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Figurative painter **Riley Holloway** currently works out of Dallas. He attended The Art Institute of Dallas and the Florence Academy of Art, after which he was awarded an artist residency at The Fairmont Hotel in Dallas. Holloway is best known for his dynamic work and fresh look at figurative art. His images are often accompanied by text and other personal references embedded within the work. Holloway uses a bold painterly technique to create depth within the portraits. Holloway's aesthetics create familiar spaces that are rich in storytelling, free from constraints, and true to his subjects. Holloway's technique is undeniable and his content is rich in both drama, history and intimacy.

Jammie Holmes is a self-taught painter from Thibodaux, Louisiana, whose work tells the story of contemporary life for many black families in the Deep South. Through portraiture and tableaux, Holmes depicts stories of the celebrations and struggles of everyday life, with particular attention paid to a profound sense of place. Growing up 20 minutes from the Mississippi River, Holmes was surrounded by the

social and economic consequences of America's dark past, situated within a deep pocket of the Sun Belt, where reminders of slavery exist alongside labor union conflicts that have fluctuated in intensity since the Thibodaux Massacre of 1887. His work is a counterpoint to the romantic mythology of Louisiana as a hub of charming hospitality, an idea that has perpetuated in order to hide the deep scars of poverty and racism that have structured life in the state for centuries.

Letitia Huckaby has a degree in Journalism from the University of Oklahoma, a BFA from the Art Institute of Boston in photography and her Master's degree from the University of North Texas in Denton. Huckaby has exhibited as an emerging artist at Phillips New York, the Camden Palace Hotel in Cork City, Ireland, and the Texas Biennial at Blue Star Contemporary Art Museum. Huckaby is a featured artist in *MAP2020: The Further We Roll, The More We Gain* at the Amon Carter Museum and State of the Art 2020 at The Momentary and Crystal Bridges Museum, both opened in the spring of 2020.

Sedrick Huckaby was born in Fort Worth, Texas in 1975. He received his formal education from Boston University and Yale University. After his formal education he traveled internationally to study old master painting. Eventually Huckaby moved back to his hometown of Fort Worth. A Guggenheim Fellowship and a Joan Mitchell Award are among the numerous accolades that he has received. Huckaby is currently an associate professor of painting at The University of Texas at Arlington. He is represented by Valley House Gallery in Dallas and Philip Martin Gallery in Los Angeles.

Amit Majumdar is a poet, novelist, essayist, and translator. His latest books include *Godsong: A Verse Translation of the Bhagavad-Gita*, with Commentary (Knopf, 2018) and the poetry collection *What He Did in Solitary* (Knopf, 2020). Recent novels published in India include *Sitayana* (Penguin Random House India, 2019) and *Soar* (Penguin Random House India, 2020). The former first Poet Laureate of Ohio, he is also a diagnostic nuclear radiologist in Westerville, Ohio, where he lives with his wife and three children.

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Lydia Pyne is a writer and historian, interested in the history of science and material culture. She has degrees in history and anthropology and a PhD in history and philosophy of science from Arizona State University. Her field and archival work has ranged from South Africa, Ethiopia, and Uzbekistan, as well as the American Southwest. She is the author of *Bookshelf; Seven Skeletons: the Evolution of the World's Most Famous Human Fossils; and Genuine Fakes: How Phony Things Teach Us About the Real World*. Her writing has appeared in *The Atlantic*, *Nautilus*, *Slate*, *History Today*, *Archaeology*, and *TIME*, as well as *The Public Domain Review*; she is currently a visiting researcher at the Institute for Historical Studies at the University of Texas at Austin. Lydia lives in Austin, where she is an avid rock climber and mountain biker.

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China. The Republic of Sakha (Siberia) declared him a “Cultural Hero” for his cultural revitalization work. From 2006 to 2019 he worked as a narrative consultant and Creative Director for Hanson Robotics, Hong Kong. He has published two books; his academic writings have appeared in numerous international journals. See deadwhitezombies.com and thomasriccio.com.

Mark Rosen is Associate Professor of Visual and Performing Arts at the University of Texas at Dallas, where he also currently serves as Associate Dean of Undergraduate Studies for the School of Arts and Humanities. A specialist in early modern art and cartography, he is the author of *The Mapping of Power in Renaissance Italy* (Cambridge University Press, 2015) and has published in *The Art Bulletin*, *Oud Holland*, the *Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz*, and other journals. He also currently is President of the Italian Art Society.

Jane Saginaw is a student in the Ph.D. Program in Humanities at the University of Texas at Dallas, where her interests include American domestic life during the Second World War. Her memoir, *Because the World is Round*, is the story of a trip around the world that she took in 1970 with her wheelchair-bound mother who was paralyzed by polio. Before returning to graduate school, Jane was a trial lawyer in Dallas with the law firm of Baron and Budd. She later served in the Clinton Administration as the Regional Administrator of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Region Six. In 2006, she was awarded Trial Lawyer of the Year by Trial Lawyers for Public Justice in recognition of her work on *Venezuela vs. Hughes Aircraft*, a case involving groundwater contaminated with trichloroethylene. Jane’s undergraduate degree was awarded in cultural geography from the University of California, Berkeley. Her law degree is from the University of Texas at Austin. Jane is married, has three adult children, and is an avid traveler to foreign countries and internal landscapes.

Nomi Stone is a poet and an anthropologist, and the author of two poetry collections, *Stranger’s Notebook* (TriQuarterly 2008) and *Kill Class* (Tupelo 2019). Winner of a Pushcart Prize, Stone’s poems appear recently in *POETRY*, *American Poetry Review*, *The New Republic*, *The Best American Poetry*, *Tin House*, *New England Review*, and elsewhere. She has a PhD in Anthropology from Columbia, an MPhil in Middle East Studies from Oxford, and an MFA in Poetry from Warren Wilson, and she is an Assistant Professor in Poetry at the University of Texas, Dallas.

Evita Tezeno is a Port Arthur, Texas native, and graduate of Lamar University. Her works of art consist of collages with cubism influences. Her bold use of color, texture, and shapes are the core of her collages. Inspired by images from her childhood, Evita translates these memories through mixed media, combining handmade papers, acrylic paints and found objects. Her work is collected by many famous entertainers, media personalities and athletes including Samuel L. Jackson,

Denzel Washington, Star Jones, and Susan Taylor. As the recipient of the prestigious Elizabeth Catlett Award for The New Power Generation hosted by Hampton University, she has paved a career as a sought after multi-disciplined female artist. She has been commissioned by the Essence Music Festival in New Orleans, The Dallas’ Deep Ellum Film Festival as well as the 30th annual New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival. Her work can also be found in the permanent collection of the Embassy of Madagascar.

Frederick Turner’s science fiction epic poems led to his being a consultant for NASA’s long-range futures group, through which he met Carl Sagan and other space scientists. He received Hungary’s highest literary honor for his translations of Hungarian poetry with the distinguished scholar and Holocaust survivor Zsuzsanna Ozsváth, won Poetry’s Levinson Prize, and has often been nominated for the Nobel Prize in literature. Born in England, raised in Africa by his anthropologist parents Victor and Edie Turner, and educated at Oxford University, he is also known as a Shakespearean scholar, a leading theorist of environmentalism, an authority on the philosophy of Time, and the poet laureate of traditional Karate. He is the author of about 40 books, ranging from literary monographs through cultural criticism and science commentary to poetry and translations. He has taught at UC Santa Barbara and Kenyon College, edited the Kenyon Review, and is presently Founders Professor of Arts and Humanities at the University of Texas at Dallas. Recent publications include *Light Within the Shade: 800 Years of Hungarian Poetry*, translated and edited by Frederick Turner and Zsuzsanna Ozsváth, Syracuse University Press, 2014; *Apocalypse: An Epic Poem*, Baen Books (ebook) and Ilium Press (hardback and paperback), 2016; *More Light: Selected Poems, 2004-2016*, Mundus Artium Press, 2017; and *The Golden Goblet: Selected Poems of Goethe*, translated and edited by Frederick Turner and Zsuzsanna Ozsváth, Deep Vellum Press, 2019.

Desireé Vaniecia is a contemporary painter who lives and works in Dallas, Texas. Raised in a matriarchal home, her work pays homage to her family and their legacy. Her distinctive personal style challenges a stereotype of black women constructed by society and the media. Her portraiture evokes both vulnerability and strength in the figures, either through posture, physical interaction, or compositional format. Gesture and poses are presented as powerful, whether through sexuality or assurance, while facial expressions and anatomical detail are left reduced and neutral within empty or vague settings.

Dr. Weiyi Wu is a research associate of The School of Arts, Nanjing University. As an 2018-2019 junior fellow with the Institute for the Study of American Art in China, she visited the Edith O’Donnell Institute of Art History and carried out research on native American art. Her research interests include American native modernism and historiography of modernist art.

1

ART WORLDS

What We Talk About When We Talk About Leonardo

Mark Rosen

Associate Professor of Visual and Performing Arts
The University of Texas at Dallas

Walter Isaacson, *Leonardo da Vinci*. Simon and Schuster, 624pp., \$22 paper.

Martin Kemp, *Living with Leonardo: Fifty Years of Sanity and Insanity in the Art World and Beyond*. Thames and Hudson, 288pp., \$35 cloth.

L EONARDO DA VINCI'S SALVATOR MUNDI has been in and out of the news. It is the world's most expensive painting, having sold for \$450.3 million dollars at a Christie's auction in 2017. No one's seen it for a while, but it's believed to be somewhere in the Persian Gulf. Or in storage, where the owner can avoid paying duties. It's been heavily restored, with less than a quarter of its surface original to the late fifteenth or early sixteenth century. It may have been painted by Leonardo with assistance. Actually, it might not be by the artist's hand at all.

The painting is like a shell company, or a shell game. Many millions of dollars are at stake, and in a mutually fulfilling show of synergy, the restorers, auction houses, and speculators lean hard on museums and scholars to validate their a priori conclusions. The *Salvator Mundi* is one of several new works, supposedly by Leonardo, that have come to light in recent years after resting in private hands for decades.¹ Not completely previously unknown to scholars, the *Salvator Mundi*, the so-called *Bella Principessa* (more on that one later), and the early variations on the *Mona Lisa* (with the Prado version being given special attention in the past couple years) are now put forward with well-financed bouts

¹ From here on out I'll follow tradition, descending from Italian scholarship and usage, in calling him "Leonardo" rather than "da Vinci," much as I'd refer to the great thirteenth-century reformer as "St. Francis" rather than "Assisi." Dan Brown has a lot to answer for besides this unfortunate coinage, but in the age of editorial cutbacks "da Vinci" is sadly starting to creep into reputable publications.



Figure 1 "Léonardo de Vinci," installation view. Musée du Louvre, Oct. 24 2019 to Feb. 24, 2020. Photo © Musée du Louvre / Antoine Mongodin.

of publicity and videos advocating their acceptance. On more solid ground, two 2019–20 exhibitions—"Leonardo: A Life in Drawing" (London and Edinburgh) of 200 sheets from the Royal Collection at Windsor Castle, and the eponymous career-spanning Louvre blockbuster (Figure 1)—sold out every ticketed slot, while even a show on the artist's teacher and later colleague Verrocchio at the National Gallery in Washington made much of its Leonardo connections, spotlighting his portrait of *Ginevra de' Benci* at the center of the exhibition. The 2019 renovation of the Louvre's Salle des États in anticipation of the quincentenary of the artist's death relocated the *Mona Lisa* to the hall featuring Rubens's phenomenal Marie de' Medici cycle, which was overrun with

anxious pilgrims forced into serpentine queues (Figure 2). Meanwhile, major restorations are undertaken on the few surviving and well-documented works in major collections, with the Louvre *Madonna and Child with St. Anne* receiving widespread criticism for overcleaning its surface and the unfinished Uffizi *Adoration of the Magi* earning praise by removing some of the panel's later overpaint to reveal a near-crystalline level of brush drawing on the surface.

Because there's a finite number of works, and seeing them in person can be a challenge (scalpers control most of the timed-entry tickets to *The Last Supper* in Milan and most of the artist's drawings are normally kept far from public view), perhaps these new frenzies are inevitable. Moreover, interest in



Figure 2 *The Mona Lisa* on view in the Galerie Médicis, Musée du Louvre, summer 2019.
Photo: Musée du Louvre.

Leonardo is not limited to the public or to museum curators; scholarly work remains vibrant, with established curators Carmen Bambach of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and Martin Clayton of the Royal Collection Trust contributing substantive new monographic studies; established academics like Claire Farago and Frank Fehrenbach continuing to find new topics to illuminate; and young scholars like Leslie Geddes and Francesca Borgo moving beyond the paleographic approach that defined Leonardo studies for nearly a century. That tradition, which in the English-speaking world dates back to Kenneth Clark's 1935 catalog on Leonardo's Windsor drawings, had a nearly unbroken chain, with Clark's onetime assistant Carlo Pedretti devoting nearly his entire sixty-plus-year scholarly career to the artist. (Pedretti, who actually bought a villa in a town

neighboring Vinci and lived there in the last years of his life, was a jolly and extravagant presence, calling up lines from the artist's notebooks easily by memory.) Martin Kemp, emeritus of the University of Oxford, is currently the senior traditionalist of Leonardo scholars, even if many of his recent publications have been surprisingly accepting of new attributions.

With the majority of the artist's sheets and manuscripts in private hands or largely inaccessible before the era of photography, Clark, Pedretti, and Kemp performed an important role in Leonardo scholarship as the first group to consider the entirety of his output, not simply a scattered selection of damaged, decaying, badly restored, or overly visited paintings. It's easy to forget that the popular picture of Leonardo as an inventor of machines (and the many science-museum

exhibitions that have followed) and as a scholar of anatomy was essentially formed in the twentieth century as his manuscripts and drawings were widely published for the first time. Unlike, say, Michelangelo, whose most important works remained intact and visible in historically important buildings, Leonardo received a dramatic image upgrade beginning in the era of photography and ramping up in the late twentieth century, as his private, schematic, or unfinished thoughts became a gathering point for humanist reflection on the possibilities of the interdisciplinary mind.

Even so, the recent flood of interest does seem astonishing, and the field remains fiercely contested. Productivity gurus like to use Leonardo as a free-floating avatar for human problem-solving, often divorced from many of the contexts (drainage, warfare, exegesis of ancient texts) that actually generated those ideas. Others get lost in or overwhelmed by the new digital editions of the once-inaccessible bound manuscripts, such as the Codex Leicester and the Codex Arundel. The fact that over the past half century, the former has passed hands from old British nobility to petroleum tycoon Armand Hammer (who during his ownership renamed it the “Codex Hammer”) to Bill Gates, gives a sense of the magnetic pull of money toward the totemic power of Leonardo’s unpublished thoughts.

It does seem worth a moment’s pause to consider what we want out of Leonardo, and two recent books aimed beyond specialists, Walter Isaacson’s best seller *Leonardo da Vinci* and Martin Kemp’s *Living with Leonardo*, open up that discussion. I should mention that these are hardly the only recent books in the field, which include *The Last Leonardo* (New York, 2019), Ben Lewis’s journalistic account of the recent saga of the *Salvator Mundi*, and curator Carmen Bambach’s four-volume *Leonardo da Vinci Rediscovered* (New Haven, 2019), the latter of which will probably take a few years for even specialists to absorb. Isaacson and Kemp reflect differing approaches to why Leonardo matters,

and why his unanswered riddles continue to attract both novice visitors and lifelong obsessives. Many laypeople are instantly familiar with a handful of works (*The Last Supper*, *The Mona Lisa*, *Vitruvian Man*) and may have visited a science museum with recently produced three-dimensional models based on the artist’s sketches; maybe they’ve seen an anatomical drawing or a sketch of horses, and a sheet of a bearded, balding older gentleman believed by some to be a self portrait. Yet it can be difficult to tally the artist’s character based on these disparate data points without expert assistance. These books aim to reach those who haven’t necessarily spent their lives deep in the weeds of Leonardo studies. One is directed to those wanting to learn practical life lessons from Leonardo’s example; the other charts a life spent literally contemplating the artist’s works and career, with battle-bruised wisdom to share with the outside world.

Isaacson’s Leonardo is not just a Renaissance man, but part of his ongoing series of great-minds biographies that include Benjamin Franklin, Albert Einstein, and Steve Jobs. What do these men have in common? Perhaps the answer can be most easily ascertained by citing another title, of a book edited by Isaacson in 2010: *Profiles in Leadership: Historians on the Elusive Quality of Greatness*. Each biography is presented both as a step-by-step charting of its subject’s unusual career path while trying to draw out practical or moral applications beyond the contingencies of their moments. In Isaacson’s telling, each of these biographical subjects is simultaneously iconic and iconoclastic, both the best example of what they do and the least typical.

Despite the daunting historiographic tradition descending from Clark, there’s no reason that an outsider like Isaacson cannot make a useful foray into the field; many of the debates for lifers are questions of paleography and chronology that may not have strong repercussions on the overall impression. To his credit, Isaacson doesn’t cheat in his

Leonardo biography—he attempts to cover the entire career, and has consulted most of the important authors, to put together his general-interest study. Beyond B-school consultants, the book is also intended to reach casually interested tourists about to make their first trek to Paris or Milan, although at a weight of over three pounds the hardback is traveler-unfriendly.

“His genius was of the type we can understand, even take lessons from,” the introduction to Isaacson’s *Leonardo da Vinci* assures us. “It was based on skills we can aspire to improve in ourselves, such as curiosity and intense observation.” Or, later: “One mark of a great mind is the willingness to change it.” From the conclusion: “His life offers a wealth of lessons. *Be curious, relentlessly curious.*” Sounds great, but to Be Like Leo also takes immense graphic skill, years and years of apprenticeship and training, deep-pocketed and patient patrons, and reasonably safe sinecures that care little about immediate results. Most of these probably sound like wondrous dreams to the debt-riddled college graduate, and wastes of time to results-oriented employers and confounded parents. Plus there’s also the ineffable origins of the nature of genius itself, which nobody—not even Leonardo’s most talented and original contemporaries—ever really doubted (nor should they have) was a rare thing indeed, and that Leonardo possessed it. We can’t really easily account for that part. Even Freud struggled to explain him: “[Regarding] the artistic gift and the capacity for work, being intimately bound up with sublimation, we must admit that the essence of the artistic function also remains inaccessible to psychoanalysis.” Nonetheless, Leonardo’s vegetarianism, homosexuality, recurring dreams of deluges, and preference for female portrait subjects—these were all run through the Freudian process without much useful practical advice for acolytes of either the artistic process or psychoanalysis, and were taken apart by Meyer Schapiro in his endlessly

rereadable 1956 “Leonardo and Freud: An Art-Historical Study.”

We see echoes of Freud’s approach in Isaacson at times: “As a gay, illegitimate artist twice accused of sodomy, he knew what it was like to be regarded, and to regard yourself, as different.” This sets up an ineffable yearning to solve nature’s riddles:

His curiosity, like that of Einstein, often was about phenomena that most people over the age of ten no longer puzzle about: Why is the sky blue? How are clouds formed? Why can our eyes see only in a straight line? What is yawning? Einstein said he marveled about questions others found mundane because he was slow in learning to talk as child. For Leonardo, this talent may have been connected to growing up with a love of nature while not being overly schooled in received wisdom.

Despite such table-setting, however, Isaacson’s is a conventional biography, for the most part, charting Leonardo’s moves and accomplishments chronologically. The young Leonardo bristled at the constraints of artistic production in Quattrocento Florence, an ostensible republic under the control of the Medici and its partisans. Working alongside Verrocchio and then on his own in the 1470s, he found the demands of its patronage system—usually with contractual obligations to deliver a work by an established deadline, then to search out the next project—antithetical to the kind of untethered exploration he would later become famous for. An artist could go stretches between jobs, preparing studies or *modelli* without any compensation whatsoever, and Leonardo’s slow pace and imperviousness to pressure gave him major disadvantages in that competitive mercantilist system. What was especially remarkable about his attitude was that he succeeded (multiple times!) in finding court appointments that provided him a regular salary and time to pursue his expanding interests. His two periods in Milan and final years in France were not entirely free from the expectation that he produce

works—*The Last Supper* and the aborted Sforza equestrian monument most famously, and also the more standard production of court artists like portraits and ephemeral decorations. But during those periods he was allowed much more time to pursue studies of optics, anatomy, weaponry, machinery, and much else besides. Upon his return to Florence in his middle age (from around 1500 to 1505), he was highly enough regarded (vide his friendship with Machiavelli) that he could pick and choose artistic projects (*Mona Lisa*, *The Battle of Anghiari*) while also serving both Florence and others (notably papal son/military commander Cesare Borgia) in matters relating to engineering, hydrography, warfare, and cartography.

