre in 1992, the protagonist was played by Greg Hicks. The production was in the studio theatre, so the nervous actors were only inches away from the first-night critics. They could see the fluff in the end of Michael Billington's biro. Hicks was in Nazi uniform. He cracked his heels together, raised his arm in the Hitler salute - and paused for a very, very long time before saying "General Count Klaus Maria von Orestes, / seconded from the Eastern front". (You can, *pace* Birdboot, the critic in Stoppard's *The Real Inspector Hound*, start with a pause.) Afterwards, in the dressing room, I praised his fantastically effective pause. What was the thinking behind it? "I forgot my name", Hicks said. ■

Craig Raine is Emeritus Fellow in English at New College, Oxford. His most recent book is *My Grandmother's Glass Eye: A look at poetry*, 2016

TLS CROSSWORD 1435 BY BROTEAS



ACROSS

- 1 One who worships an emperor mostly backing a similar ruler (4)
- 4 Tragedian, or old hack possessed by brazen presumption, introduced by host? (10)
- 9 Bones that are seen in circles? (8)
- 10 "Ay, in the very temple of Delight / — Melancholy has her sovran shrine" (Keats) (6)
- 11 A medieval profiteering estate manager and wine maker is Gabriel's domineering father (6, 6)
- 13 Lazy liar working with me as a fictional quartet member (5, 5)
- 15 Gloomy poet making a comeback (4)
- 16 March to play for money with hotel pianist (4)
- 17 Low grade piano - bottom standard? (4, 6)
- 19 Violently belt Satan with bat - he's a monster (7, 5)
- 22 San Marino, your foremost nominally ancient example of a city state (6)
- 23 After a bit of testing, personal letters are sent here (4, 4)
- 24 Foster revolution after rebellious activity starts, in a 1974 tale about betrayal (4, 6)
- 25 Story with youth beginning to come to a service (4)

DOWN

- 2 Explosive essay on ace revolutionary playwright (4, 6)
- 3 Transport company issue - it involves a wartime exile from Russia (7, 8)
- 4 Austrian novelist's unfinished artistic creation (long) (5)
- 5 This fuel, note, is in the can (7)
- 6 Lout entertaining low life in a debut novel about a dysfunctional family (5, 4)
- 7 Archdeacon's daughter, still angry, raged furiously (8, 7)
- 8 A place you can be in sometimes - "office", reportedly (4)
- 12 Pretty girl with frown about a bit of trouble in novel about the sixties (5, 5)
- 14 A Spanish dance to finish off an afternoon party (9)
- 18 Audibly lament over new feature in church - a gap in the upper storey? (7)
- 20 Attack in which ace ensnares Spitfire at last (5)
- 21 Some problem made Charles's bored wife an adulteress (4)

SOLUTION TO CROSSWORD 1431

The winner of Crossword 1431 is L. J. Broady, of Bradford

The sender of the first correct solution opened on August 5, 2022, will receive a cash prize of £40. Entries should be addressed to TLS Crossword 1435, 1 London Bridge Street, London SE1 9GF



Knives out

What do Philip Larkin, Margaret Thatcher and James Callaghan have in common? They all claimed that Thomas Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* was their favourite poem.

This much Larkin himself learnt in 1985, from an anthology called *My Favourite Poem*, edited by Mary Wilson. The poet, the former Labour prime minister and the former Labour prime minister's Conservative successor had contributed to Wilson's anthology - although only Larkin could claim a further distinction relating to it. "Why aren't I Prime Minister?", he asked his future biographer Andrew Motion. "Yours truly is the only one proposing & proposed."

Larkin may not be around to propose a favourite poem, but it is possible to imagine a high-ranking politician or two proposing a poem of his for the modern equivalent of such an anthology - especially since the hoo-hah over Larkin's removal from the poetry anthology of one of the country's main GCSE exam boards.

Reports were widespread last month of how the board in question, OCR, was committing "cultural vandalism", in the words of the then education secretary, Nadhim Zahawi, by ditching "An Arundel Tomb", alongside several

other cherished zingers of the poetic canon by Wilfred Owen, Seamus Heaney and Gerard Manley Hopkins, in favour of what *The Times* was pleased to call "poets from more diverse backgrounds". The board might reasonably point out that it is retaining poems by Blake, Keats and Sylvia Plath, among others, in its anthology; and that it has a duty to refresh its offerings from time to time. But the wrongs and rights of the situation are immaterial. In political terms, Larkin is merely all the more readily available now to be championed by anyone in the crowd of craps he so disdained, for the scoring of an easy political point. And if not "An Arundel Tomb" itself, surely a politician or two could drop a hint about their long-standing admiration for a poem such as "Money" ("I listen to money singing")?