Isacson regards these skills, requiring discrete talents and years of study, as evidence of “a combinatory creativity... able to perceive the details and patterns of nature and then remix them in imaginative combinations.” The author is aware that the chronology of Leonardo’s manuscripts is far from settled, and has been the subject of never-ending debate in terms of their direct linkage to actual projects, but this makes him a difficult biographical subject from which to derive easy takeaways. We know the general contours of where he was and with whom he worked; the big commissions (the two iterations of *The Madonna of the Rocks*, the Sforza Horse, *The Last Supper*, *The Battle of Anghiari*) have fairly secure documentation and contemporary witnesses. But it is precisely in the undated notebook sheets for unrealized or unspecified projects that Leonardo’s “remix” ability (if we must use that construct) seems most powerful. While we can trace the design evolution of the perspective or figure groupings in *The Adoration of the Magi* or identify bends of the Arno for which a water project was designed, many resist the Freudian approach because they still remain elusively unmoored from life events, at least to the best of our present knowledge. Chronology and causality are hardly the only things that matter in a biographical portrait, but in Isaacson’s book

we’re left plodding through mostly familiar ground without fresh eyes, seeking practical connections to our present overworked condition. In a sense, at this moment of history a traditional biography alone feels insufficient, especially to the tech-savvy, information-overloaded clientele it imagines as its audience. The many recent interactive editions (both apps and websites) may provide more useful tools for those readers, allowing them to select their own area of interest and giving them the ability to experientially poke around for a while rather than following a standard birth-to-death itinerary.

Clark, Pedretti, and Kemp performed an important role in Leonardo scholarship as the first group to consider the entirety of his output.

The other recent book, Martin Kemp’s *Living with Leonardo: Fifty Years of Sanity and Insanity in the Art World and Beyond*, is altogether different from Isaacson’s study. The title is apt. Kemp’s book is an intellectual biography of his flirtation and then deep-seated romance with Leonardo studies, a project only now winding down after decades supervising countless MA and Ph.D. theses at the University of Oxford. After a brief mention of growing up in a middle-class community “deeply suspicious of foreigners” and a short resume of his academic itinerary in the first dozen pages, almost no other extracurricular information is shared. It’s purely devoted to only the parts of his life connected to Vinciana.

Like Pedretti, Kemp has considered nearly every facet of the artist’s output, from anatomy to engineering to artistic technique, and he has produced the most widely read English edition of Leonardo’s writings on art

(*Leonardo on Painting* [New Haven, 2001]) and the best general-interest monographic study in any language (*Leonardo da Vinci: The Marvellous Works of Nature and Man* [Oxford, 1981; rev. 2006]). At the start of Kemp's career, he recognized that tackling Leonardo was probably a lifelong commitment: "He looked big and difficult—the sort of figure you should either do wholeheartedly, or not at all." Before diving into that fateful choice, Kemp wrote his first book on Venetian colorist Cima di Conegliano, a near-exact contemporary of Leonardo. And over the decades, he has produced substantial non-Leonardo books, most notably *The Science of Art* (New Haven, 1992), *Behind the Picture* (New Haven, 1997), and a new edition of Alberti's *On Painting* (London, 1991). But since the early 1970s, he has returned to the artist repeatedly, especially over the past twenty years, when he's been called to weigh in on current controversies or author catalog essays for dozens of Leonardo-related exhibitions worldwide.

As someone whose research has gained greatly from the advances made by Clark, Pedretti, and other twentieth-century scholars, Kemp is acutely aware that almost every supposition made about the artist remains provisional, even at this late date. *Living with Leonardo* is larded with qualifications, necessarily so. "Each age claims that it has reached the right solution, and present assumptions are likely to be superseded," he notes about *The Last Supper*. "Seeing is a malleable business." He judiciously lashes out at those who would cheapen the artist's name and work, such as the "conspiratorial codswallop" of *The Da Vinci Code* and other conspiracy-minded websites. Participating in the Leonardo business, with its never-ending stream of supplicants looking for a connoisseur to sign off on their latest finds, must wear out a scholar, which makes it remarkable that his tone throughout seems measured, tolerant, and patient. Not long before the publication of this book, Kemp made a statement on his website that he was retiring from offering

opinions on new attributions; the Internet age had made it a nearly full-time job for him, and one with huge financial and legal ramifications.

The last case Kemp spent significant time with became the most controversial in his career. While the *Salvator Mundi* generated healthy conversation before its sale and is taken seriously by most experts (Kemp is convinced, though its attribution as a fully autograph Leonardo remains unsettled among many), the ink-and-pastel-on-vellum female portrait that emerged from a private collection in 1998 is a different matter (Figure 3). The Christie's sale that year identified it as "German School, Early 19th Century: The Head of a young girl in Profile to the left in Renaissance Dress, pen and brown ink, bodycolor on vellum." In other words, the auction house, which had little incentive to be overly cautious, saw the work as a Romantic fantasia on Renaissance themes. From the formality of its profile format to the Spanish-inspired clothing of the sitter to her *coazzone* (the horsetail-like braided and bejeweled coiffure), the drawing clearly is "set" in late Quattrocento/early Cinquecento Milan, and can be cross-referenced to portraits from that era by Ambrogio de' Predis, Giovanni Antonio Boltraffio, and Leonardo himself. But the whole history of art (not to mention of forgery) had those other works available to study as well, and the long-running historical fascination of Academic artists reviving Renaissance subjects or motifs (Ingres's 1818 *Death of Leonardo da Vinci* in the Petit Palais being a prominent example) would be worth keeping in mind when approaching this drawing of uncertain provenance. At that auction it sold to a New York dealer for \$19,000.

Kemp was perhaps inevitably drawn into the melee via Peter Silverman, who had bought the drawing from the dealer in 2008 for \$21,000, claiming he had been haunted for a decade that he hadn't managed to secure it at the 1998 auction. Silverman was making the rounds of experts, some of whom—the formidable



Figure 3 *La Bella Principessa*. Ink and pastel on vellum, 33 x 24 cm. Wikimedia / Public domain.

Leo Steinberg and Carmen Bambach, for example—dismissed it out of hand. Others were curious and could see it as a late Quattrocento work, even if its format (partly pastel on vellum) was hugely unusual for the period. Kemp reluctantly agreed to have a look, and trekked to a Zurich freeport (where collectors are allowed to store their holdings tax-free, and where the portrait remains even today) to render judgment. “The first moments are always edgy. If a certain ‘zing’ does not occur, the encounter is going to be hard going. The portrait ‘zinged’ decisively.” Once seduced, Kemp went all in on joining with technical analysts and other curators to produce a circuitous explanation for this work, which unlike the *Salvator Mundi* had no substantive contemporary evidence to suggest its creation by someone in Leonardo’s circle. He quaintly dubbed the work *La Bella Principessa* (The Beautiful Princess) and at the end of his researches believed its subject to be Bianca Maria Sforza, daughter of Galeazzo Maria Sforza and Bona of Savoy, Duke and Duchess of Milan. A NOVA episode, “Mystery of a Masterpiece,” ran on PBS in 2012, starring Kemp and Silverman and making a leading case for the work’s acceptance as an autograph Leonardo. In the program, Silverman especially plays up his “eye” in seeing the work as a Leonardo long before anyone else, as if its obvious allusions to Renaissance Milanese portrait conventions were somehow overlooked by experts rather than recognized as conscious and studious references to known works. Kemp is shown investigating the vellum and, via technical analysis, claiming it as a sheet from 1496 torn out of a manuscript, the *Sforziada*, today in the National Library in Warsaw. A few naysayers, such as the illustrious Renaissance drawings scholar David Ekserdjian of the University of Leicester, were brought in to speak against the work, but in terms of screen time they’re vastly outnumbered. Kemp’s involvement with the attribution is detailed in *Living with Leonardo*

with considerably less hyperbole than in the NOVA video or the two books on the portrait that Kemp co-authored with French technical advisor Pascal Cotte. But no second thoughts, other than “I do sometimes wonder if I should have left others to stick their necks out.” Much of the establishment remains unconvinced, including the Met’s Bambach and the Albertina’s director Klaus Albrecht Schröder. I too have many doubts, and believe the Christie’s description—a German emulation of an Italian mode—seems eminently reasonable. Many believe it’s an outright twentieth-century fake made for gullible investors.

Isaacson also gives an account of the attempts to authenticate the work, mostly based on interviews with Kemp and the scholar’s published writings. What’s the meaning of this hullabaloo, to Isaacson? It “provides us with some insights into what we do and do not know about Leonardo’s art.” Despite the shrugging vagueness of that phrase, it’s strangely accurate in this case. At times viewers and historians have to take a long journey to grasp Leonardo’s work; it does not unravel its secrets easily to outsiders, nor did the artist leave us with simple instructions. The fact that so many of his sheets are filled with text, some even presentably legible, does not mitigate the fact that his research was not prepared in publishable form in his lifetime, nor that so many of his painted works were left unfinished or deteriorating. Yet his cultural capital still holds sway; witness Beyoncé and Jay-Z’s “Apes***t” video, in which the couple’s time alone in front of the *Mona Lisa* is the ultimate signifier of status. But there’s still a lot of reimagining left to be done in Leonardo scholarship. His work was always an ongoing project, rich in depth and at times impenetrable to the prying eyes of outsiders, even those who devote years to its pursuit. What becomes clear from these two recent books, and the others that continuously arrive, is that we’re still at a relatively early age in Leonardo studies. **A**

A Weird, Unique Lushness

Brian Allen

El Greco: Ambition and Defiance. Réunion des musées nationaux–Grand Palais, Paris, Oct. 14, 2019 to Feb. 10, 2020; The Art Institute of Chicago, May 7 to Sept. 7, 2020.

El Greco: Ambition and Defiance, edited by Rebecca J. Long, with essays by Keith Christiansen, Richard L. Kagan, Guillaume Kientz, Rebecca J. Long, Felipe Pereda, Jose Riello, and Leticia Ruiz Gomez, and contributions by Jena K. Carvana. Distributed by Yale University Press, 200pp., 148 color ills., \$50 cloth.

LIKE A HUCKSTER, I TELL WHOEVER listens: “If there’s an El Greco show, run, don’t walk, to see it.” Domenikos Theotokopoulos, called El Greco (1541-1614) is almost always arrestingly good. You don’t have to believe anything spiritual to find yourself bewitched by his acidic palette, fantastic settings, and writhing, soaring saints. He’s exotic, with an amalgamated name evoking Crete, Italy, and Spain. Over nearly forty years in Toledo, his exoticism, aided, no doubt, by a disputatious, risk taking character, fermented more than ripened. Today, he’s seen as a unique genius.

El Greco: Ambition and Defiance is the new survey organized by the Grand Palais in Paris and the Art Institute of Chicago. I saw it at both places. Over the past years, I’ve seen a dozen El Greco shows, starting with the 1982 retrospective. He’s the gift that keeps on giving. Both the exhibition and the book dazzle.

Ambition and Defiance follows El Greco’s career, beginning with his early days making icons, small and rote, with flat airless spaces and stiff, isolated, stern figures. In his mid-twenties, he moved to Venice in hopes of entering the high-end market for portraits and religious pictures. There, he absorbed a warm Venetian palette and painterly style, and learned volumes about composition. Possibly, he worked in Titian’s shop. He found an ally and mentor, the prominent miniaturist Giulio Clovio, then in his seventies, who introduced him to Cardinal Alessandro Farnese, Rome’s biggest and most discerning art patron.

He arrived in Rome in 1570 and worked among Farnese’s stable of artists until he offended someone important, possibly the cardinal, possibly for claiming Michelangelo couldn’t paint figures and that, by the way,

he'd happily repaint his *Last Judgment* in the Sistine Chapel to show everyone how figures ought to be painted. We don't know. We know he was bounced from Farnese's clan. Since artists say insulting things about other artists all the time, it's likely his crime was to have aggravated everyone through consistent pushiness. Though he had a modest portrait business in Rome, off to Toledo he went.

Moving to Toledo to decorate a new chapel—and a showstopper it is—he tried to enter the circle of Philip II's court, painting *The Martyrdom of St. Maurice and the Theban Legion*, which the king didn't like, and *The Disrobing of Christ* for the cathedral in Toledo, which the sacristans there didn't like. Neither king nor cathedral hired him again. He spent the rest of his career in Toledo, doing some big altarpiece projects but mostly devotional pictures for homes and small chapels.

Run, don't walk, to see an El Greco show, and *Ambition and Defiance* is a good one. The works on view—about fifty-five, more or less, with some changes at each venue—are splendid. There are roughly forty lenders, showing that the curators sought the best, wherever it was. Awe is the operative emotion in seeing so much great work, so adroitly arranged.

El Greco's *Assumption of the Virgin*, painted in Toledo in 1577-79 and owned by the Art Institute, dominates the main gallery in both Chicago and Paris (Figure 1). Both shows have subsequent galleries dedicated to the artist's big portrait business. Both devote much space to El Greco's repertoire of saints and to his facility of drawing new angles on established tropes. Both treat his late work, differently but nicely, and both consider how he organized his studio and the issue of work done by both him and his assistants, usually his son.

Walking up the Art Institute's grand staircase, there is the show's star, *The Assumption of the Virgin*. It's one of the museum's big hits under any circumstances,

and it's the centerpiece of El Greco's first Toledo commission. *The Holy Trinity* from the Prado is in this gallery, also by El Greco and originally displayed above *The Assumption* as part of the nine-painting chapel extravaganza from the convent of Santo Domingo el Antiguo (Figure 2).

The exhibition marks the first time that the two have been reunited in over two hundred years. This commission has been exhaustively explored over the years, but it's worth repeating that El Greco was recruited for the job in Rome by the Toledan patron, who wanted a complex program done in the latest Roman style. El Greco was by then floundering, scorned by the Farnese court and stuck on a portraitist's treadmill. He offered a good price and, presumably, some good lines, and he was willing to go to Toledo.

A wall mural in this gallery in Chicago shows the altarpiece as it exists now, with some of El Greco's nine paintings still in situ and copies of *The Assumption* and *The Trinity*. This wall mural is a good idea. It's the best way to show art that didn't or couldn't make it to the galleries. It also conveys the size of the project. The exhibition is, after all, about El Greco's ambition, and he'd never done anything as remotely complicated in terms of numbers of figures and narrative complexity, nor had he ever designed altar architecture. *The Assumption of the Virgin* is gorgeous on its own, but it's about thrust and, installed in Toledo, was of a piece with *The Trinity*, placed above it and the denouement of Jesus's life on earth.

When El Greco got to Toledo, he was, after all, 35 and not young. What to do with the work he did before? From the late 1560s until 1576, El Greco developed quickly from making icons, which aren't especially fetching (and, in any event, present problems of attribution), to *Saint Francis Receiving the Stigmata* from 1567-70, a figure in a landscape and still a compositional push for the artist, to the movingly direct 1571 bust portrait

Christ Carrying the Cross, two *Annunciations*, and San Diego's group picture, *Adoration of the Shepherds* from about 1576. In Chicago, this storyline is pushed to the side. In Paris, these small pictures were in cases, in a packed narrow space where no one could see them.

The rush to get to Chicago's *Assumption* is understandable. It's the splashiest thing in the show, with weighty figures and bold animation, thirteen feet from top to bottom. The Art Institute's the host and wants to strut its best stuff. *The Trinity*, though inspired directly by a Durer print, is a sinuous male nude, Jesus, held convincingly by God and surrounded by angels. Together, the two are considered by scholars as El Greco at the very moment he became El Greco, an atomic blast of vision and confidence.

Still, I knew we'd taken a big shortcut. I wanted to know more about Rome. The first two essays in the catalogue explore in gratifying depth El Greco's development there. Keith Christensen's essay explains the obvious—El Greco didn't spring fully formed from the head of Zeus or anyone else—yet I didn't know the backstory, or at least the Rome story. Neither, I suspect, did the visitors to the show.

I've done many exhibitions, and I know the show in the galleries and the show interpreted in the catalogue can't always match. To a degree, for brevity's sake and because of the challenges of getting loans, the show we see at the museum sometimes seems like the movie version of a long novel. Some storylines and characters need to be dropped. Alas, this happens a lot in *Ambition and Defiance*.

There hasn't been an exhibition of El Greco in Rome, and I couldn't help thinking that Rome forged El Greco, making of him the artist he became in Toledo. Rome in the 1570s was not quite in an aesthetic hangover. It's better to say that after the deaths of Michelangelo in 1564 the bees in the hive moved less quickly, with less focus and elan, not directionless but set in their ways as

though waiting for the next new thing to occur, which, of course, it did in Caravaggio. We call it the death throes of Mannerism.

Christensen's essay develops a milieu where El Greco saw work by Federico Zuccaro, Girolamo Muziano, Marcelo Venusti, Scipione Pulzone, and Marco Pino, artists he knew and from whom he learned. Titian and Tintoretto were always in his mind as his beacon lights but here are Correggio, Beccafumi, Bassano, and Parmigianino, too. Does that essay outline a freestanding exhibition, on El Greco in Rome? Yes, and a very rich one, but it wouldn't be a blockbuster and it would end, not begin, with the Chicago painting.

You don't have to believe anything spiritual to find yourself bewitched by El Greco's acidic palette, fantastic settings, and writhing, soaring saints.

The old take on El Greco's style is that he arrived in Toledo a good Roman Mannerist. His figures are serpentine, even limber, his brushstrokes sweeping, and his colors given to neon, all held in check by a classicizing reserve. He absorbed some of this in a Rome still redolent of Michelangelo. Inspired by Michelangelo, he balances sprezzatura with solidity. As balletic as his figures are in both *The Trinity* and *The Assumption of the Virgin*, they've got ballast, too. In Toledo for nearly forty years—not a backwater but, rather, a company town where the big business was established religion—El Greco kept his core Mannerist philosophy and merely pushed it to an extreme, the serpentine and sprezzatura tripping the light fantastic, leaving reserve in the dust.



Figure 1 El Greco (Domenikos Theotokopoulos). *The Assumption of the Virgin*, 1577–79. The Art Institute of Chicago, Gift of Nancy Atwood Sprague in memory of Albert Arnold Sprague.



Figure 2 El Greco (Domenikos Theotokopoulos). *The Holy Trinity*, 1577–79. Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid.



Figure 3 El Greco (Domenikos Theotokopoulos). *Vincenzo Anastagi*, ca. 1575. The Frick Collection; Henry Clay Frick Bequest. Photo: Michael Bodycomb.

Even in Rome, El Greco had an inventive edge having nothing to do with his personality, which we can all agree was immensely disagreeable. I wanted more than the nice tip of the hat the exhibition gives to El Greco's Roman period. Christensen, for instance, draws new attention to El Greco's biggest Roman work—what he calls the “astonishing” portrait of the soldier Vincenzo Anastagi at the Frick Collection in New York. El Greco painted it in 1575 (Figure 3). One of my favorite paintings at the Frick, it's displayed at the end of its grand gallery next to Velazquez's sparkling portrait of Philip IV and Goya's *The Forge*—the Frick's power corner.

Christensen says it best:

There is nothing remotely comparable in this extraordinary work in contemporary Roman art: the audacious way in which the figure confronts the viewer, his armor brilliantly described by broad brushstrokes, his silhouette against a simply articulated background with the shutter of the window open and the line of the floor receding at a slight diagonal...

That's great praise. The picture's a key ingredient in understanding El Greco as an experimental, risk-taking, freethinking artist. It's a daring portrait, ambitious and more original than defiant. His brushstrokes veer from velvety to brisk to thick, and augment Anastagi's virility and girth. A single blaze of light, like a tiny bolt of lightning, glazes off his armor. He's ruddy from the sun, and his calves are as big and hard as a tree trunk. He's what used to be called a man's man. No wonder he freed Malta.

It's not in the exhibition. The Frick doesn't lend art Frick himself bought, and there's nothing to be done about that. It's not considered in the galleries, though, at all. This is a hole in El Greco's story. The Anastagi portrait seems to be the moment the artist merged rich Venetian color and gauzy brushwork with that Roman sculptural look.

It was a time in Rome when great portraiture was thin on the ground. Taddeo and Federico Zuccaro, Federico Barocci, Scipione, Bartolommeo Passeroti, and Lavinia Fontana were portraitists, all talented—but the Anastagi portrait uniquely shines.

The point I'm making is that in any show examining El Greco's ambition and the glee he felt in flouting authority and convention, the Rome story needs more than a slice of space. Gallery space, I know, sometimes is what it is, but giving this period short shrift does the show's themes and the visitors a disservice. A second essay in the catalogue considers in depth the outsized role of the painter Giulio Clovio in El Greco's life. Clovio disappears almost entirely from the show in the galleries—unavoidable, I know, since El Greco's great portrait of him is in a traveling show of treasures from the Capodimonte, which owns it. The essay, however, is one of the catalogue's highlights and features great, original research.

There's a medium-sized replica of *The Disrobing of Christ*, from the 1580s, in the exhibition. El Greco did the mammoth version (112 by 68 inches) in 1577-79, which is another chapter in the artist's career of risk taking and, alas, litigiousness. He did it for the sacristy of the cathedral in Toledo, where it hangs today. I think it's one of the great achievements of his career and, up to that point, his most ambitious painting. It depicts at least twenty-five figures surrounding Jesus, whose red robe is dense and expansive, its folds made from sweeps of white paint.

The crowd around Jesus isn't anonymous or suggestive. Real, rough Spanish faces, each with a different turn of his head and gesture, make for a convincing mob, and making a mob look convincing requires an extraordinary sense of design. A man in shining armor to Jesus's left is a version of Vincenzo Anastagi, tough, sure, mean, and glittering. One figure in the mob looks and

points at us, his gesture painted with spatial perfection.

Rebecca Long's catalogue essay reports the unhappy reaction at the cathedral once El Greco finished the painting. The gang there perceived two narrative improprieties: most of the bobbing, animated heads in the mob rose above Jesus's head, and the three women in the corner, who El Greco explained as the three Marys, weren't noted in the Gospel of Matthew as actually being there. A furor arose. The cathedral didn't reject the painting. Rather, patron and artist engaged in a long legal battle over what El Greco should get for payment.

Here's another moment missing from this exhibition about El Greco's defiance. Long's superb essay plumbs the quirks of the marketplace El Greco experienced in Spain, especially the *tasacion* system, which determined how much an artist got paid. As a general proposition, it's well-plowed territory but, for El Greco, the devil's in the details. Scholars in the past have delivered the outlines of the system, rushing to make the point that El Greco felt that it treated him as a craftsman rather than a philosopher. (I'm certain these scholars felt they, too, were underpaid.)

Using this system, artist and patron would negotiate a contract for a commission, which might or might not be detailed on subjects, poses, and even costumes, and the artist would get some money up front to buy supplies. He might get progress payments, too. Once the work was done, the artist and patron each appointed one appraiser to determine what he was to get as a final price. Since the two never agreed, an arbitrator was selected randomly by the local court, which would rather have a settlement reached than deal with a lawsuit.

El Greco's work wasn't cheap, even in the *tasacion* system. We can determine what his prices were in today's money since the Spanish ducat was pegged to the price of gold, with one

ducat valued at 3.5 grams of gold. An ounce of gold, or 31.103 grams, was priced on August 7, 2020 at \$2042.68, making one ducat worth \$229.00. El Greco agreed to a bargain price of 500 ducats for the entire Santo Domingo el Antiguo project—nine paintings and altar architecture—since he was new to Toledo and wanted the job. At \$114,000, it's a good deal for the patron. El Greco and his two longtime studio assistants moved to Toledo to do it. He worked on the program for two years. Not exactly starvation wages, however.

In their first pass, the cathedral's assessors valued *The Disrobing of Christ* at 227 ducats. El Greco's assessors said it was worth 900 ducats. The arbitrator assigned the final value at 318 ducats—\$73,000 using today's gold value. Not bad, but not \$206,000. And the cathedral would not pay even that sum unless El Greco corrected the errors, which El Greco refused to do since, he correctly felt, it would ruin the scene. A rancorous, four-year legal battle ensued. El Greco eventually accepted 318 ducats, promising to make the changes, which he never did. The cathedral never hired him again for a painting commission, although in 1585, they hired him to make an elaborate frame for *The Disrobing of Christ*, for which the catalogue essay reports he was paid more than he made for the painting itself.

It's a great story, and it's missing from the galleries. I wonder why. El Greco had many disputes of this kind. It's part of his story, and it's not greed. Rather, it's a point where ambition and defiance merge as essential elements in the El Greco saga. I don't know whether it was a question of space, or a judgment that arithmetic would ruin the experience. Arts people don't like to talk about money, but money was indeed at the heart of so many of El Greco's problems in Toledo. He defied any authority over his vision, and that's a point of intellectual honor, but he disputed authority over money. Gallery visitors ought to know about this.



Figure 4 El Greco (Domenikos Theotokopoulos). *The Martyrdom of Saint Maurice*, about 1580–82. El Escorial, Patrimonio Nacional de España. Photo: Creative Commons / Wikimedia.

Even in Rome, El Greco had an inventive edge having nothing to do with his personality, which we can all agree was immensely disagreeable.

They also should know that the *tasacion* system sometimes delivered a windfall. El Greco's six-painting retablo for the Colegio de Dona Maria de Aragon, both sides agreed, was worth 6,000 ducats, close to \$1.4 million in today's money. The patron swallowed hard and paid.

"What to do with El Greco in Rome" and "what's this *tasacion* system all about" are middling questions compared to "what to do with Saint Maurice." This painting, from 1580-82 and El Greco's foray into Philip II's patronage, was a flop, however magnificent it is. It's not in the exhibition and not even treated in the gallery interpretation. Again, there's nothing we can do if a lender won't lend, and the thing, all sixteen feet of it, never leaves the Escorial. According to Felipe Pereda's great essay in the catalogue, *The Martyrdom of Saint Maurice and the Theban Legend* is the ultimate, definitive example of both El Greco's ambition and his defiance (Figure 4). It gets no coverage in the exhibition. It's wrong to leave the gallery visitors clueless about it.

I don't mind at all that *The Burial of the Count of Orgaz* from 1586 isn't in the show. It's fantastic and famous but it's not central to the plot. It's a culmination and a triumph, but El Greco at his best defies and overcomes heartbreak. Success? We assume that for him. But it's disaster that builds character and, I suspect, keeps him going and fighting.

The St. Maurice painting's story is a deeply mined one, as well as essential. El Greco, once in Toledo, wheedled himself into the royal court's circle. He was hired to paint Saint Maurice for a marquee altarpiece at Philip II's signature building, the Escorial,

then under development. El Greco's own commission hasn't been found, but we have commissions for other Escorial altarpieces of the same size. They're detailed, down to a provision providing for "no dogs, no cats, nor any other dishonest figure, but there should only be saints" so that the composition "should provoke to devotion."

El Greco's boo-boo is famous. He put the martyrdom of Maurice and his legion in the deep background, rendered in small figures. Maurice stands in the foreground, life-size, surrounded by his associates, all in poses that have been described as balletic—but I would take it further, and suggest that the quartet of gate-legged men in tights recalls a pinup from a muscle magazine.

Putting the crux of a religious, mythological, or historical story tucked in the back wasn't new. It happens a lot in Mannerist painting. So, too, do stretched, preening figure types. In 1605, José de Sigüenza, the librarian, poet, and historian based at the Escorial, wrote that the painting "has much art" and El Greco "knows a great deal" but that, the king felt, "saints should be painted in such a way that our desire to pray to them is not destroyed."

Pereda's essay develops an entirely new interpretation of these lines, which have been thought to mean that Philip disliked the central figures because they were too hammy and too elegant, painted in a pretty, even glam palette of blues, yellows, reds, and greens. He finds that in putting the actual, gruesome martyrdom off in the distance, El Greco did something revolutionary. He emphasizes the instant when Maurice and his fellow Christians decide not to defend themselves

but to accept martyrdom. It's this moment, filled with pathos, the pivotal moment of courage and decisiveness, the intellectual rather than the physical climax, that was the moment of martyrdom. It wasn't the suffering (in Maurice's case, over in an instant), but the grace and audacity that the martyrs-to-be summoned.

Pereda argues that these moments of deliberation, persuasion, conviction, acceptance, and submission inspired devotion, not the gruesome denouement where heads rolled. "It is the cause, not the suffering, that makes a true martyr," Saint Augustine wrote on the nature of martyrdom, and El Greco acted on this impulse in making his picture. This wasn't, Pereda argues rightly, a dry, historical, theoretical matter. Martyrdoms were actually happening in the 1570s and 1580s, mainly in England. El Greco took the risk that Philip II, immersed as he was in English religious wars, would see that what is to be admired in the martyrs is not their suffering alone but their steadfastness and bravery. He was wrong.

This finding explains another defiant feature in El Greco's work. *The Martyrdom of Saint Maurice* is an aesthetically effective picture. Like all of El Greco's work, it's a sensual feast of color, painterliness, and figures whose structure is bracingly unusual. He doesn't offer the serene beauty of Raphael or the muscularity and tumult of Michelangelo but, rather, a weird, unique lushness that makes the viewer want to look. El Greco simply wouldn't do blood and gore. This, by the 1580s, became El Greco's brand, and it was a brand the king didn't like. The meat and bones of this brand helps us understand El Greco's famous statement that "painting deals with the impossible." A miracle is when an impossible thing happens. El Greco, in designing the Saint Maurice story, wanted to visualize abstract thought, something impossible to see.

The gallery of portraits in Chicago is a good reminder of El Greco's facility here, and of the simple point that portrait-painting was a big part of his business. The portraits are all from his Toledo period. The cast of characters tells us who was buying from him. The room also gives a good place for *The View of Toledo* from 1599 (Figure 5). It's topographical enough—the view is still intact today—but the buildings seethe and swell and the sky's apocalyptic. There's nothing serene about it. Rather, it's so roiling and abstract that it can't help becoming a thermometer measuring El Greco's imagination.

Surely one of the most strikingly beautiful galleries in America now is the El Greco show's room of portrait-type paintings of saints (Figure 6). These were his bread and butter, and were produced in considerable number. I've seen many dozens of them, in museums and in Toledo. With many side by side comparisons, in a perfectly lit gallery against a saturated blue wall color, these pictures are magical. Richard Kagan's essay in the catalogue is essential, since he's the living master of El Greco studies and, in his piece, does a deep dive in the demand for art in El Greco's Toledo.

El Greco did only eight or nine altarpiece programs, depending whether or not we count his unfinished projects. He was cut from royal work and from the cathedral in Toledo. The exhibition, via Kagan, makes a detailed study of the demand in Toledo for devotional pictures like those El Greco produced in near assembly-line fashion. Toledo was the center of an immense archdiocese, with parish churches, monasteries, convents, shrines, brotherhoods, colleges, and hospitals, as well as private chapels in affluent homes. Rich people were always dying, which means the market for new tomb chapels never ceased. Demand for mid-sized painting grew simply because the Counter-Reformation's battle plan was partly



Figure 5 El Greco (Domenikos Theotokopoulos). *View of Toledo*, about 1598–99. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, H. O. Havemeyer Collection, Bequest of Mrs. H. O. Havemeyer, 1929.



Figure 6 Installation view of *El Greco: Ambition and Defiance*, 2020. Image courtesy of the Art Institute of Chicago.

aesthetic and encouraged, if not demanded, serious redecoration.

The saints' gallery at the Art Institute shows art mostly from the 1580s to just past 1600. Saint Francis was popular since he helped liberate souls from Purgatory. El Greco did versions depicting Francis meditating on death, sometimes with Brother Leo, and Francis getting his stigmata. He offered versions of Saints Peter, Dominic, and Sebastian, and various takes on the Virgin. The gallery is a treat for many reasons. Side-by-side versions of St. Peter done from the 1590s into the 1600s show the change in El Greco's style: continued elongation of figures, looser brushwork, more turbulent nocturne skies.

Some of his saints are sacred conversations, too, and one, *Christ Taking the Leave of His Mother* from the late 1580s, is dazzling (Figure 7).

It's a medley of articulate gestures, like sign language. El Greco's characteristic long fingers look like flying birds. The faces are beautiful, especially Jesus's, with big, brown, bright eyes in full point-making mode. Both wear blue cloaks that feel and look like velvet with a sheen. It's a very sensual picture, which makes the viewer want to look at it. The eye caresses the hands and fabric, not in a covetous or sexual way. Rather, it cocoons and then co-opts both eye and mind, and that's effective art and effective proselytizing.

His *Mary Magdalene* from 1577 is next to the same figure from 1580-85. Both Magdalenes are blonde bombshells, but the later one is not quite of this world. Her sexy sizzle seems to melt the figure, her hair amplified and torso swelling—not to the point of bursting, but certainly to where some



Figure 7 (top) El Greco (Domenikos Theotokopoulos). *Christ Taking Leave of His Mother*, 1585/90. The Art Institute of Chicago, anonymous loan.

Figure 8 (right) El Greco (Domenikos Theotokopoulos). *The Adoration of the Shepherds*, 1612–14. Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid.





Figure 9 El Greco (Domenikos Theotokopoulos). *The Vision of Saint John*, about 1609–14. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Rogers Fund, 1956.

metamorphosis is happening. These two paintings are in Chicago. In Paris, El Greco's *Mary Magdalene* from 1576-77 is on view. It's in Budapest and I'd never seen it before. In this one, El Greco focuses the body and face more. There's nothing gauzy about it. The lines don't throb. All three are symphonies in blue but this Mary is earthly, in her face, which is portrait-like, and in the tightly finished book, skull, and covered cup next to her and the very real-looking plants sprouting from the rocks next to her.

Ambition and Defiance ends in Chicago with a great blast of El Greco's late work—ending with dazzle, which we like. I could have lived without a wall of El Greco paintings compared to work from his studio, and work started by El Greco but finished by his son. I suppose this is obligatory in a survey show, but it tells us what we already know. To borrow from Mark Twain, while El Greco is lightning, his son and assistants are lightning bugs.

On a more triumphant note, three of the artist's Crucifixions are there, including the big one from the Louvre dating to the 1580s, *Christ on the Cross Adored by Two Donors*. Jesus is on the cross, as nude as El Greco gets, still a convincing, living body, serpentine, and with a nice, firm pair of legs. Two smaller versions from after 1600 drain the corporeality from Jesus. He's more stretched, now emaciated, his body a rack of deep, dark creases and neon-white skin. The sky's darker and malevolently agitated. He's a wraith.

El Greco's *Adoration of the Shepherds* from 1612-14 is there, from the Prado (Figure 8). He painted it for his own tomb in Santo Domingo el Antiguo, the same church that housed his first great altarpiece. Comparing it to *The Assumption of the Virgin*, the blockbuster at the start of the exhibition, all rational space seems to have slipped away. The heavens explode with light, clouds, and a band of ethereal, floating angels and putti. It's dazzling: both vibrant and unreal, even supernatural. The figures become tall, flickering flames stretching toward the heavens. El Greco's colors are harmonious but harsh, and acidic set against pools of black. Like *The Vision of Saint John* from around between 1608 and 1614, it's hallucinatory.

The Vision of Saint John is a fragment and unfinished (Figure 9). It ends *Ambition and Defiance*. Picasso used it as one of the models for *Les Femmes d'Alger*. El Greco planned it for an altarpiece at the Hospital of Saint John the Baptist in Toledo. It shows the opening of the Fifth Seal of the Apocalypse. In color and composition, its audacity is of a piece with his very late work, and here El Greco defies not old, established taste but the new. El Greco's son tried to persuade the hospital to accept it, but failed. Not only was it unfinished, but it didn't reflect the fresh, contemporary taste for naturalism. The hyperreal had replaced the ecstatic and fantastic, courtesy of Caravaggio. Once, El Greco had come to Toledo as the agent of the latest Roman style. By the time of his death, the latest Roman style pushed him aside. A

American Modernists Contemplating Asia

Reviewing the Journey of Mark Tobey and Isamu Noguchi

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This article is dedicated to my mentor, Professor Richard R. Brettell, for his wisdom and passion that have enlightened so many, and that will be carried on by those who have been deeply touched.

The Third Mind and a Janus-faced America

In 2009, The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York held an exhibition: *The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplating Asia 1860-1989*. The curator Alexandra Munroe introduces the show by saying:

*While Europe has long been recognized as the font of mainstream American art movements, the exhibition explores an alternative lineage of creative culture that is aligned with America's Pacific vista—Asia. Vanguard artists consistently looked toward “the East” to forge an independent artistic identity that would define the modern age—and the modern mind—through a new understanding of existence, nature, and consciousness.*²

An exhibition review by Andrew Solomon states that conventional wisdom by then still held that contemporary art in the East was

either derivative or unsophisticated.³ Solomon recalls that Munroe's 1994 exhibition, *Scream against the Sky: Japanese Art After 1945* was “one of the first major museum shows in New York to correct that perception.” While being interviewed for *The Third Mind* by the *Los Angeles Times*, Alexandra Munroe also emphasizes the importance of the West Coast, long overlooked in the narrative of American art history for the same reason: “Traditionally, modern and contemporary and avant-garde art have always been discussed in their relationship to Europe. The natural bias has been New York and East Coast.”⁴

Obviously, Munroe has been seeking for an alternative lineage and geography of American art history. But by no means is she the first pioneer. In fact, over fifty years before, Mark Tobey, who is also included in

¹ This research is funded by the ISAAC (Institute for the Study of American Art in China) collaboration between Nanjing University, the Edith O'Donnell Institute of Art History, and the Amon Carter Museum of American Art, with the support of the Terra Foundation for American Art.

² Munroe, A. *The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia, 1860-1989*. Guggenheim Museum, New York, January 30 to April 19, 2009.

³ Andrew Solomon, “The Third Mind,” andrewsolomon.com/articles/the-third-mind-2/ (accessed January 30, 2020)

⁴ Scarlet Cheng, “The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia: 1860-1989” at the Guggenheim,” *Los Angeles Times*, Feb. 1, 2009, www.latimes.com/entertainment/la-ca-asia1-2009febo1-story.html (accessed January 30, 2020).

The Third Mind, had already promoted America's Pacific vista by stating his view of a "Janus-faced" America in the 1946 MoMA exhibition *Fourteen Americans*:

Ours is a universal time and the significances of such a time all point to the need for the universalizing of the consciousness and the conscience of man. It is in the awareness of this that our future depends unless we are to sink into a universal dark age. ... America more than any other country is placed geographically to lead in this understanding, and if from past methods of behavior she has constantly looked toward Europe, today she must assume her position, Janus-faced, toward Asia, for in not too long a time the waves of the Orient shall wash heavily upon her shores.⁵

Fourteen Americans was one of a series of exhibitions with which MoMA aimed to promote the awareness and studies of modern art in the United States. The fact that "youth happens to be in the majority" of the selected artists in both the 1946 and 1942 shows (*Americans, 1942: 18 Artists from 9 States*) echoed the emergence of American art as a major player in the battles over the discourse power of modernism. Such an ambition of de-marginalizing and internationalizing American art is best illustrated by the curator Dorothy C. Miller's (1904-2003) introduction of *Fourteen Americans*: "The idiom is American but there is no hint of regionalism or chauvinistic tendency. On the contrary, there is a profound consciousness that the world of art is one world and that it contains the Orient no less than Europe and the Americas."⁶ This obviously resonates with Tobey's positioning of America as "Janus-faced."

⁵ Miller, Dorothy C. ed. with statements by the artists and others. 1946. *Fourteen Americans*. The Museum of Modern Art. The full text of the catalogue is accessible at www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/3196

⁶ *Fourteen Americans*. exh. cat.



Figure 1 Portrait of Teng Baiye with dedication to Mark Tobey, 1926. University of Washington Libraries, Special Collections, UW 237232.

Mark Tobey's white writing—knitting the "chaos-catcher"

Mark Tobey (1890-1976) was born in Centerville, Wisconsin and educated at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (1906-1908), but he established his career in the West Coast by founding the art department at The Cornish School in Seattle, Washington in 1921. He is also known nationally as the founder of the Northwest School which includes Guy Anderson (1906-1998), Kenneth Callahan (1905-1986), and Morris Graves (1910-2001). While teaching at the Cornish, Tobey became

friends with Teng Baiye (滕圭, 字白也 1900-1980), a Chinese student who was studying at the University of Washington (Figure 1).⁷ Tobey had long been interested in mysticism. Before converting to the Bahá'í faith in 1918, he had been attracted to Eastern philosophy and spiritualism. After meeting Teng, Tobey soon started learning calligraphy under Teng's guidance. From 1929 to 1933, Teng Baiye carried on research studies at Harvard University. His dissertation focused on a survey and evaluation of looted Chinese cultural relics, for which he traveled extensively in Europe on an exchange fellowship of the Harvard-Yenching Institute. In 1925, Tobey also traveled in Europe, including a pilgrimage to the Bahá'í holy site in Haifa, and a visit to Acre to learn more about Persian and Arabian calligraphy. From 1930 to 1937 he taught art and philosophy at the Dartington Hall School in Devonshire, England. After Teng returned to China, Tobey visited him in Shanghai in 1934. During that trip, he also went to Japan, and even spent a period of time at a Zen monastery where he studied Zen painting and haiku poetry, as well as calligraphy and its philosophical underpinnings.

Calligraphy is the meta-language of traditional Chinese painting. For literati painting especially, calligraphy is the essential tool that requires day-to-day practice and takes one's lifetime to perfect. Examining the friends' biographies up to the early 1930s, Tobey could only have studied with Teng for five years at the most. It is doubtful whether Teng ever chose the copybook to teach Tobey, even though that

is the only legitimate way for any beginner of calligraphy in China. What really matters is not a good grasp of the model calligraphy but Tobey's ready embrace of cross-cultural differences: Asian art forms, compositions, skills as well as aesthetic and philosophical ideas (Figure 2). For him, Teng Baiye was a catalyst, and his own extensive travels were the fertilizer.