We can only hope that the more responsible sort of political journalist has spent the past week trying to get the legion of Tory candidates for the job of prime minister, with Mr Zahawi among them, to name their favourite Larkin poems (or just any poem, really). We, in turn, have been pursuing our own very responsible line of enquiry, and wondering which out of the legion Larkin would have chosen as his preferred prime minister.

The answer would perhaps depend on how seriously you take Larkin's various remarks about "rampaging hordes of blacks" who "steal anything they can lay their hands on", or about the "bloody Paki next door" ("Kick 'em out"). Such aperçus have been known to put people off a poet as well as, unfortunately, his poetry. To certain would-be leaders of the modern Tory party, they could pass for manifesto pledges.

To return from such mysteries to answer only our initial question: we reckon that Larkin would have voted for whichever candidate could have most closely approximated his beloved Mrs Thatcher, in policy as in demeanour.

That's "la divine" Thatcher - yes, we write with a copy of Larkin's *Selected Letters* to hand - whose plans to "slim the universities" Larkin admired so much. "None is to be closed (shame!) but ... some people will get the DCM (Don't Come Monday)." "What a blade of steel!" he gushed after meeting her at a dinner in 1982. "Watching her was like watching a top-class tennis player; no 'uh-huh, well, what do other people think about that', just bang back over the net." Nor was the infatuation dimmed when Larkin declined the laureateship a couple of years later. If anything, he besottedly prophesied, it was the country ("too idle and selfish") that would let down this "superb creature" - "I wish I liked the other



members of her party 1/4 as much".

Above all, there was the time when Thatcher paid Larkin a "great compliment" regarding what she described as his "wonderful poem about a girl". Larkin wasn't sure which wonderful poem the divine one was complimenting him on. "You know", she said. "Her mind was full of knives." The two gentle admirers of Gray's *Elegy* could bond over this slightly misquoted line from "Deceptions" ("I thought if it weren't spontaneous she'd have got it right", Larkin reflected), although, as any woke exam board can tell you, the interpretation of poetry is a complex business. "I also thought that she might think a mind full of knives rather along her own lines" - that flash of steel once more - "not that I don't kiss the ground she treads."

Larkin was born a hundred years ago, on August 9, 1922; and the BBC is marking the occasion with a series of short programmes, *Larkin Revisited*, to be broadcast next month. "Larkin's poems still divide opinion", the press release opines. The Poet Laureate, Simon Armitage, will use his time on air to pick through ten of these "iconic" yet "agitational" poems to reflect on his own fascination with Larkin, as well as the "uglier attitudes of this complex and contradictory poet".

A minor fictional centenary, meanwhile, has just passed. A hundred years ago, in F. Scott Fitzgerald's imagination, the young Nick Carraway was knocking around Long Island and getting to know that cove Jay Gatsby. On one occasion, in Fitzgerald's novel, Nick uses the "empty spaces of a timetable" to jot down the names of those who "accepted Gatsby's hospitality and paid him the subtle tribute of knowing nothing whatever about him". The timetable - "disintegrating at its folds" by the time Nick comes to tell his story - is "in effect July 5th, 1922". It's not exactly Bloomsday. But it does have us wondering if we should have been paying more attention to fictional anniversaries all along, in lieu of their less varied, "IRL" equivalents.

One of Larkin's poetic masters, Thomas Hardy, is the subject of an exhibition in the West Country this summer, taking place across four museums. *Hardy's Wessex: The landscapes that inspired a writer*, which runs until October 30, is said to be the largest exhibition yet about the author; it includes rarities and previously unseen oddities such as Hardy's first landscape sketch (at the Wiltshire Museum in Devizes), his dog-handle walking stick (at the Dorset Museum in Dorchester) and his first wife Emma's notebook (at Poole Museum). "I was immediately arrested by his familiar appearance", she wrote of their first encounter, "as if I had seen him in a dream."

Pictured above is an item now on display at the Salisbury Museum: the kettle that belonged to Mary Hardy, the author's paternal grandmother, who lived with the family at Bockhampton. Is Nadhim Zahawi au fait with Hardy's poem "One We Knew"? Read it for yourself as your own kettle boils; imagine the tales the boy Hardy must have heard, in which the follies of the great undoubtedly figured:

She told of that far-back day
when they learnt astounded
Of the death of the King of
France:
Of the Terror; and then
Bonaparte's unbounded
Ambition and arrogance.

M. C.

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