In 1937, Tobey left England and returned to the United States because of the increasing threat of war in Europe. He lived in Seattle until 1960. During those two decades, the influence of calligraphy first appeared in his semi-abstract cityscapes of the 1930s, and gradually gave rise to his unique technique of "white writing" with which his work became more and more abstract (Figure 3). White writing is a way of superimposing a web of white (or light-colored) calligraphic marks and symbols atop densely interwoven brushstrokes (usually in grey or dark colors). In 1944, the Willard Gallery in New York showed Tobey's white writing paintings for the first time, which officially announced his artistic breakthrough. In 1951, the Whitney Museum of American Art held a solo exhibition for Tobey, which traveled throughout the country. And in 1958, Tobey represented United States and won the first prize for painting at the 29th Venice Biennale. Following this international success, his works were shown in the documenta exhibition in Kassel (1959, 1964) and many other exhibitions around the world. In 1960 Tobey moved to Basel, Switzerland, where he died on April 24, 1976.

Mark Tobey invented the all-over composition and linear network that anticipated Jackson Pollock (1912-1956). But unlike Clement Greenberg (1909-1994) who discounted cross-cultural fertilization, Tobey always acknowledged the Eastern sources of his art. He was confident in what

⁷ No documentation shows when they met exactly. A photo of Teng Baiye given to Tobey as a gift is dated December 16, 1926. For more information, see the exhibition *Mark Tobey and Teng Baiye: Seattle/Shanghai* at the Frye Art Museum, and the book edited by Danzker, Jo-Anne Birnie and Scott Lawrimore. eds. 2014. *Mark Tobey / Teng Baiye: Seattle / Shanghai*. University of Washington Press.



Figure 2 Mark Tobey (1890-1976), *Untitled (Sumi Drawing)*, 1957. Ink on paper. Sheet: 20 3/8 x 28 1/2" (51.75 x 72.39 cm.). The Martha Jackson Collection at The Albright-Knox Art Gallery, 1974 (1974:8.37). Photo credit: Albright-Knox Art Gallery / Art Resource, NY. © 2020 Mark Tobey / Seattle Art Museum, Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

he observed from the modern life and how he should “represent” it in his art. The linear network he knitted with the white writing skill was a “chaos-catcher” (to borrow the word “dream-catcher”) he used to trap the turmoil and upheaval within the big cities. Modern artists are faced with a constantly changing reality. It only makes sense if they are also equipped with highly flexible methods and skills: “I have sought a unified world in my work and used a movable vortex to achieve it.”⁸ This “movable vortex” is also what Tobey described as “the calligraphic impulse”:

When I began grappling with sumi ink and a brush in Japan and China, trying to understand Asian calligraphy, I realized that I would never be anyone else than the Western person that I am. However, it was there that I became acquainted with what I call the calligraphic impulse, which opened up new dimensions for my work. For example I was able to paint the turmoil and upheaval within the big cities, the interplay of the lights, and the streaming crowds, trapped in the meshes of this net.⁹

This “movable vortex” is exactly what Tobey learned from calligraphy (be it Chinese, Japanese or Arabian) and Eastern aesthetics. It demonstrates the enduring

⁸ Tobey to Katharine Kuh, 28 October 1954, quoted in “Interview with Mark Tobey,” in Kuh, K. 1962. *The Artist's Voice: Talks with Seventeen Artists*. Harper & Row, p. 244.

⁹ Quoted in Mark Tobey, exh. cat. 1966. *Kestner Gesellschaft*, p.32.



Figure 3 Mark Tobey, *Broadway*. 1935-36. Tempera on Masonite. H. 26, W. 19-1/4 inches (66 x 48.9 cm.). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Arthur Hoppock Hearn Fund, 1942 (42.170). Image copyright © The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Image source: Art Resource, NY. © 2020 Mark Tobey / Seattle Art Museum, Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.



Figure 4 Mark Tobey (1890-1976), *Lines of the City*, 1945. Tempera on paper mounted on board. 17-7/8 x 21-3/4 in. (45.5 x 55.25 cm). Bequest of Edward Wales Root, 1957.36. Photo credit: Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, Andover, MA / Art Resource, NY. © 2020 Mark Tobey / Seattle Art Museum, Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

influence of his brief association with Teng Baiye. It also explains Tobey's preference for water color, tempera, or pastel surfaces, which makes his works stand out from those of his contemporaries. The cool, refined surface and linear network consisted by calligraphic brushstrokes are just the opposite of the weighty, volumetric and definite oil painting. The "vortex" or "impulse" has its lightness, flexibility and ambivalence, all of which are ideal for Tobey's contemplative goal of expressing the mystical through art (Figure 4).

Noguchi's organic abstraction– animating the space

The keywords *impulse*, *vortex*, and *movement* link Tobey to Isamu Noguchi (1904–1988), whose works appeared in the same show, *Fourteen Americans*. In the catalogue, Noguchi explains his understanding of modern sculpture by emphasizing the importance of growth:

The essence of sculpture is for me the perception of space, the continuum of our existence. ... Since our experiences of

space are, however, limited to momentary segments of time, growth must be the core of existence. ... Thus growth can only be new, for awareness is the ever changing adjustment of the human psyche to chaos. If I say that growth is the constant transfusion of human meaning into the encroaching void, then how great is our need today when our knowledge of the universe has filled space with energy, driving us toward a greater chaos and new equilibriums. I say it is the sculptor who orders and animates space, gives it meaning.¹⁰

Isamu Noguchi was born to be what Tobey anticipated as a “Janus-faced” American artist. From the ages of 2 to 14, Noguchi was raised and educated in Japan. His mother Léonie Gilmour had to take multiple jobs as an English teacher, because Isamu’s father Noguchi Yonejirō had already re-married and started a new family before he invited them to reunite with him in Kyoto. Léonie and Yonejirō’s romantic relationship had started in New York when she was working as his proofreader and *de facto* co-author of the English poems that won him the title “the Poet Yone Noguchi.” As a scholarship student at Bryn Mawr, Léonie Gilmour was well-read and highly intelligent. She was the first one to believe that her son would be an artist and she always insisted on it, even when he was enrolled in the premed program of Columbia University. Yone Noguchi didn’t give his son much attention, except for the name “Isamu” (勇 braveness). In fact, when Isamu Noguchi wished to visit Japan in 1930, his father turned him down with a letter saying “You should not come to Japan using my name.” He went to Beijing instead, staying there from July 1930 to January 1931.

In Beijing, a Japanese friend, Sotokichi Katsuizumi, who then was working for the Yokohama Specie Bank in Beijing, showed

Noguchi his small collection of scrolls by Qi Biashi (齐白石 1864-1957). Noguchi was entranced by what he saw, and asked to be introduced to Qi, with whom he later studied with for a short period. Qi himself was just at the completion stage of his later famous “Mid-life Reformation (衰年变法).” Just as the case of Mark Tobey and Teng Baiye, little would Noguchi understand or even care about the opposition between the Four Wangs (四王) and the Four Monks (四僧) which were at the core of Qi’s reformation. Even less would Noguchi know about Chen Hengke (陈衡恪, 字师曾, 1876-1923), Lin Fengmian (林风眠 1900-1991) and Xu Beihong (徐悲鸿 1895-1953) and other of Qi’s supporters’ agendas regarding Chinese modern art. Nevertheless, Noguchi’s Beijing drawings suggest a keen observation of Qi’s masterful skills and artistry with free-spirited lines, bold brushstrokes, and a purposeful use of void space. Most importantly, the crucial connection between Qi and Noguchi is that Noguchi was also struggling at the edge of a truly great breakthrough (Figures 5 and 6).

Before planning his trip to Japan, Isamu Noguchi had a successful one-man show in New York in 1928, following his apprenticeship in Paris with the abstract sculptor Constantin Brâncuși (1876-1957). This easy success turned into an early crisis. Since he couldn’t figure out anything that Brâncuși wouldn’t or couldn’t do—in other words, there was no possible way to break free from his mentor—Noguchi simply abandoned abstract sculpture after that show. Later in his life, Noguchi recalled how Brâncuși had told him that his generation could go directly into pure abstraction, without the need to abstract from nature. Noguchi doubted whether that was really an advantage, because he always had reservations about objectivity and mechanization and inclined towards

¹⁰ *Fourteen Americans*. exh. cat. The Museum of Modern Art



Figure 5 Isamu Noguchi, *Miss Expanding Universe*, 1932. Aluminum, 40 7/8 x 34 7/8 x 9 in. (113.9 x 88.6 x 15.2 cm). Art Institute of Chicago, Bequest of Ruth Page, 1994.833. Photo: The Art Institute of Chicago / Art Resource, NY. © 2020 The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum, New York / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

the organic approach to abstraction. It was with the hope of looking for his own unique way to connect nature and abstraction that Isamu Noguchi went to the East—his other cultural source.

In the first a few months in Beijing, Noguchi did drawings using pencil, charcoal and crayon. Then he used brush and ink, for a change. After he met Qi Baishi and started visiting him frequently, he adopted Qi's techniques quickly. The majority of Noguchi's Beijing drawings are nudes, which Qi never did. But the key

thing is that Noguchi got the essence of Qi's art. He captured the liveliness of his objects, using fluid and minimal lines to convey the dynamism of their movement. Interestingly, Noguchi abandoned brush and ink after exhibitions of his Beijing drawing back in America, just like what he did to Brâncuși's instructions. Nevertheless, when we compare his later works (sculptures, landscape and industry designs) with those Beijing drawings, we can see clearly that he only discarded the forms but internalized the essence and further established his



Figure 6 Isamu Noguchi, *Gregory (Effigy)*, 1946 (cast in 1964). Bronze, 69 1/8 x 16 1/8 x 16 1/2 in. (175.6 x 41 x 41.9 cm). Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, Ark., 2013.42. © 2020 The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum, New York / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

unique visual language and philosophy. His Beijing sojourn is vital, because that was a time when he was still struggling to find his position in the already crowded sphere of modern art. A researcher, Natsu Oyobe, argues for the significant influence of Qi Baishi on Noguchi's later works:

... a crucial stage between the figural portrait heads made in New York in 1929 and the abstract terracotta sculptures made in Kyoto in 1931. ... Noguchi's own sense of abstract form finally began to emerge. It is a form, not static and polished like Brancusi's, but animated, extracted from the postures or movement of human figures and conveying the model's personality and emotional state.¹¹ (Figures 7-10)

Or, as Isamu Noguchi himself puts it: "Then, shifting to materials more natural to the place, I made enormous drawings with fantastic brushes and expressionist flourishes upon their incredibly beautiful paper."¹² Noguchi's brush drawings and Tobey's calligraphic impulse converge right at the expressionism characteristic of Chinese painting. Together and among many others, they contributed to a unique source of American modernism that is distinct from the European tradition of intellectual geometric abstraction.

Necessary cross-cultural (mis)understanding

As early as the 1930s, the Tobey and Noguchi generation of American artists had been revolting against the European model

of aloof, analyst abstraction, hoping to find an alternative approach to modernism, as well a unique visual language and legitimate identity of American modern art. From a broader perspective, it is a common approach to establish a vernacular modernism by borrowing from cultural 'others.' In *Ideographia: The Chinese Cipher in Early Modern Europe*, David Porter investigates the use of the image of China as a foil that serves to reinforce Enlightenment rationality.¹³ Similarly, Elizabeth Hope Chang argues that nineteenth-century British aesthetic engagement with China is characterized not by more "accurate" representations of China, ... but rather a "further preservation of what were thought of as Chinese ways of seeing within a modernizing British vision."¹⁴

Admittedly, Asia as the 'third mind' has been manifested as short-lived trends or recognized by the mainstream art historians as an alternative option. A decade after the Guggenheim show has passed, "the appropriation and integration of Asian sources" are still to be thoroughly reviewed. Individual cases like Mark Tobey and Isamu Noguchi indicate that it could be useful to develop a Jungian-informed art history, incorporating research on artists who absorbed and integrated Asian sources without fully comprehending their origins. It is also necessary to supplement this synchronic perspective with a diachronic one, by examining and comparing

11 Isamu Noguchi/Qi Baishi/Beijing 1930. exh. cat. 2013. The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum.

12 Noguchi, I. 1968. *A Sculptor's World*. Harper & Row, p. 20.

13 Porter, D. 2002. *Ideographia: The Chinese Cipher in Early Modern Europe*. Stanford University Press.

14 Chang, E. H. 2010. *Britain's Chinese Eye: Literature, Empire, and Aesthetics in Nineteenth-Century Britain*. Stanford University Press, pp. 64-65.



Figure 7 Isamu Noguchi, *Seated Nude: Study in Black*, circa 1929-30. Pen and brush on cream-colored paper, 22 1/16 x 17 3/16 in. (56 x 43.7 cm). University of Michigan Museum of Art, Museum purchase, 1948/1.295. © 2020 The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum, New York / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

particular “missions” undertaken by artists of different historical periods. For instance, “the tension between control and composure on the one hand and spontaneity and intuition on the other. ... The striving for not only synthesis of opposites but also vitality was something Tobey had in common with many of his slightly younger contemporaries.”¹⁵

Calligraphy is one of the various answers pursued by New York modernists, as well as by those on the West Coast; it is used in different senses by Franz Kline (1910-1962)

¹⁵ The Phillips Collection, 2017. *Ten Americans after Paul Klee*, Prestel, p. 101.

and Brice Marden (born 1938). Self-reflexivity thus becomes crucial to art historians. This means to uncover those buried facts and clues, based on a serious reflection on the mythology of a linear progressive modernism. From the perspective of global art history, the appeal for an alternative modernism or multiple modernisms would make no sense if researchers do not envisage the polyphony on the periphery as well as in the centers. Through treating the vernacular in their own rights rather than as sources or inspirations, we could hope to get closer to the historical configuration of a shared modernism.

Envisage the polyphony through communicative comparisons

From this perspective, it is clear that the foregoing anecdotes in fact demand and enable a theoretical imagination of the polyphony, which requires a re-examination of Tobey’s and Noguchi’s Asia by uncovering the course of modernization as visualized by Asian artists and intellectuals.

Fang Wen (方闻1930-2018)’s student Shi Shouqian (石守谦) criticizes the “impact-response” model followed by generations of art historians from Michael Sullivan (1916-2013) to Craig Clunas.¹⁶ He argues that for renovators like Xu Beihong, Lin Fengmian, and Chen Hengke, “western influences” served ultimately as a starting point for their inquiries of “the essence of (Chinese) painting”, rather than as a destination of their respective reforms. By comparing these renovators’ strategies and experimentations, Shi Shouqian points out that their artistic explorations were deeply intertwined with and often troubled by a common anxiety of cultural reconstruction

¹⁶ See Shi, Shouqian 2015. *From Style to Huayi: Reminiscing on Chinese Art History* (《从风格到画意：反思中国美术史》 Cong fengge dao huayi: fansi zhongguo meishushi). SDX Joint Publishing Company. pp. 385-87.

and national salvation in the early 20th century China. Thus, in a more general sense, Shi concludes that questions about the vernacular are characterized by complex and ambivalent artists-audiences and art-society relations which ought to be analyzed in the context of the particular country or area in question. With that vision, Shi presents his explanation for the frustrated artistic reforms which is distinct from his predecessors' viewpoints:

During the early years of the Republic of China, the cultural environment was undergoing unprecedented changes. As a consequence of reforms in education and value systems, the symbiosis of art and culture was suddenly deprived from its soil.... There was a lack of interaction between renovators of artistic styles and leading figures in the cultural field, which eventually resulted in increasing departmentalism and mutual repulsion. The debate of artistic reform degraded into "private issues" within small groups, draining its possibility of receiving resonance from the wider cultural environment.... The tortuous process of artistic reform since Xu Beihong was largely because of its disconnection with the cultural environment.¹⁷

His interpretation of the modern history of Chinese art could be compared with those of other art historians including James Cahill (1926-2014), Max Loehr (1903-1988), Teng Gu (滕固 1901-1941) and Lu Fusheng (卢辅圣). While being viewed together, their divergent approaches all point to one fact that the art-culture relation lies in the very center of a critical historiography of Chinese art. Indeed, it is the interaction between artistic creation and its cultural environment that bridges the gap between the alleged exterior and interior studies of art.

17 Shi, Shouqian. 2018. *Styles and Changes: Ten Treatises on Chinese Painting* (《风格与世变：中国绘画十论》 Fengge yu shibian: zhongguo huihua shi jiang) Beijing University Press, p.15. This excerpt is translated from the Chinese edition by the writer of this article.



Figure 8 Isamu Noguchi, *Baby: Scroll (Kakemono)*, 1930. Brush, ink and wash on white paper, 66 ½ x 30 ½ in. (168.91 x 77.47 cm). University of Michigan Museum of Art, Gift of Sotokichi Katsuizumi, 1949/1.190. © 2020 The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum, New York / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

This leads us back to the foregoing discussion of American modernism. Andrew Hemingway questions the process of aesthetic filtration implied in the historical study of art. His critique echoes Shi Shouqian's argument with respect to the problematic historiography of a single, universal modernism:

How do we decide whether an artwork addresses history in a compelling way? Surely this is not something we can understand intuitively (as in judgements of taste), but rather something we can only arrive at through a complex historical argument.... Or are art and history so universal that the differences between particular national cultural formations are irrelevant, and a Corot will always count for more than an Inness, wherever, whenever?¹⁸

18 Hemingway, Andrew. 2009. American art pre-1940 and the problem of art history's object. in Groseclose, B. and Jochen Wierich eds. *Internationalizing the History of American Art*. The Pennsylvania State University Press, pp. 78-79.

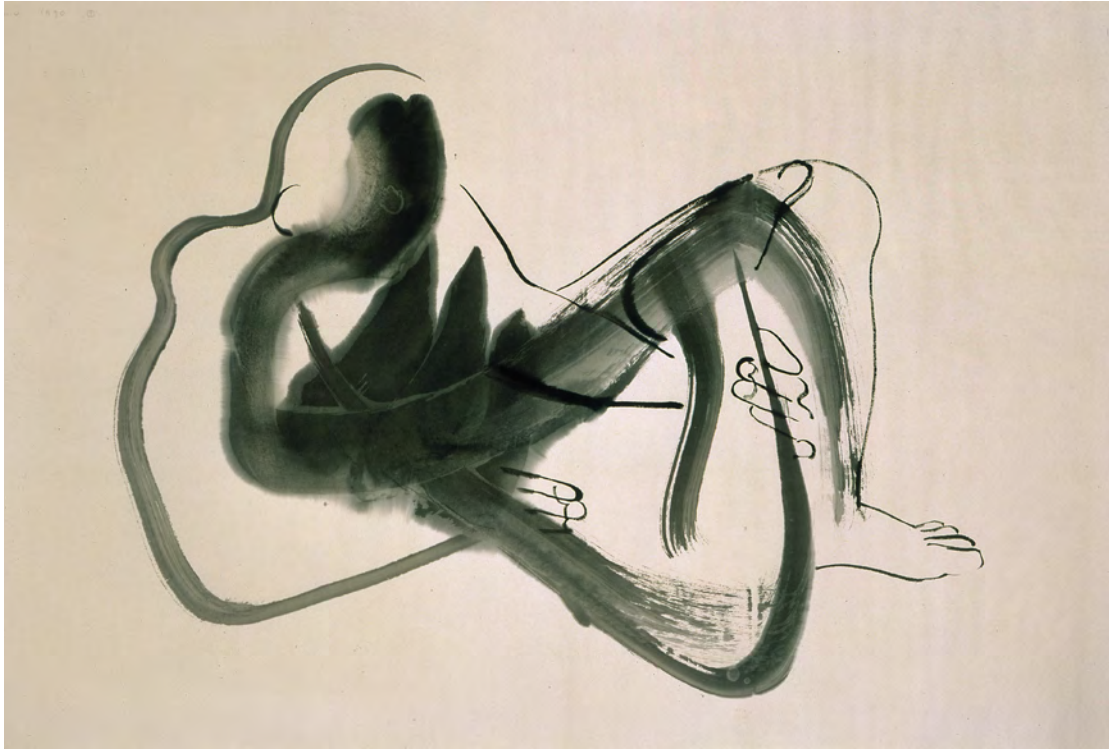


Figure 9 Isamu Noguchi, *Peking Drawing*, 1930. Ink on paper, 35 1/8 x 57 1/2 in. (89.2 x 146.1 cm). The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum, New York Museum. © 2020 The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum, New York / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

This long-standing prejudice against American art also indicates what is missing in Shi Shouqian's sympathetic retrospection of Chinese modernists: modern art as well as the discipline of art history have both been interwoven with conceptions of the nation state since their very beginning. In the same book that includes Hemingway's article, editors Barbara Groseclose and Jochen Wierich reveal the "growing-up narration" of American art history and further traces its origin back to the dichotomy of "European model – American characteristics".¹⁹ These studies explain

19 Groseclose, B. and Jochen Wierich eds. 2009. *Internationalizing the History of American Art*. The Pennsylvania State University Press, pp. 7-9.

why the much-delayed art and cultural independence of the United States would take the form of the triumph of American modernism. The resultant "Paris-New York" axis has proven to be a continuation of the teleology, which is not disturbed by postcolonial discourses but only surfaces as one of the symptoms of globalization.²⁰

But how was the teleology of a single modernism established originally? This question couldn't be fully resolved from a longitudinal perspective only. As exemplified by the resonance between American and Chinese modernism, teleological narratives

20 Moxey, Keith. 2006. Art history after the global turn, in James Elkins ed. *Is Art History Global?* Routledge, p. 208.



Figure 10 Isamu Noguchi, *Sunken Garden*, Chase Manhattan Bank Plaza, 1961-64. Exterior design with water, natural stones. Photo by Arthur Lavine, 1965. © The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum, New York / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

could be deconstructed through an exploration of the spatial dimension of art history. Within the context of American art, this involves not only differences between New York, the West Coast, the Southwest and many others, but also nuances of each

local art ecology. Most importantly, in order to avoid fragmented trivialization, the spatial exploration has to be driven by a communicative purpose. Perhaps it is time that we embark on the journey that Tobey and Noguchi had pointed out for us. ˆ

A Way of Knowing: Nishiki Sugawara-Beda

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Nishiki Sugawara-Beda: Zero at Home

Jan. 13 to Feb. 7, 2020

West Gallery, Texas Woman's University, Denton

I HAVE ALWAYS FELT THAT ART IS AN EPISTEMOLOGY, a way of knowing the world. Art is a form of knowledge even as it is an object of knowledge, highlighting not so much what we know but how we come to know it. In terms of knowledge, contemporary artists tend to take facts as given, as ground zero from their aesthetic point of view. Certitude, then, becomes less important than the array of emotive reactions the art object can engender. If this conception of art is viable, then we might ask what does Nishiki Sugawara-Beda want us to know with her “Zero at Home” exhibition? And how does she want us to know it?

The artist would like viewers “to explore their own spiritual worlds through both physical and imaginative space,” and leave the exhibition “with visual and mental frames for their spiritual world to linger, form, and exist.”¹ While we can take the professor of art at her word, the words of the influential Dadaist Marcel Duchamp also come to mind. A seventy-year-old Duchamp once famously claimed the existence of an “art coefficient” at work in the creative act: the difference between what the artist intended to create and what was ultimately created, “like an arithmetical relation between the unexpressed but intended and the unintentionally expressed.”² Indeed, the simplicity

1 Nishiki Sugawara-Beda, “Zero at Home” exhibition statement. Provided by the artist.

2 Marcel Duchamp, “The Creative Act,” in Salt Seller: *The Writings of Marcel Duchamp*. Marchand du Sel, ed. Michel Sanouillet and Elmer Peterson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 139.

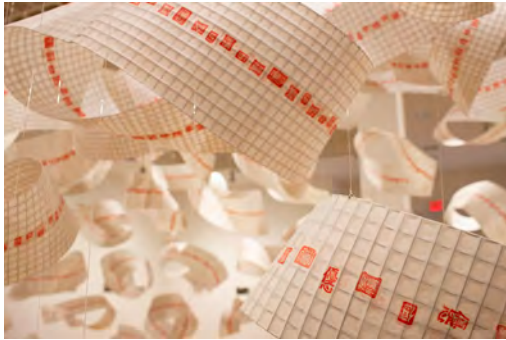
of the exhibition is deceptive, and one gets the impression that there is more going on in the gallery space than is readily apparent, perhaps even more than the artist is aware of. Also like Duchamp (and the Minimalists), Sugawara-Beda wants the spectator's mind and presence to complete the artwork. This open-ended invitation inspires me to investigate some of the deep underlying themes in her work.

Human Knowledge - Words

Kotodama Converse (Figure 1) dominates the gallery in which it is located. An industrial sensibility permeates its abstraction, with grids of metallic wire embedded in the hovering circlets of rice paper that twist and fold upon themselves (Figure 2). The sculpture is steeped in the humanistic, communicative function of art: the red *kanji* seals that bisect the rice paper in slightly irregular lines display the characters for “heart and friend” and “communicate and heart” grouped together. As the title indicates, the work is Japanese in inspiration. *Kotodama* means “word-spirit,” while “Converse” (as in conversation) places these sentimental couplets in an interlocutory position with respect to the viewer. The artwork acts as an aesthetic invitation that asks the spectator to engage its composite being with an energy of positivity, warmth, language, and closeness.

At the same time, however, there is a paradox at play with *Kotodama Converse*, that speaks to the complex way that we, as subjective beings, come to know the external world. The object is eminently accessible. During the exhibition, attendees walk freely in and around its low-hanging canopy. But for all of its humanistic aspirations, the artwork actually floats like a distant singularity. It seems not to point to anything in particular, a hallmark of the abstract. The language of abstraction is international. Abstraction's syntax is relative, non-objective, ostensibly open to all humanity. Ironically, this also makes it universally foreign, indigenous to no one, which might help explain the disconnection between the artwork's call of humanistic engagement and its seeming detachment from the normal manner with which we communicate.

One wonders if in fact the artist is less concerned with abstraction, than with monumental representation. In the aesthetic environment “Zero at Home” presents, the mind wanders and synapses trigger as constellations of ideas and imaginary images collide in a miasma of possible indexicals. There are external references at work here, in the West Gallery space. Classicity emanates from the white pillars that frame the sculpture. In some sense its effect is that of a natural history museum, recalling the remains of a dangling Cretaceous skeletal *Torvosaurus* or *Triceratops*. Seen from some angles, *Kotodama Converse* looks very much like the globular mass of the



human brain free from its encapsulating exoskeleton (Figure 3). This is probably the artwork's most appropriate visual synonym. For communication is ultimately a way to transfer the contents of one's mind/brain into another's. The *only* way to do this is through symbolic means, whether verbal or written, sonic or visual. Art is therefore perfectly placed to illustrate this telepathic, uniquely human phenomenon.

Do scientific descriptions tell us more about the world, or do aesthetic ones? Of course, in the end both ways of knowing obtain. Duchamp's simile describing the artistic act as an "arithmetic relation" hints at this bivalent condition. Sugawara-Beda's artwork speaks to this dynamic as well. The rectilinear pillars and grids within and above it have a hard scientific association, while the curvilinear bands take on a softer humanistic tone. Indeed, the exhibition title "Zero at Home" contains both numerical and sentimental allusions. However, to the extent that communication is the key, one must insist that the world of art appears more fundamental. Words communicate the inner content and meaning of a mind to the outside world. *Kotodama Converse* does this both literally with linguistic seals and symbolically via its sculptural forms. Each circular ribbon is an individuated phonetic fragment in the totality of the artist's creative speech act. In a way its ambient mass is a surrogate for the human presence that the artwork

Figure 1 Nishiki Sugawara-Beda, *Kotodama Converse*, 2012-2020. Rice paper, mesh wire, calligraphy ink, rice glue, and fishing wire. 12 x 10 x 16 feet, dimensions variable. Photo: Michael Modecki. Copyright © Nishiki Sugawara-Beda.

Figure 2 Nishiki Sugawara-Beda, *Kotodama Converse*, 2012-2020 (detail). Photo: Nishiki Sugawara-Beda. Copyright © Nishiki Sugawara-Beda.

Figure 3 Nishiki Sugawara-Beda, *Kotodama Converse*, 2012-2020. Rice paper, mesh wire, calligraphy ink, rice glue, and fishing wire. 12 x 10 x 16 feet, dimensions variable. Photo: Nishiki Sugawara-Beda. Copyright © Nishiki Sugawara-Beda.

Figure 4 Nishiki Sugawara-Beda: *Zero At Home*, installation view showing *Kotodama Converse* (left) and *KuroKuroShiro* series (right). West Gallery, Texas Woman's University, Jan. 13 to Feb. 7, 2020. Photo: Nishiki Sugawara-Beda. Copyright © Nishiki Sugawara-Beda.

entreats to complete it. As the cognitive scientist George Lakoff argues in *Philosophy in the Flesh* (1999), “The mind is inherently embodied. Thought is mostly unconscious. Abstract concepts are largely metaphorical.”³ The psychoanalytic overtones of this statement—both Freudian and Jungian—hit the mark. We know the world with both our subjective and objective faculties, both aesthetically and scientifically, and we are usually not even aware of this. Sugawara-Beda brings this abstract reality to the viewer, whom she sees as “contributing psychological and emotional content as they enter and interact” with a symbolic artwork that engages these dualisms directly.⁴

Sacred Space - Spirit

“Word-Spirit” (*kotodama*) refers to the Japanese belief in “the mystical or magical...power inherent in words”; that “words can make things happen.”⁵ So, what is happening in the gallery?

Perhaps the best way to make sense of “Zero at Home” is to understand it as an instance of humanistic geography: as a space that centers human experience as the fulcrum of meaning vis-à-vis environment, and a place where feelings and sentiments can find corporeal existence and privilege. In the long history of art, religious spaces have primarily provided the context for such expression. Indeed, the exhibition statement makes clear that the artist understands the gallery space in spiritual terms, as a sort of sacred space with which to engage, one created collectively between artist and art-goer. But how might this be achieved?

The spatial arrangement of parts in the gallery retains an asymmetrical quality consistent with certain Zen paintings, such as Muqi Fashang’s *Six Persimmons* (c. 13th century) or even prehistoric Jomon pottery from Japan (c. 3000-2000 B.C.). The seventeen small-scale abstract paintings on the wall (*KuroKuroShiro*) are arranged in strict

3 George Lakoff, *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 3.

4 Sugawara-Beda, exhibition statement.

5 Michael F. Marra, *Japan's Frames of Meaning: A Hermeneutics Reader* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2011), 28.



Figure 5 Nishiki Sugawara-Beda, *KuroKuroShiro XXIII*, 2020. Sumi on wood, 6 x 12 inches. Photo: Nishiki Sugawara-Beda. Copyright © Nishiki Sugawara-Beda.

rectilinear sequence on one side of the gallery, conversely set against the curvilinear *Kotodama Converse* on the other (Figures 4 and 5). This asymmetry is duplicated with the sculpture, which is also hung off-center with respect to the vertical pillars that frame it (Figure 3). The effect of this configuration is subtle but important. Viewers in the room instinctively or unconsciously adjust to this imbalance, and in so doing thereby open the door to intuition, as the innate desire to systematically analyze things becomes somewhat thwarted. Installations such as these are not problems to be solved, but knowledge to be gained. Artists tend to use the emptiness of an installation as an intentional element of the imaginative experience they envision. Scale—measured in the difference between what is present and what is not—becomes the metaphysical force at work with how physical spaces can address the immaterial soul. In this case, such spatiality is in accord with conventional sacred spaces, such as large-scale churches and basilicas.

The contemporary abstraction of the exhibition should not disrupt this analysis. Modernist critics such as Michael Fried have found transcendence in unlikely places such as these. Fried would take issue with Sugawara-Beda's call for audience interaction, deriding it as unnecessarily "theatrical." Nevertheless, for Fried traditional representation in any sphere is not an automatic guarantee of artistic preeminence. The key is to be in the moment, present with the "presentness" of the art object, and with the instantaneous insight one can find in an aesthetic space designed to facilitate it. "Zero at Home" arguably succeeds in that appeal. To take him out of context but still to his point, a place can be sacred even if it is not literally so, for "we are all literalists most or all of our lives." As he famously claimed with spiritual flourish: "Presentness is grace."⁶

Although Zen teachings and Kyoto temples arise in personal discussions with the artist about the installation space, one need not think in such specific terms. Lokesh Chandra, one of the most venerable and imaginative scholars of religious space at work today, sees structural spirituality as "...the eternal absolute in a flux of appearances." According to Chandra, "Life is well-being. Well-being becomes Being. The body needs embodied space."⁷ The humanistic sentiment that he expresses is ultimately the manifest sensibility that Sugawara-Beda hopes to evoke with the installation. Kindness, amity, and benevolence are the motivating factors. These aspirations are embedded in the central artwork linguistically with the prominently utilized kanji seals for "heart" and "friend."

Of all the terms and ideas used thus far to describe "Zero at Home," the most salient would have to be "heart." The artist, I am sure, would agree. The word has a special place in the nomenclature of cultural humanity. Its *kotodama* is palpable as an intrinsic concept. Its connotation of center or core is not inconsistent with its other sense of emotion and compassion. The heart is the internal organ upon which all other organs rely, and without "heart" in the metaphoric sense it would be impossible for us to be human in the sense of recognizing the common humanity at the core of culture. The artwork and exhibition exist as an opportunity to reflect upon that reality. Is it possible to suggest then,—in light of the above— or is it just me, that in fact *Kotodama Converse* also resembles the shape of the human heart...?

It was claimed above that art is an epistemology, a way of knowing the world. What does Nishiki Sugawara-Beda ultimately want us to know about the world with "Zero at Home?" *Her* heart; our shared spirit. ㊦

6 Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 168.

7 Lokesh Chandra, "Life, Space and Structures," in *Concepts of Space, Ancient and Modern*, ed. Kapila Vatsyayan (New Delhi: Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, 1991), 211.

Opening Our Eyes to See

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A. Kendra Greene, *The Museum of Whales You Will Never See: And Other Excursions to Iceland's Most Unusual Museums*. 222pp., 37 drawings. Penguin Books, \$22 cloth.

IT IS SAFE TO SAY THAT THE ICELANDIC MUSEUM SCENE IS not a saturated field of study. A. Kendra Greene's recent book, as far as I can tell, is the first to widely address the topic. I'd venture that most people know of at most, one museum in Iceland—the Phallogological Museum—even though the country has over 265 known institutions, making this volume an eye-opening introduction to the rich and sometimes quirky culture of this island nation. But this book is far from a simple survey of museums. With persistent and contagious curiosity, Greene guides us through the unexpected spaces that make up Iceland's museums, revealing the many ways that objects can tell human stories, if we are willing to look and listen. At the heart of these stories, however, are deeper questions about the nature of human collecting and the place of museums, questions that resonate far beyond local museums of Iceland. Simultaneously a tribute to Iceland and the power of storytelling, the book challenges readers and museum-goers to think beyond standard definitions in order to see the world in new ways, even those things that we would normally consider unseen.

The book is not a comprehensive guide or description of all Icelandic museums, nor is it a travel volume akin to those of ancient or medieval writers who regaled their patrons at home with tales of faraway places. From the start, Greene makes clear that she is recording her own story, recounting her own fascination with Icelandic museums and their blurring of public and private. According to a list in an appendix, the author visited over thirty Icelandic museums in preparation for the book, and while many of them only make a small appearance, this thorough research is apparent in the wide-reaching and rich way in which she describes the country's history and the peculiarities of its culture. Although centered around the expansive stories of seven key museums—case studies of a sort—her tale is carefully woven to create a coherent picture of Iceland's cultural history and the way it is displayed and consumed.

As might be expected, the book begins with the Icelandic Phallogological Museum. The museum claims to be the only penis museum in the world, a superlative that is difficult to challenge, and has origins in a single man's collection of curiosities, which was not originally intended for a museum. What might surprise you, though, is that the Phallogological Museum may be among the more conventional institutions documented in the book, since it has a fairly traditional mission: to collect, preserve, and display objects that tell a specific story. In this case, the museum collects, preserves, and displays "phallic specimens belonging to all the various types of mammal found in a single country [Iceland]"—certainly not your typical Impressionist painting—but clearly articulated. You have to give an institution credit for adhering to its stated mission and vision. In the end, it is precisely this conventionality that makes the Phallogological Museum so very ordinary. Why is a penis novel when you have an entire museum full of them?

If, after spending time with the Phallogological Museum, penises seem too ordinary, there are plenty of other unusual museums from which to choose. Among others, Greene ferries us through the Bird Museum, full of all species of taxidermized birds; the Museum of Sorcery and Witchcraft, featuring all sorts of trinkets related to witchcraft including the ever-popular necropants (literally "corpse britches"); and the Icelandic Sea Monster Museum, which collects testimonials of monster encounters (although sadly, no monsters themselves). For me, the most interesting museum was not that which displayed unusual and out-of-the-ordinary objects, but actually the most ordinary: Petra's Stone Collection, technically not a museum, began like many Icelandic museums, as a personal collection. The eponymous Petra gathered rocks and stones that she found beautiful or interesting on her daily walks, and eventually her collection outgrew her house and her yard, and began to draw the attention of neighbors and passers-by. It is now on the "must-see" list for most tour buses in the region. But why? The collection has never been counted, so it cannot claim any particular superlative for size or scope and the rocks themselves hold no inherent value. While whale penises seem to become less interesting the more ordinary they get, stones somehow become *more*

interesting—perhaps because they are so incredibly accessible. Who among us can't recall picking up a stone, or relate to the urge to collect things?

So what about those places we will never see? By far the most unexpected sections of the book are those that discuss the museums or collections that cannot be seen, or simply *with nothing* to see. I started the book assuming that I would encounter glossy photos or illustrations of the museums under discussion. My own bias as an art historian left me expecting to be guided by the objects or at least the places in which they were located. In the absence of images, I initially felt lost, stranded, even cheated—unsure how to form a picture of a museum without...a picture of a museum. I realized quickly that the absence of photographs was another of the book's gifts. In many ways like seeing a movie of a favorite old book that you've read many times over, seeing the galleries, storerooms, or objects might shatter the beautiful picture I've formed in my mind, the collection of images and stories that I've created thanks to Greene's vivid and precise descriptions that far outshine what could be included in the volume, and perhaps even what I might see in real life—in some instances because there is actually nothing to see. Although it may seem absurd to build a museum for no physical objects, or that can be seen by no one, this is actually the case for several collections under discussion, which begs the question: is it so absurd? Is it a prerequisite of a museum to have physical things, or really, to tell a story? In the case of the Icelandic Sea Monster Museum, for example, the absence of sea monsters is part of the intrigue. Would there be so many stories of sea monster encounters, if there were sea monsters available for the taking?

It would be a disservice to end this short review without mentioning the book itself, that is, the physical book. The volume is small in size, almost like a journal, and the typeface is an unusual, but pleasant green. Greene, an artist, has included over thirty drawings throughout the text. The drawings are not illustrations, although an appendix at the back eventually reveals that they do correspond to objects in collections under discussion, but feel more like the kinds of drawings or annotations that would appear in a personal notebook. These subtle, but noticeable additions to text lend an additionally magical quality, turning this from a simple guide or history, to more of a personalized story. It would be a mistake to read only the e-version of this book.

In the end, we are left with fewer answers than questions—nowhere does Greene provide the magic solution or definition for what constitutes a museum, which objects should be collected, or even a comprehensive guide to Iceland's collections, but she does not leave us stranded with no way forward on our journey to see those things that are normally unseen. In her characteristically whimsical prose Greene instead offers a gentle, albeit powerful call-to-action: "The world is chockablock with untold wonders, there for the taking, ready to be uncovered at any moment, if only we keep our eyes open." Perhaps this is a solution after all. . a

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**LITERARY
LIVES**

A Silent Fool

Cordelia's Subversive Silence in *King Lear*¹

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1 This essay is an abridged and amended version of a chapter from my current book project on tragedy and imagination, tentatively titled, *The Tragic Imagination in Shakespeare, Emerson, Nietzsche, and Deleuze*.

2 Simone Weil, "Introduction," in *Simone Weil: An Anthology*, ed. Sian Miles (New York: Grove Press, 2000), 1.

3 *Ibid.*, 2.

4 We might compare the use of "fool" here to the *eiron* (ἔϊρων), a stock character in classical Greek comedy, known for buffoonery, mock modesty, and for besting his braggadocious opponent, the *alazon* (ἀλαζών). Xanthias, the servant to Dionysus in Aristophanes' *Frogs*, is a prime example. In addition to comic theater, some consider the *eiron* to have inspired Plato's depiction of Socrates and his many encounters with sophists, as well as the Gospel writers' portrait of Jesus, particularly in his confrontations with learned religious figures. In this sense, the "fool"—servant, slave, clown, madman—has a long history of exposing ignorance, challenging convention, and of speaking truth to power. Shakespeare continues the tradition with his fools. Our word "irony" derives from this theatrical term.

5 Simone Weil, "The *Iliad* or the Poem of Force," 163.

Not long before her death at the age of thirty-four, Simone Weil, in one of her last letters, reflected on a production of *King Lear* she had recently attended:

There is a class of people in this world who have fallen into the lowest degree of humiliation, far below beggary, and who are deprived not only of all social consideration, but also, in everybody's opinion, of the specific human dignity, reason itself—and these are the only people who, in fact, are able to tell the truth: All the others lie.²

She tells us that this class of people are "fools."³ No one listens to them because they have "no academic titles or episcopal dignities." In drama we often relegate the spoken truth of fools to the satirical and ironic, their silent truth to the regrettable and naïve.⁴ Not simply *truth*. The truth about the way things really are—a truth silently lived or publicly spoken—loses its irresistible and essential qualities when received through the register of foolishness, when foolishness remains antonymic to wisdom (or at least what passes for wisdom). History and the wide field of arts and letters give us many fools of fate subjected to the world in and of force—*force* being that which "turns anybody who is subjected to it into a *thing*"⁵—a world represented not only by institutions and systems of power, but by prevailing values and ideological undercurrents. This is the iron bar comprised of conformity, practicality, and good sense, under which the citizens of all late capitalistic and over-developed nations must pass, precluding dangerously foolish lives, foolish pronouncements of truth, and foolish silence before all manifestations of power. This bar ever lowers in inverse proportion to the need for fools to walk upright. Their relegation to the category of "fool," which attempts to rob them

of the truth of their witness, especially by silencing them, nevertheless still contains liberating possibilities: power can be drawn out and exposed. In silence things must be what they really are. This foolish quietude—*elected* or *forced*—indicts power and disrupts the world of force.

But what do we do with such indictments and disruptions?

We should see them as tools for subversion.⁶ In those very encounters with persons behaving or speaking in a manner that power judges as subversive (or even simply non-conforming) to its desires, it must, as the force driving it demands, victimize those unruly subjects through identification within the particular domain of that power, whereby those named (or classified) become contained within that system of intellectual or political enclosure allowing power to display, conceal, sentence, and pardon as suits its self-perceived purposes. In those encounters, concurrent with power's prerogatives, that truth—in adopted silence or forced silence, by foolish affect or consignment to foolishness—testifies against power's judgments. Time will, of course, make fools of us all before the end. Still, in the moment of being named criminal, rebel, subversive, deviant—*fool whatsoever*—the genuine subversion that might shake the social world reveals its efficacy. Shakespeare makes this terribly clear in *Lear*.

The king has grown old. He tires of the affairs of state, but not of kingship's privileges. His *destiny* rests in his hands, his *fate* in the hands of his daughters. Here we find the formula of theatrical tragedy: the force of fate rises up against destiny's desires.⁷ Events and conditions set the stage for truth to reveal itself and to be roundly denied. Except by madmen and poets who affirm "nothing" or "weakness" and who see the truth of the situation. Except by lovers, now and again, who have grown foolish by their love. Except, in *Lear*, by a few faithful servants and children hooped together with their lord by unbreakable bonds of duty. Shakespeare gives us Cordelia as such a fool, as well as the Fool,⁸ and later, in a most interesting way, Edgar as Tom o' Bedlam. Here we will only consider Cordelia's foolishness.

In abrogation of his monarchical responsibilities, Lear decides to divest himself of the worries burdening his great privileges in order to face his end in merry revels and repose.

To shake all cares and business from our age,
Conferring them on younger strengths, while we
Unburthened crawl toward death.⁹

To live out his life as a king without responsibilities, Lear intends to divide his kingdom among his three daughters and their husbands (including whomever Cordelia will wed). Three daughters who, once invested with his political power, become for him, like those

6 Cf. Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), 65; Alan Sinfield, "Shakespeare and Education," in *Political Shakespeare: Essays in Cultural Materialism*, 2nd edition., eds. Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 178.

7 Cf. Max Scheler, "Ordo Amoris" in *Selected Philosophical Essays*, ed. and trans. David R. Lachterman (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 106-8.

8 Richard Abrams, "The Double Casting of Cordelia and Lear's Fool: A Theatrical View," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, Vol. 27, No. 4 (Winter 1985), pp. 354-368.

9 William Shakespeare, "King Lear" (conflated text), *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1997), 1.1.37-39. *The Norton Shakespeare* will be used throughout. I will list the title of the play, followed by the act, scene, and line numbers.

ancient daughters of necessity, the triune forces of fate. In *Macbeth* these forces appear supernatural and outside of the family dynamic, though not entirely outside of a recognized, if still ambiguous, role within society. While substantive differences mark out Lear's daughters from Macbeth's witches, the two groups play a structurally similar role within the social dimension and life-world of the eponymous characters: neither of whom will in fact turn out to be the true tragic hero. Even in the age of Shakespeare, even now, it is, whatever shape it takes, always a god who plays that role (*both* the ultimate symbol of irresistible force and drives *and* simultaneously their atoning redress). All the famed figures of the tragic stage are "...mere masks of this original hero, Dionysus."¹⁰ Through the illusion of a free decision (and the delusion of a wise decision) Lear "creates" the circumstances by which he will have no authority to exercise his will or power to indulge his wants. Like Oedipus, he ironically enacts his own curse.¹¹ Though it is possible that Lear thinks himself to be acting beyond his own interests with a politically shrewd move that would see the old kingdoms of England, Wales, and Scotland restored to something of their former independent status, he is yet driven by the fate of force, which works through all mechanisms of power and self-will.¹² Though the wisdom of age or even a hint of sanity might advise him against this course of action, as well as the game excusing it, he sees no danger.

Again, as the original author and judge of the game—but only as ironic enactor—Lear believes that all will, quite naturally, go well. And why not? His division of the kingdom will arguably please more citizens with territorial identities than it will displease, and his investiture of rank and rule converts his beloved children into his patrons. They will become the powers of the realm(s), surely only adding additional gratitude to their love? Undoubtedly, they and their husbands will make fine regents and will fulfill their filial duties to their father and former king? And even *if* Lear were none too sure about Goneril and Regan, he could always count on his youngest and most beloved daughter, Cordelia, with whom he originally planned to live: "I loved her most, and thought to set my rest / On her kind nursery."¹³ But, strangely, as we well know, she refuses his game. Why? And why does Lear react with such incredible rancor anyway? The shadowed corners of the mind hide all manner of monsters.

The game:

Tell me, my daughters—
Since now we will divest us, both of rule,
Interest of territory, cares of state—
Which of you shall say doth love us most?
That we our largest bounty may extend
Where nature doth with merit challenge.¹⁴

A love test. At first blush, Lear's game seems innocent enough. Each daughter giving a small speech proclaiming her love for him. A little

¹⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), 73. Some classicists and scholars of the Athenian theater, whether following Aristotle or not, would disagree with Nietzsche's reading. The assertion, however, besides having textual evidence, phenomenologically sees tragedy as an ontological state of affairs *and* a performative response venerating the god symbolizing that state of affairs. Tragedy, in this way, is more about the nature of being and the trials of existence than it is about the localized and individuated virtues and vices of a particular mortal character.

¹¹ John Kerrigan, *Shakespeare's Originality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 74.

¹² *Ibid.*, 70.

¹³ *King Lear*, 1.1.123–24.

¹⁴ *King Lear*, 1.1.46–51.

whimsical, sentimental fun dressed in formality. He is, after all, about to give them his kingdom; the least they could do is say a few fine words. The older daughters, whatever their aspirations, take to the game and play it to maximum effect.

GONERIL

Sir, I love you more than words can wield the matter;
Dearer than eye-sight, space, and liberty;
Beyond what can be valued, rich or rare;
No less than life, with grace, health, beauty, honor;
As much as child e'er loved, or father found;
A love that makes breath poor, and speech unable;
Beyond all manner of so much I love you.¹⁵

Regan follows and concurs with her older sister, notably adding:

Only she comes too short, that I profess
Myself an enemy to all other joys,
Which the most precious square of sense possesses,
And find I am alone felicitate
In your dear highness' love.¹⁶

Eloquent exaggerations which, as long as no one draws attention to their substance and scrutinizes them, no doubt please Lear. Accordingly, after Regan and Goneril's love pronouncements the king gives them their share of the kingdom. All proceeds swimmingly for everyone. Except for Cordelia, who, between the two speeches, quietly reflects:

What shall Cordelia speak? Love, and be silent.¹⁷

and after Regan's speech adds:

Then poor Cordelia!
And yet not; since, I am sure, my love's
More ponderous than my tongue.¹⁸

Her love and silence presages that which is to come, the preliminary drawing out of the unnoticed and unconscious forces at work in the game. Her depersonalized response creates space wherein the drives at work in and through each of the participants can uncomfortably show themselves. In but a few moments, the silence—not Cordelia herself—will bear testimony against all the players. That is, it creates the conditions by which they must bear testimony against themselves. What will this testimony tell us? Lear's actions and demands: riddled with taboo energies and want of self-possession. Her sisters' professions of love: filial impiety masked in adoration. Those who speak the truth or for truth's sake refuse to speak: love's vulnerability and duty's foolishness.¹⁹

Finally, her father turns to her—"Now, our joy" and "Speak"—and the engine begins its rumblings. She gives him his due.

15 *King Lear*, 1.1.53–59.

16 *King Lear*, 1.1.71–74.

17 *King Lear*, 1.1.60.

18 *King Lear*, 1.1.75–77.

19 Cf. Christina Luckyj, "A Moving Rhetoricke: Women's Silences and Renaissance Texts," *Renaissance Drama*, Vol. 24 (1993), pp. 33–56.

CORDELIA Nothing, my lord.
LEAR Nothing?
CORDELIA Nothing.
LEAR Nothing will come of nothing, speak again
CORDELIA Unhappy that I am, I cannot heave
My heart into my mouth. I love your majesty
According to my bond; nor more nor less.
LEAR How, how, Cordelia! mend your speech a little,
Lest it may mar your fortunes
CORDELIA Good my lord,
You have begot me, bred me, loved me; I
Return those duties back as are right fit,
Obey you, love you, and most honor you.
Why have my sisters husbands, if they say
They love you all? Haply, when I shall wed,
That lord whose hand must take my plight shall carry
Half my love with him, half my care and duty
Sure, I shall never marry like my sisters,
To love my father all.²⁰

Cordelia offers a succinct explanation of her refusal to participate, for to have remained absolutely silent about her silence would seem too ungrateful. Her refusal indicates an affirmation, not a renunciation: she loves her father.²¹ She has and will happily give him everything due him. Everything and only what is due him. A hyperbolic expression of filial love makes a mockery of her genuine love and appreciation for him. Her sisters do not mind at all. Lear's game, which invites—demands—such exaggeration, subsequently inverts reality, albeit not in a revolutionary or liberatory way. Those who would lie to accomplish their ambitions receive the rewards rightly reserved for those who would, in an ideal world, speak the truth, while those who would speak the truth receive the judgments usually reserved for those who lie. All because silence exposes the lies concealing the secret truths of the players and of reality. What are these most unknown, guarded matters?

First, Lear, whatever his other merits, comes to us unfree for his own end—hence his unwise abdication in order to die “unburthened” and free of care—indicating an approach to truth from marked deficiency. He possesses no clear disclosure of his innermost fears or understanding of his darkest desires; thus, he has no way of attaining anything resembling authentic resolution in the face of old age and death. He cannot act as whole person. He might indeed have many fine and kingly qualities, but, like all other captive players correctly called “protagonist” (principal mortal sufferer) or wrongly named hero (of divine parentage) caught up in the tragic engine, his faults facilitate his susceptibility to the hidden energies steering all unreflective life. “As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods; / They kill us for their sport.”²² The most apparent consequence of Lear's self-disclosive limitations: truth remains for him something subject to his impaired—or overly

20 *King Lear*, 1.1.86–103.

21 Albert Camus, *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt*, trans. Anthony Bower (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 13.

22 *King Lear*, 4.1.37–38.

personalized—understanding of those drives that constitute him, precluding any full—or adequately *depersonalized*—account of the way things really are. The way people, places, and things are driven to be, which in turn reveals the proper and improper objects of acceptance and refusal. The naked soul alone can see the world of force and bear silent witness against it.

[Aside. There is, of course, no metaphysically “objectivated” state or emanation of being. There is no pure, universal Truth as Plato and others have contended. Even if or when we concede something like “transcendence”—going beyond the usual limits of experience—every desire for and account of “the truth” signals an expression, contains a signature, bears the stamp of time and place. Nevertheless, we can still acquiesce or aspire to the quiet possibility we each possess of simply letting things be what they really are and of demonstrably giving a pious, critical, living account of the way things really are. The unenviable and treacherous task then lies in giving an account of truth that does not leave us with an empty metaphysical notion or merely another perspective among an ocean of perspectives. Rather, something in accord with both nature and ourselves; something extraordinarily capable of helping us to make sense of the world and of convicting us, luring us, placing provocative demands upon us. This is why truth is of a higher quality than facts. For truth received in silence and conceived in testimony exposes everything for what it really is and for what it should be. Especially quiet testimony. And we are always either free or unfree to be claimed by these proclamations of truth. We are never neutral before them. In those encounters truth reveals how subordinated we are to force and power, how caught up in the spell of illusions, how trapped by the habits of belief. It reveals a profound sense of proportionality between all things. We become de-centered. Our lives and world must then be reconstructed in accord with truth.]

Bereft of sufficient introspection, caught up in invisible inner wars, Lear’s failure to achieve self-mastery—as existential acceptance of what is necessary, political liberation from what is not necessary, and the creation of new ethical imperatives for what is possible—necessarily relegates his response to Cordelia to the overly personal and profane. He finds no home in trust and possibility. He cannot abide silence. He is unable to “hear” the truth of silent testimony about the way things are. In the world of power and force, someone must always be doing or saying something. Never nothing. The Fool: “Sometimes I am whipped for holding my peace.”²³ As a consequence, he cannot slow the fate of force or mitigate against the world of power. “Nothing’s” ultimate authority hovers at the edges of his kingdom. For now, all remains pre-reflective force incapable of genuine compassion. Goneril and Regan capitalize upon this predicament and artfully

23 *King Lear*, 1.4.161.

though gracelessly handle truth as a “moveable host of metaphors.”²⁴ Indeed, lies of a lesser order become the truth, a necessary illusion lasting as long as its persuasive force and explanatory strength allow? It would seem so. Until the untimely inconvenience and disruptive nature of “nothing” and silent witness—presented by beings’ tragic fools—shatter such illusions. Often at the expense of their lives.

To consider the second matter brought to light in this scene, we must recall Lear’s disproportionate response to Cordelia’s appeal to “nothing” and silent refusal to participate—at least in the way his deficiency expects—in his love contest.

LEAR But goes thy heart with this?

CORDELIA Ay, my good lord.

LEAR So young, and so untender?

CORDELIA So young, my lord, and true.

LEAR Let it be so! Thy truth, then, be they dower!

For, by the sacred radiance of the sun,

The mysteries of Hecate, and the night;

By all the operations of the orbs

From whom we do exist and cease to be;

Here I disclaim all my paternal care,

Propinquity and property of blood,

And as a stranger to my heart and me

Hold thee, from this, for ever. The barbarous Scythian,

Or he that makes his generation messes

To gorge his appetite, shall to my bosom

Be as well neighbored, pitied, and relieved,

As thou my sometime daughter.

KENT

Good my liege—

LEAR Peace, Kent!

Come not between the dragon and his wrath.²⁵

Like Polixenes’ turn in *The Winter’s Tale*, wherein his wife, Hermione, quite suddenly and unexpectedly, becomes the focus of his jealousy and mania, Cordelia, also seemingly inexplicably, finds herself fallen from most beloved daughter to despised object. Lear, pre-Christian pagan that he is, calls on the sun, the night, the goddess of magic and witches, upon all heavenly bodies which might bear witness: Cordelia is no longer his daughter. He belittles her appeal to the truth in the process: “Thy truth, then, be they dower!” She will be to him as a parent-devouring barbarian. Her honest and plain account of her love for him—and refusal to exaggerate her love for him—produces such a powerful and disruptive reaction that we are left wondering: What has caused this wrathful dragon to emerge? From cherished and endowed to despised and disowned in but a few lines. We do not need to speculate too wildly to discover an adequate subtext contextualizing Lear’s erratic behavior.

The rage Lear shows towards Cordelia’s reverent silence—probably present in longstanding patterns of behavior—evinces a response to an unresolved fear of abandonment and a dangerous level

24 Friedrich Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lies in a Non-Moral Sense” in *The Nietzsche Reader*, eds. Keith Ansell Pearson and Duncan Large (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 117.

25 *King Lear*, 1.1.304–122.

of insecurity surrounding rejection, more than likely the result of some deep trauma regarding his wife's absence, as well as, perhaps, his own mother's. The missing mother (or mothers) in the play, the demand not only to be loved but admired to excess by his daughters, and the uncontrollable animus displayed toward Cordelia after her apparent failure to fulfill this confused demand, makes a compelling case for Lear's unconscious desire that Cordelia (primarily) and her sisters (secondarily) play the role of wife and mother.²⁶ This is not the only instance in Shakespeare where we find daughters cast in the role of forbidden love objects. Or of love objects becoming curse objects. These flirtations with incest taboos steer the action onward into ever more destructive territory. As Mark Taylor describes such behaviors and the desires driving them:

Consciously or unconsciously, sometimes both, Shakespearean fathers dread no circumstance more than the loss, to other men and to maturity, of the daughters whom they desire for themselves; and this desire, both impermissible and inadmissible, expresses itself in very strange behavior—in acts that are arbitrary, selfish, irrational, violent, cruel. The combination of dread and desire that occasions these acts designate incestuous feelings; hardly ever overt, these incestuous feelings manifest themselves through sublimations, compensations, and displacements.²⁷

The “incestuous feelings” compelling Lear and other Shakespearean fathers do not often show themselves directly, providing room for ambiguity and doubt. These figures have been socialized to compensate for these strange desires by undertaking less overtly catastrophic activities. Yet, flashes of irrational cruelty—unjustified doubts, unprovoked rebukes, inappropriate games—indicate the perniciousness effects of unaddressed underlying forbidden desires. Here, Lear's mercenary reaction to Cordelia so clearly breaks from the usual defense mechanisms redirecting those taboo energies that we are left with little doubt as to the catalyst for his disavowal of her.²⁸ A course of action ultimately stripping him of everything valuable and leading to a perfected ruin.

The last aspect brought to light by these speeches tells us something both about Lear and the structure of tragic drama: the enginery and its parts requires winding up. The stage and pieces must be set, even if we enter *in medias res*. The conditions for restoration in the play—which includes elected divestment of some essential aspect of identity, order, or place and the possibility of repossession—must first be laid out, slowly come near again, flirt with success, and inevitably fail in the end. The people, places, institutions, cultural practices, and values constituting the particular world of the play find themselves narratively compelled to reveal their hidden dynamic structures and spiritual characteristics in order for the tragic

26 Coppelia Kahn, “The Absent Mother in King Lear,” in *Rewriting the Renaissance: The Discourses of Sexual Difference in Early Modern Europe*, eds. Margaret W. Ferguson, Maureen Quilligan, Nancy J. Vickers (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 248.

27 Mark Taylor, *Shakespeare's Darker Purpose: A Question of Incest* (New York: AMS Press, 1982), x.

28 Diane Elizabeth Dreher, *Domination and Defiance: Fathers and Daughters in Shakespeare* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1986), 64.

29 Cf. William Rosen, *Shakespeare and the Craft of Tragedy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964), 1-51.

30 Compare these passages from the opening scene of *Othello* with his notorious lines at the end: "I know my price, I am worth no worse a place" (1.1.11); "In following him I follow but myself. / Heaven is my judge, not I for love and duty, / But seeming so for my peculiar end" (1.1.58-60); "Even now, now, very now, an old black ram / Is tupping your white ewe" (1.1.88-89); and at the end, "Demand me nothing. What you know, you know. / From this time forth I never will speak word" (5.2.309-310). Iago has already told and shown us everything we need to make accurate determinations about his motivations.

31 *King Lear*, 3.2.68-69.

32 David Margolies, *Monsters of the Deep: Social Dissolution in Shakespeare's Tragedies* (New York: Manchester University Press, 1992), 6.

33 Arnold Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, trans. Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 160-1. The full passage might be helpful here: "Persons for whom funeral rites are not performed are condemned to a pitiable existence, since they are never able to enter the world of the dead or to become incorporated in the society established there. These are the most dangerous dead. They would like to be reincorporated into the world of the living, and since they cannot be, they behave like hostile strangers to it. They lack the means of subsistence which the other dead find in their own world and consequently must obtain them at the expense of the living. Furthermore, the dead without hearth or home sometimes have an intense desire for vengeance."

god—symbol of unconscious force, its many drives and the atoning counter-movements—to explicitly and publicly strip them of their illusions of reality, most importantly the illusion that their elective divestment of what is necessary was ever truly elective or that it ever really happened.²⁹ What are our choices before the powers prompting them? Before biological imperatives and societally compelled behaviors? Most decisions arrive as *ex post facto* rationalizations for our participations in the formula of force. The nature or use of reason notwithstanding, the reliable dreams and historical aspirations upon which human reality bases itself will end, all hidden motives known or knowable within the drama will come to light. Even Iago, famous for his refusal to explain his motivations in the end, still tells us of his jealousy and reveals his racism in the opening scene of *Othello*.³⁰ The tragic engine does not simply address itself to the superficial, it strips all and lays bare what is most personal. We too find ourselves stripped of our secrets in time. In this denuded world the old illusions will no longer suffice, and new or revised ones become necessary. "The art of our necessities is strange, / That can make vile things precious."³¹ And precious things vile. The world must drip with *pathos* and bleed with loss while hope unsettlingly lingers. Through this process the particular and discrete become general and universal. Something essential about reality must now arrive so that we might accept and venerate it or reject and condemn it. And do so in order that possibilities and impossibilities might be affirmed.

Here, Lear's game shatters the previously functional illusion of healthy love existing between father and daughters to reveal what the nature and destiny of the actual relations dictate: good and evil will become unfixed and words unreliable. The community of values—whatever they are—will always disintegrate in time.³² Love detaches from life and affixes itself to death. Only "nothing" remains trustworthy. Epic or intimate, it simply and sadly takes an exaggerated instance to remind us. In this way, Lear's contest of love speeches functions as ironically foreboding funeral orations. Not encomiums inflated and false (Goneril and Regan) or even honest and true (Cordelia), rather revelatory eulogies. His children curse him and themselves with their speeches, adumbrating the ruin to come. Though Lear is the subject of these fine false words—as if composing elegies—he has not yet received a "proper burial." He will become something like a specter or revenant: until the end of the play he will have no real life, no real death, no home, no tomb, no means by which to actualize his projects or possess the objects he desires. He will become a towering figure of rage and dark poetry, simultaneously a phantasmal figure incapable of living or dying, one ultimately "condemned to a pitiable existence."³³ Until, through its tools of love and time—*suffering*—the tragic engine fits him for his end. It makes him, as it makes all of us, in an ultimate sense, *chrisimos*: useful, serviceable, good.

The tragic world, especially as Shakespeare presents it in *Lear*, might lead us to believe that some violation of what lies at the center of any world structure, behind all attraction and repulsion—the order of love (*ordo amoris*)—has fallen into a state of disunity. While tragic drama highlights those moments wherein fate and destiny drive characters to become caught in seemingly unresolvable conflict, it is also true, in a more fundamental sense, that tragedy venerates an underlying unity in all things. That is to say, an actual ontological disunity is impossible. In a Heraclitean sense, the cosmos certainly presents itself to us in a state of disunity, as if constituted of rifting forces, as if the universe constantly dissents. But to believe that this conflictual state signals something “wrong” or “unjust” is largely a Christian idea, in which tragic “disunity” or “dissolution”—the violation of the *ordo amoris*—is the very thing to be repaired. In this view, fate (as force) and destiny (as will) ought to be aligned, the order of love (as right willing) and the order of the world (as right understanding) must achieve harmony. The humanistic sciences, in their own way, share this aspiration, replacing spiritual depravity with primitive ignorance. Yet tragedy outlines and particularizes the way things truly are. The order of love quietly remains an undergirding possibility, a hidden power within the mindless world of force, unless cultivated and allowed expression through different modalities or relations.³⁴ An important aspect of the tragic engine lies in pitting the mindless *and* mindful modes of love against one another as part of time’s perfecting mechanisms, making the players ready for their end.

Why is love so important to tragedy? It appears near the heart of almost every tragic drama. Its powers are primal and revolutionary. It touches everything that matters. Or, more accurately, love gives all things meaning. We cannot improve upon Emerson’s sentences here:

The introduction to this felicity [love] is in a private and tender relation of one to one, which is *the enchantment of human life*; which, like a certain divine rage and enthusiasm, seizes on man at one period and works a revolution in his mind and body; unites him to his race, pledges him to the domestic and civic relations, carries him with new sympathy into nature, enhances the power of the senses, opens the imagination, adds to his character heroic and sacred attributes, establishes marriage, and gives permanence to human society.³⁵

At critical moments love is always personal. But its role in the structure of relations comes before and after us, it transcends us. We can, of course, always locate its subjective genesis in particular instances and relations, but then, once we have entered into the “enchantment of human life,” we find ourselves “revolutionized.” We are carried away and brought into a new (and very old) reality. Seized in the center of our being by love, we become united with others, drawn

34 Scheler, 119–120; Weil, 94.

35 Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Love” in *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Brooks Atkinson (New York: The Modern Library, 2000), 190, *emphasis added*.

36 Ibid, "Circles," 257.

37 Ibid, "Self-Reliance," 145.

38 Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, trans. Janet Lloyd (New York: Zone Books, 1988), 43.

39 Cf. Stanley Cavell, "The Avoidance of Love: A Reading of King Lear" in *Disowning Knowledge In Seven Plays of Shakespeare*, Updated Edition (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 39-123.

into new ethical possibilities; our senses gain aesthetic enhancement, imaginations expand, we receive divine qualities, true partnerships emerge, and the human world gains the semblance of permanency. It does all of this, however, precisely by transcending the particular (going beyond the merely personal or subjective) and transporting us into the universal (apprehending something depersonalized or metaphysical). We succumb to love at first in a very personal way only to have it take us, however momentarily—for world-destructive and reconstructive purposes—far away from ourselves. In order that we, by way of abstraction or idealization, can find a sense of proportion and measure outside of our own experience (however imaginary the whole thing is). Whether we understand it as terminating in objectless contemplations or meditations upon "the nothing," love contains the potential to take us out of ourselves, temporarily freeing us from force's otherwise irresistible formula, so that something else can be discovered or encountered. An idea. To accomplish this liberation, we need silence.

"Good as is discourse," Emerson writes, "silence is better, and shames it."³⁶ And earlier, in *Self-Reliance*, he tells us, "I like the silent church before any service begins, better than any preaching."³⁷ Discoursing, conversing, teaching, preaching, protesting, debating, all manner of human speech and conveyance of ideas and problems present us with useful and potentially productive encounters, but silence born of love or prudence in the face of certain impossibilities or uncertain ambiguities—"zones of opacity and incommunicability"³⁸—asks of us something more difficult than the articulation or defense of our beliefs. The truth of (our) love and the power of (our) testimony against injustice and madness serves the "imagined" structure of the world that convicts us and—through our quietude—helps to create the conditions of shame by which the "real" structure of the world can be brought into the starkest of contrasts with the world we desire.³⁹

Not merely an idiosyncratically wished-for world, but rather a distinct, if unprepossessing, world of full and free participation that is “always to come,” for which the dialectical drama—fictionalized as tragedy or concretized as history—sets the stage beyond the limitations of the purely personal and communal contemplative realms. We might easily dismiss the radicality of silence to meaningfully strive towards these ends, yet we would only do so if we have already conceded the measure of meaningful work to quantifiable criteria that inevitably reduces all ideas and projects to a material conditionality unfit to evaluate trans-historical projects and commitments. Peace advocates, witnesses bearing silent testimony against oppression and violence, intentional communalists, ordinary folks in ordinary times invisibly participating in the subversion of reality: “Fools.”

Cordelia is such a *fool*. With her silence in *Lear*, as in any fictional or historical account, we find no guarantees, only more danger. Her father becomes unhinged, her sisters opportunistic. Silence compels force and power—in whatever particular form they express themselves—out into the open. In the open we find them stripped of illusion and pretense. Force and power cannot just be, they cannot simply linger. All those caught and subordinated by them must always be busy. Yet, now, though it may take a few acts and scenes and a few more devastating turns, their chief agents can no longer hide among the banalities of life and within the usual administrative movements that so often occlude their insensitivity to the order of love and the freely imagined world to come.⁴⁰ They will be seen for what they are. They will perish under their own weight and by their own designs. They will disquietedly and gracelessly enact their own curse. Though they have no choice but to become fit for their end—which is the very reason for the tragic engine—they will never attain the satisfaction or peace of a joyous tragedy.⁴¹ A

40 Provisionally, “the world to come” here suggests what awaits those who discover a liberated subjectivity and an authentic sense of community in the tragic world. They free themselves from the “formula of force,” refusing to be subordinated to all powers that restrict or deny an active inner life, that dictate the terms of a meaningful material existence, and that atomize and alienate all manner of social life. And these free subjects discover a way of accomplishing this without succumbing to violence or revenge.

41 Cf. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), 120.

In Praise of Ozsváth and Turner's Poetry of Translation

Mark Olival-Bartley

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe,
The Golden Goblet: Selected Poems, translated
by Zsuzsanna Ozsváth and Frederick
Turner. Deep Vellum, 234pp., \$12 paper.

THERE'S NO GAINSAYING THAT YOU HAVE MORE pressing concerns than to read a process-driven and autobiographical account celebrating a new translation of select verse by Goethe. Indeed, we all do. Scanning the headlines as we scroll through our social media feeds, we are collectively undone by illimitable crises: There's the pandemic, of course; catastrophic climate change; drought and famine; a global rise in fascism; the Holocene extinction; cyberwarfare; the acidification of the oceans; a worldwide recession—and the list goes on and on and on (and on). So, during this *annus horribilis*, marshaling whatever intellectual energy that remains to read, God help us, poetry seems, well, unseemly: After all, turning inward from the apocalyptic to seek, ostrich-like, the sanctuary of *belles lettres* suggests either brazen decadence or outright escapism. And, while we're playing the devil's advocate here, we might as well ask what possible value could a new translation of centuries-old verse by a dead white European male have for us now?

It's a fair question and the very one that Frederick Turner—co-translator with Zsuzsanna Ozsváth—poses with uncanny prescience at the outset of his introduction to *The Golden Goblet: Selected Poems*: “Why read Goethe now? Or let's say: ‘What is wrong with us now, that we

might require the help of Goethe?” Or, put yet another way: Given the magnitude and complexity of the foregoing catalogue of challenges facing humanity, how can reading Goethe help? In our first steps toward an answer, we would do well to keep in mind that Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832), during his long and eventful life, masterfully explored a host of genres in pursuit of the abiding interests of his polymathic intellect—he was equally at home in fiction (e.g. *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, 1774; *Elective Affinities*, 1809), drama (e.g. *Götz of Berlichingen*, 1773; *Iphigenia in Tauris*, 1787), autobiography (e.g. *Italian Journey*, 1817; *Poetry and Truth*, 1830), scientific study (e.g. *The Metamorphosis of Plants*, 1790; *Theory of Colours*, 1810) and even military history (*The Siege of Mainz*, 1793).

Yet, for all this, Goethe is, first and foremost, a great poet—not only for his formidable lyrical gifts but as one who, as Turner notes, through “a supreme act of adulteration” was able to create “a common language that,” even in translation, “can connect all the thoughts and feelings of the human tribe.” To be sure, Goethe is often included with other great poets whose names now clamor as clichés—Homer, Virgil, Dante, and Shakespeare—and whose literary stocks have also fallen as a result of the culture wars fought over their inclusion in the canon. That said, syllabus requirement or no, readers who have actually sojourned in the visionary worlds of the great poets are generally quick to praise and recognize the value of the experience, dismissing the most egregiously banal of those fraught ados. As to Goethe, well, he is the youngster of that storied pantheon and, as such, the most modern and familiar to us—and, because he is so winsome a wordsmith, one whose unremitting brilliance is so seamlessly melded to an authentic soulfulness, we relish his verse.

Of course, unless you are one of the hundred million or so literate in the language, the only way to savor the mellifluousness of Goethe’s mesmerizing mind is through the medium of a good translation, of which those for *Faust*—considered the greatest work of literature in German—abound. Indeed, while the prestigious challenge (and market potential) of rendering the poet’s masterpiece into English ensures each generation its own so-called definitive version, the greater bulk of Goethe’s shorter verse, equally artful, has always garnered much less attention among international publishers and, thereby, readers. Thankfully, Deep Vellum—a not-for-profit publisher based in Dallas with an impressive catalogue of literature in English by contemporary writers from around the world—and the Ackerman Center for Holocaust Studies at the University of Texas at Dallas have come together to bring forth a new anthology of Goethe’s lyrical work, exquisitely translated by Zsuzsanna Ozsváth and Frederick Turner, *The Golden Goblet: Selected Poems*. Both Ozsváth and Turner are professors at UT Dallas, and both have published their own work to much acclaim; together, they have previously translated three volumes of

Hungarian poetry into English that have won great accolades, including the Milán Füst Prize, the highest literary award in Hungary. *The Golden Goblet* is their first translation of German literature.

At this point, I feel the need to pull back the curtain a bit: Reviews such as this are seldom read by poets themselves without the accompaniment of a disdainful smirk or a smile indicating an itching for a fight. (In a letter to me five years ago, Donald Hall dished that the poetry reviews were his least favorite part of *The New Yorker*.) This is all by way of saying that summarily judging another's volume of hard-won verse through, say, formulas of convention or, worse, platitudinous quips is an act of bad faith. And, for someone like me, who has lived in Munich for a decade yet remains a decidedly clumsy bilingual, I must confide at the outset that I am not an expert on Goethe's poetry; in fact, I feel much more comfortable reading in English. So, my legwork in evaluating the translation by Ozsváth and Turner lay equally in checking their versions of the poems against both the authority of Goethe's German alongside two other contemporary translators, David Luke (whose *Selected Poetry of Goethe* is published by Penguin) and Walter Arndt (whose *Faust* is published by Norton). I'm all but certain, too, that a lifelong proclivity toward formalist verse has played a role in my reading here of *The Golden Goblet*. Admitting these opinions, limitations, and biases is important—not least because, while most of us are wont to trust our intuitions in aesthetic matters, the means by which poetry can be translated with fidelity are manifold.

Indeed, when standing before the poetry section of a bookshop or library, every enthusiast has one or two litmus tests that he or she is given to favor in discerning whether a collection is worth reading. Mine is to flip through the pages and scan the enjambments, assessing how the breaking of syntax at the right margin allows for the play of interlinear ambiguity, however momentary, before the next line is read. Should I find lines ending, say, with prepositions or articles, there's a good chance that I'll shelve the book. On the other hand, should I encounter lines laden with phrases that might unexpectedly tack at the break or, better, verbs whose transitivity dangles the possibility of an unseen object or, better yet, consummate homonyms oscillating between being plural nouns or third-person-singular verbs in the present tense, then I'm smitten. It's at this time when I look for a chair, preferably somewhat out of earshot, and, seated, begin to (softly) read aloud and savor the language like an off-duty restaurant reviewer newly served at a novel eatery. Come to it, that bit about the enjambments is but a prelude: Reading aloud (to enjoy what Donald Hall impishly called, in that same letter, "aural sex")—for me, anyway—is the best test of taste. A non sequitur (and over-the-top mixed metaphor): In reading great verse aloud, I sometimes think of Der Blaue Reiter masterpiece *Fighting Forms*, Franz Marc's famous last painting, as a dynamic poetic ideal, in which opposing forces clash colorfully into

shards of echoes that, like the simile of vibrating violin strings in Rilke's in "Love Song", coterminously sound into a singular medley of metrics and occasional inversion, of sentential composition and enjambment, of lexical riches and metaphorical evocation, of delicious diphthongs and consonantal clusters, of lofty lyricism and downhome earthiness.

The syllabic count, the metrics, the rhyme scheme, and even the number and line placement of the feminine endings matches Goethe's German perfectly.

The Golden Goblet had me smitten from the very first. As a material object, the book is a pleasure to hold, handy in its heft; it's also a pleasure to behold, for it is handsomely designed (with a matte black cover that connotes both Janus and Warhol in its etching of the poet's iconic yet eerily forlorn portrait in neon green, pink, and orange above his surname in oversized white blackletter). As to the text, the generous font size of the Bembo typeface is easy on the eyes (even, as I found, without one's reading glasses), and the ample margins encourage the wholesale impression of variegated stanzaic forms and allow for their fulsome annotation. To assist the reader in contextualizing the poet's verse, there are two sizable preludes—an introduction by Turner ("Goethe the Revolutionary") and a foreword by Ozsváth ("Biography as Poetry, Poetry as Biography")—and an illuminating afterword by both translators on their collaborative practice ("Natural Meanings: On Translation"). Sensing the linguistic needs of their likely readers, Ozsváth and Turner elected to make *The Golden Goblet* a monolingual translation, thereby doubling its offerings; for those interested in reading comparatively, a list is provided of both the English and German titles of each poem. (All of Goethe's poetry in German, incidentally, can be easily found at a number of different websites or in inexpensive anthologies; I picked up a brick-sized hardback online for just five euros.)

I confess not having read Goethe since taking a survey course during my freshman year in college some thirty years ago—where we read *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, a novel—and I am embarrassed to admit having never encountered his poetry before, save the occasional lyrical translation (like Rita Dove's "Above the Mountaintops," which appeared in *The New Yorker* three years ago). To gird myself for what I thought would be a tough Teutonic slog, I read Robertson's primer and Safranski's biography before delving into *The Golden Cup*—but I needn't have done that, for Ozsváth and Turner have fashioned a thoughtfully user-friendly book that assumes no familiarity with Goethe's oeuvre yet

consummately achieves the objectives stated at the closing of Ozsváth's foreword: "Our goal has been to translate Goethe's poetry into English, approximating its musical, rhythmical, and visual achievement, and opening the door to this new world of treasures for English-speaking readers."

After reading and annotating *The Golden Cup* once through, I followed the second reading of each poem by reading alongside it both Goethe's German originals and English translations by either Walter Arndt or David Luke (or sometimes by both). Assessing the poems impressionistically in that manner, one after another, was just too difficult for me (and my gnat-like memory): So, I dusted off my Olympia manual, typed up iterative sets of representative poems, taped together those individual sheets of A4 (Europe's equivalent to letter-sized typing paper in the U.S.), and, pen in hand, scanned the metrics of each version, noting the rhyme scheme (and whether the rhymes were masculine or feminine). In marking up the translations of Arndt, Luke, and Ozsváth and Turner, I sought to see how each discrete translation met my litmus tests in reckoning with the challenge of the original's enjambments and replicating the inimical music of its German verse.

To get a sense what this looks like, consider these iterations of "Chorus Mysticus," the final lyric that ends *Faust (Part Two)*, Goethe's masterpiece.

GOETHE

Alles Vergängliche
Ist nur ein Gleichnis;
Das Unzulängliche,
Hier wirds Ereignis;
Das Unbeschreibliche,
Hier ists getan;
Das Ewigweibliche
Zieht uns hinan.

ARNDT

All that is changeable
Is but reflected;
The unattainable
Here is effected;
Human discernment
Here is passed by;
The Eternal-Feminine
Draws us on high.

OZSVÁTH AND TURNER

All that is transient
Is but a fiction;
All insufficiency
Here becomes action;
All wordless mystery
Here may be done;
The ever-womanly
Still draws us on.

LUKE

All that must disappear
Is but a parable;
What lay beyond us, here
All is made visible;
Here deeds have understood
Words they were darkened by;
Eternal Womanhood
Draws us on high.

At first blush, the three translations seem akin to one another—yet, in looking closer at the prosody of each, differences are thrown into relief. For example, while Luke’s translation certainly has the same number of lines and rhyme scheme as Goethe’s original, the number of syllables per line, their pattern of stresses, and the resulting music differs appreciably from what a German reader experiences in reading this lovely verse aloud. Note how Goethe’s metrics are varied, whereas Luke’s are monotonous; note how Goethe’s poem has two feminine rhymes, whereas Luke’s has none. Though Arndt’s translation fares better than Luke’s with a closer approximation to Goethe’s syllabic count per line and the inclusion of feminine rhymes, these do not perfectly match the German nor does Arndt’s metrics. Given the relative brevity of the lines, Ozsváth and Turner, amazingly, have achieved the impossible: the syllabic count, the metrics, the rhyme scheme, and even the number and line placement of the feminine endings matches Goethe’s German perfectly. (Although there’s no way to ever really know, I’m of the mind that Ozsváth and Turner might have even sought to up the ante with an oblique homage to John Donne, the seventeenth-century English poet given to melding the sacred and profane.)

Here are the final two stanzas of Goethe’s “Selige Sehnsucht,” which Luke translates as “Ecstatic Longing” and Ozsváth and Turner as “Blessed Yearning”: All versions have the same syllabic count per line, rhyme scheme (almost), and alternation of masculine and feminine rhymes—in reading the English versions, take note of their syntactical and lexical choices.

GOETHE

Keine Ferne macht dich schwierig,
Kommst geflogen und gebannt,
Und zuletzt, des Lichts begierig,
Bist du Schmetterling verbrannt.

Und so lang du das nicht hast,
Dieses: Stirb und werde!
Bis du nur ein trüber Gast
Auf der dunklen Erde.

LUKE

Distance tires you not nor hinders,
On you come with fated flight
Till, poor moth, at last you perish
In the flame, in love with light.

Die into becoming! Grasp
This, or sad and weary
Shall your sojourn ever be
On the dark earth dreary.

OZSVÁTH AND TURNER

Space can’t clog your spellbound yearning,
You come flying just the same,
And at last, drawn to the burning,
You’re the moth come to the flame.

You would be Earth’s sullen guest
In the darkness glooming,
If you’d never felt this quest:
Die into becoming!

In addition to avoiding Luke’s pitfalls of twisting word order around to ensure the rhyme (as in the prepositional phrase of his final line), Ozsváth and Turner employ their lineation in the service of sentence design, whose rhetorical power crescendos with each successive line until the exclamation. Even a decision as slight as Luke’s to render “earth” in the lower-case, evoking “soil” rather than “the world,” seems ill-fated: The technical proximity to Goethe’s verse notwithstanding, the pathos of Ozsváth and Turner’s version is simply lost in Luke’s for want of a metaphorical nail. (In this sampling, too, one senses that Ozsváth and Turner are reaching out to their readers allusively. One can’t help but hear the echo of Auden’s elegy to Yeats: “Earth, receive an honoured guest”.)

A final example might suffice. Here are the last two stanzas of “Der König in Thule,” which Goethe famously has Gretchen sing as she undresses in *Faust, Part One*. Here, the King of Thule, now *dying*, surrenders his final treasure—a gift from his one true love.

GOETHE

Dort stand der alte Zecher,
Trank letzte Lebensglut,
Und warf den heiligen Becher
Hinunter in die Flut.

Er sah ihn stürzen, trinken,
Und sinken tief ins Meer,
Die Augen täten ihm sinken.
Trank nie einen Tropfen mehr.

ARNDT

There stood the hoary drinker
And sipped of life’s last glow,
Then flung the holy trinket
Into the brine below.

He saw it plunging, winking
And sinking deep at sea,
His lids grew heavy, sinking
No other drop drank he.

OZSVÁTH AND TURNER

Old drinker in his palace,
He stood, drank life’s last glow,
And threw the sacred chalice
Into the flood below.

He saw it fall, and drinking,
Founder into the main.
His eyes, too, now are sinking;
He never drank again.

LUKE

The old man still drank as his life’s flame sank
Then over the waves he stood,
And the sacred cup he raised it up,
Threw it down to the raging flood.

He watched it fall to the distant shore
And sink in the waters deep;
And never a drop that king drank more,
For he’d closed his eyes to sleep.

This, of course, is the golden goblet of Ozsváth and Turner's title. In addition to sundry markers of contrast, what stands out for me in Ozsváth and Turner's rendering vis-à-vis the others is the manner in which they have infused Goethe's crafted verse with playful soulfulness; in doing so, they have enabled the great German poet to speak in an idiom that we can understand and appreciate. (Please forgive this indulgence, but I would be remiss if I didn't say that, once again, I detected some high-end word play: Goethe was born and raised on the Main.) In the end, poetry is an emergent art greater than the sum of its parts.

True translators, like true poets, are made as much as born—and the extraordinary beauty of these translations led me to Zsuzsanna Ozsváth's heart-breaking memoirs of the Holocaust and her recovery of life thereafter at home in Dallas with her family. During the Nazis' siege of Budapest when she was a child, Ozsváth found life-affirming properties in the music and imagination of Goethe's verse as recited by the children with whom she played, for this was poetry that her mother had read to her and that they both had loved. Decades later, she pursued doctoral studies in German literature in Texas and wrote a study of Goethe as part of her dissertation; as an adult, she found that the study of such poetry gave her life meaning and joy. The extraordinary beauty of these translations also led me to Frederick Turner's own exquisite verse and his brilliant disquisitions of expansive poetics and the classical spirit. The bold (and convincingly-argued) thesis of "The Neural Lyre," an award-winning essay that he and a Munich-based researcher co-authored, is that metrical verse is a universal phenomenon because its properties complement the workings of the human brain; moreover, the properties of such poetry are salutary, conferring real-world benefits to our physical well-being and mental health.

I was saddened to learn that Zsuzsanna Ozsváth and Frederick Turner will be retiring from UT Dallas this year, for their extraordinary lives—in concert with their immeasurable gifts as translators—have indeed recovered *The Golden Goblet* from the cold depths of age and churning murkiness of language for us to once again admire. Yet, before we lament the inevitable drinking and sinking of that invaluable chalice once more, there is some wonderful news to share: A new English version of Goethe's *Faust, Part One* has been translated by Ozsváth and Turner, is now being published by Deep Vellum, and will be made available for purchase on 3 November 2020, Election Day. ❧

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Please, Mr. Judge Man

Resisting Apartheid With Song and Dance

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“We are coming.” The voice on the phone was Zulu, accented and clandestine.
“We will meet you outside your apartment in five minutes.”



IT WAS 2:15 A.M. ON SUNDAY WHEN my girlfriend Shelley Kjonstad and I found ourselves in the back seat of a taxi accompanied by two rough-looking Zulu men. Ten minutes later, through dark and winding streets we were at the Beatrice Street YMCA somewhere in the industrial bowels of Durban, South Africa to judge the weekly Isicathamiya song and dance competition. The Traditional Music Association of Durban sponsored the competition and required an independent judge to forestall any chance of cheating or preferential treatment.

It was May 1992 and I was in Durban to work with the Kwasa Group, a Zulu company sponsored by the state-funded Natal Performing Arts Council. The last of the segregationist Apartheid laws were melting into history and it was two years before South Africa's first non-racial election would bring Nelson Mandela to power. Apartheid means "apartness" in Afrikaans, and this philosophy brutally enabled the white minority of 12% of the population to control and exploit the rest. The 44 years of government-enforced racism had made an indelible mark on the consciousness of South Africa's blacks, Indians, and mixed race "coloureds," leaving a legacy that will live on for generations to come. A decade-long international anti-Apartheid boycott had isolated South Africa, making it an international pariah. The boycott's recent end was a cause of celebration and relief; it also charged the atmosphere with anxiety and

uncertainty. I had worked extensively in the area of indigenous performance and was brought in to train actors and develop a performance that referenced traditional Zulu rather than Western expressions. My presence was a minor media event covered by the press and symbolic of South Africa's willingness to grow and change, and, significantly embrace its newfound acceptance by the world.

Paulus, the director of The Traditional Music Association of Durban, had read the news accounts about my work and sought me out. In the posh lobby of the theater he excitedly told me about the contest and that he preferred white judges—especially foreigners who did not know Zulus—because it limited the likelihood of favoritism for any of the dance groups. The short, tough-looking Paulus, with a sideways boxer's nose, wore a natty three-piece suit and broke into a broad victorious smile when I told him I had never seen Isicathamiya performed.

"You don't know any of the groups?"

"No."

"Very good, because we take our competition very seriously. It is important you are honest and very fair. Very fair is important. And you are an American, the people here love Americans for how you helped the black man in South Africa."

The taxi made its way to the YMCA located in an Indian commercial trading area near downtown Durban. It was a district seldom frequented by whites, and straight out of



22

22A



23

23A



24

24A

film noir. Dimly lit litter-strewn streets led to warehouses, wholesale depots, light industrial shops, outdoor markets, and large open-air bars where Zulu workers, mostly men, sat at rough-hewn tables drinking large quantities of Ijuba, the preferred and affordable porridge-like beer.

The night brought little comfort from the heat of the day. Even the generally cooling Indian Ocean breeze was a wave of warmth. The dimly lit streets were full of shadows with sweat-glistened drunken workers swaying and staggering through the night's sticky humid haze. Some sang as they walked arm-in-arm, while others stumbled and slumped. The night seemed out of focus, blurry and confused. For most, Saturday night was their only night of release after a week of ten- and twelve-hour days of physical labor. Workers who lived outside of town would catch a "black taxi"—a small van usually packed with up to 23 people—back to their township. Many were from rural areas and lived in nearby workers' dormitories with hundreds of other Zulu men. Far away from their women and families, they were restless, horny, and homesick.

The taxi rolled up to the illuminated façade of the YMCA, where dozens of men and women dressed in their Saturday night finest milled around, chatting and smoking. An oasis of relative civility as insects swarmed through long shadows cast by the entrance lights.

Members of the singing groups were easy to spot because of their matching

and stylishly trimmed purple, red, or white jackets and slacks. Several were outside getting some air, languidly socializing and smoking, their jackets open, shirt collars undone. Some had two-tone shoes, others had groomed their hair with oil; the scent of cheap aftershave tickled the air. Rehearsing men moved in and out of the shadows of the building; concentrated, rhythmic, animated, stylish. Bodies in flashy red jackets, white pants, and yellow shoes worked out dance routines, their arms extended minstrel-like, then hands held together as in prayer, a call from their leader, and they spun around.

Paulus opened the taxi door and greeted Shelley and me with a slight bow. With a grand wave of his hand, the burly man who accompanied us in the taxi adopted a serious "don't mess with me" face as he grabbed each of us by the arm. Those on the sidewalk paused. Conversations stopped and people turned, some moving towards us for a closer look. They knew we were the judges. Paulus in the lead, the crowd parted and we were quickly led in; I felt like a rock star or politician or criminal. Paulus escorted us into the empty first-floor auditorium where a few men were setting up the last of several hundred wooden folding chairs.

"The judging will start soon," Paulus said as he rushed off, leaving us in the hollow, echoing auditorium.

From another part of the building Isicathamiya singing could be heard, followed by applause, clapping, foot stomping and occasional shouts of exaltation. It sounded like a cross between a tent revival and a wild party. The evening's activities had begun hours before our arrival. Saturday nights at 10 p.m. the groups gathered and performed for the public. As judges we were not allowed to participate in these earlier presentations, which were more relaxed community events-cum-religious celebrations with audience participation.

Isicathamiya has its origins in the 1920s when it evolved from a special type of Zulu wedding song that men sang to women. The male-only style of a cappella Isicathamiya singing, rooted in the Zulu love song tradition, was re-shaped by the gospel singing style introduced by white missionaries. The term "cathamiya" is derived from the Zulu verb to "walk softly" or "tread carefully." Lyrics expressing love for a woman were recast to express love of God and Jesus. When rural Zulus migrated to the townships on the outskirts of South Africa's major urban areas of Johannesburg and Durban to seek employment, they brought the nascent tradition with them. With the advent of apartheid in 1948 and the imposition of limits on public assembly, Isicathamiya incorporated several traditional Zulu dance steps, a subversive act of defiance in the face of oppression.

Isicathamiya dance steps and arm movements incorporate traditional Zulu warrior dances. However, in Isicathamiya the sharp, aggressive warrior-like movements were given a softer form. With the incorporation of traditional Zulu dance movements, Isicathamiya became a political religious expression, and became an act of political and cultural resistance occurring right under the noses of the white oppressors during the apartheid era. The all-male Isicathamiya

was an act of disobedience stating in effect, "We Zulu are here, alive, fighting, hoping, dancing, singing."

While in South Africa I had witnessed several street demonstrations in protest to job cuts, the speed of change, and any number of abiding grievances. Nothing was as stirring or frightening than thousands of Zulu men moving through downtown Durban their chanting voices echoing a traditional warrior's call and response. With 'knobkerrie' clubs (their traditional weapon) aloft, the martial and proud Zulu moved in unison using the same, aggressively stylized march steps of Isicathamiya.

Another influence on Isicathamiya was Motown. In the 1960s and 70s American black music, specifically that of James Brown and the Temptations, worked on the imagination of African music, transforming Isicathamiya's dance steps and harmonies even further. Isicathamiya was a porous and malleable form, meeting at a place somewhere between Zulu traditional love songs, Zulu warrior dances, Christian gospel, and Motown.

Paulus rushed in and placed school notebooks and pens on the judges' table. He informed us that we would be judging nineteen groups. There were originally fifteen, but four other groups showed up unexpectedly. "Such things happen," he apologized.

"Each group will have ten minutes to perform. I will keep the clock. If they go over their time they will be stopped!"

Paulus, who had been in charge of the competition for years, had two assistants: one accompanied us in the taxi, and the other was equally large and mean looking. Both wore business suits and would keep things moving smoothly.

Each dance group and the audience knew the competition's strict guidelines—disqualifications and audience expulsion for unruly behavior were not uncommon. I was

happy for Paulus' assurances of a timetable, fearing that with so many groups to judge, along with the tendency of "African time," we would be judging well into Sunday afternoon.

After his procedural talk Paulus turned briskly and left Shelley and me alone in the empty auditorium. Our long judging table, ten feet in front of the elevated proscenium stage, was covered with a bright white-and-orange-striped tablecloth. The elevated stage was empty and on its back wall was a brightly colored mural depicting an idyllic tropical scene with grass huts and palm trees waving in an island wind. A gulf of 25 feet separated us from the first row of audience behind us. We felt awkward and lonely as we waited on our little island in the echoing auditorium, listening to the hand clapping and cheering revels happening elsewhere in the building.

Unlike the noisy celebration happening in the distance, the competition would not permit audience interaction of any kind, not even applause, as to avoid influencing the judges. During the competition each group was given a number so even their names, which often included where groups hailed from, would not influence our judging.

The Isicathamiya competition in Durban was institutionalized in the 1960s and had grown and was taken very seriously. Groups such as Ladysmith Black Mambazo had launched their career on that very YMCA stage. Others had launched careers and gone on to fame and fortune as solo performers or with groups such as Johnny Clegg & Savuka. Paul Simon and scouts for local and international recording companies were increasingly attending competitions. The coming of the New South Africa was creating a sense of possibility that was palpable. Every South African—black, white, and brown—sensed change was in the air. For the blacks, long underdogs on their own ancestral land, it could only mean change for the better. The competition was a glimmer of hope and gave a reason to dream again.

The auditorium filled with family, friends, and general public, all dressed in their finest. An air of importance filled the room. Camera flashes and stifled cheers kept the tension taut. Paulus' bouncers, carrying sticks, patrolled the auditorium to keep a solemn order in the room. The competition was also a matter of pride, which the Zulu had in abundance. It was about the Zulu community putting on its best face, showing and reaffirming itself and its own mettle.

Each Isicathamiya group was serious, committed and self-supporting. Groups had seven to nineteen members and participation required long rehearsals to master the complicated a cappella singing, dance, and movement steps. In the townships, where there were few social activities besides drinking and sports, and until the early 1990s, gatherings of men were politically suspect. Belonging to an Isicathamiya group was one of the few ways to socialize after a long day of labor.

Beginning or getting into an Isicathamiya group was competitive and no easy task. Being in a group required not only time and money, but a certain amount of Christian devotion. Their fancy suits, shoes, and gloves, as well as transportation, were provided by an individual's own funds.

Each group had to come up with thirty Rand (about \$40) as an entrance fee; the fees augmented the winner's pool, which was generously sponsored by local banks and beverage companies. The top three groups would receive money, while the others walked away with nothing. The association would, in addition, award a weekly round robin-style 300-Rand prize as an encouragement for the "most deserving group." The group prize money was sponsored by the association and was meant as start-up money or to assist groups in the purchase of their stylish costumes and to provide transport and meals.

The competition the night of my judging was of special interest because the top three winners would also win a bank-sponsored



Photos by Shelley Kjonstad. Negatives scanned by John Lehman.

regional township tour and a spot performing at a local music festival. The competition was not only a matter of money and career; at its heart it was a manifestation of culturally ingrained Zulu warrior rivalry of challenges and competition.

The auditorium was filled quickly and quietly with several hundred people who entered and sat as if in a church. Some set up video cameras near the front of the seating area.

Paulus came to our table, looked over the crowd with self-importance and leaned into us. Speaking in a low, confidential tone he underlined the criteria for competition judgment: “Movement is very important, very important! How well they dance. How much variety, inventiveness and imagination are very important, very! The skill they have in their dancing is what you must look for.

But just as important, you must not forget, is the music. Harmonies and quality of singing, balance, originality, and feeling! Even if you do not understand Zulu, listen to the music, there must be feeling of the music! Please!”

“But how do I know what is good?”

“It is all right for the judge not knowing anything of the Zulu language or tradition, that is what the groups want. Otherwise they don’t know if they have appeal to other people in other places in the world. Understand now? Lastly, you must respond to the overall impression, the costumes, presentation, and the impact of their presentation. You must be honest at all cost! The groups want the judges to be honest. They, we cry for honesty! The people, look at them...”

With that Paulus insisted we turn and look at the audience sitting behind us. “Do you see?



Yes, these people are wanting you to be honest!”

The first group was the “Aero Plane Singers.” We knew their name because they wore a sash emblazoned with it—so much for objective judging and group anonymity. When they began I couldn’t help but feeling heat on the back of my neck; everyone seemed to be watching our every action. My gestures seemed magnified; Shelley and I were on stage as well, isolated on an island between the audience of nearly three hundred who sat eerily silent behind us, and the stage in front of us.

As the night wore on into morning, I dared not lose interest or become dozy, for fear of offending the groups or the audience. Between groups, when either Shelley or I wanted a soda, we would signal one of the assistants who would scurry over. We would whisper our request, and the entire event paused until our Fanta or Coke came on a tray, was grandly

wiped of moisture and poured into a glass.

At one point I needed to go to the toilet and of course there was a special judge’s toilet. Everything stopped when I crossed the stage to the backstage men’s room. I felt very white, very colonial, and very uncomfortable knowing everyone was waiting for me to urinate.

Shelley was bemused and enamored by the heartfelt generosity of the contestants. She, like other white South Africans, knew of the competition but had never seen one. A professional photographer, Shelley shot video and still photos, judging the event through her viewfinder. Because she grew up in rural Natal speaking Zulu, she provided me indispensable insights and an occasional translation. More than once she chuckled in reaction to some odd Zulu expression presented on stage, whispering into my ear

a group's "greeting to the judge", which was always addressed to me, the man.

"Do you know what he just said? 'Mr. Judge Man and your beautiful wife, please be kind to us, because we will pray for your many children.' They're really laying it on."

Each of the groups shuffled-stepped solemnly, in profile onto the stage with heads bowed, their left hand on their heart, their right hand on the shoulder of the person in front of them. Once in position they turned, heads bowed to the audience, shifting into their opening tableau. The leader hurriedly arranged and adjusted their positions, straightening ties or jackets and giving some words of encouragement—then they were ready to begin.

Each group had a leader who was identified by his actions and differently colored jacket, which ranged in color from red to black to gray to white to lavender. Most of the groups wore either white or black cotton gloves and had spit polished shoes. The group's soloist, a tenor, was easily distinguishable from the rest by their hand-sewn sashes, which only they and the group leaders wore. One sash identified the group's name; the other was either religious, such as "Jesus Our Lord" or "Pray to Heaven," or an appeal to the judge, such as some of my favorites: "Jesus, bless the Judge," "For the Excellent Judge," and "Please Mr. Judge Man."

Many of the group members looked uncomfortable and self-conscious as they lined up; for some it was their first time in front of an audience and they were wide-eyed with stage fright. Some singers stared at Shelley and I as if we were their executioners; others kept their eyes closed to disengage from the situation. A few waved 'hello' with big smiles, which provoked Paulus into fit of admonishing sharp words and snapping fingers.

The group's ten minutes would begin with a nod from Paulus. The lead singer would glance at his watch and nod in agreement. The presentation would begin with an elaborate greeting directed at the

judges. The group's leader would offer welcoming words accompanied by obsequious bowing, smiling, and a little prayer for their victory.

Once the group began singing, as if comforted by their song, all signs of nervousness evaporated. The leader would conduct the presentation with arm and dance movements and in a way become one with the song. The group's tenors would introduce another musical motif to create a delicate overlay. Then, as with most songs, the soloist would join, hovering, contrasting, and interweaving sweetly to create a complexity of feeling that never failed to move and uplift me. Many of the groups had a limited repertoire; some knew only three to five songs, which followed the well-established Isicathamiya song structure.

The talent on stage was remarkable. However, their talent had its limits, which became apparent after the first hour of judging. With rare exception, many songs were similar in style, progression, and use of harmonies. Those groups that innovated with songs and presentation were standouts. However, the generosity and meticulous care, detail, and hard work expressed by each group never failed to impress. The singing and performance talent varied widely and as the judging progressed it was easy to identify levels of comparative quality and depth of feeling.

Paulus was a disciplinarian and the event was kept on a strict schedule. One of Paulus' two big, bouncer-like assistants used a meter-long rule to line up each group single file at the stage's stairs, making sure each singer was equally spaced. The sound of the next group warming up in the hallway was a constant distraction and Paulus would bark orders to the back of the auditorium to shut the doors. As the night wore on he increasingly admonished the audience to quiet down, threatening to expel anyone if they drank, spoke, applauded, or smoked.

Paulus enforced his rules by patrolling the audience and pointing at people to behave. During the course of the evening his assistants threw out several people for various infractions. At one point a man, a friend of a group presenting, came enthusiastically around to the front of our table. He smiled pleasantly, humbly taking our hands and thanking us warmly, touching his heart and bowing. In a matter of moments he was grabbed by one of the bouncers who lifted the small, thin man off the ground. Shelley and I stood to protest and they put him down. As they led him away Paulus scolded the man who seemed indifferent to his plight. Once at the doors, apparently to teach the fan a lesson, one of the bouncers grabbed the man around the neck and shook him violently.

Shelley and I yelled, "Let him go!" Then Shelley berated them in idiomatic Zulu, which really got their attention and put things back in order. Up until that point no one knew she was fluent in Zulu. Paulus and the dance group on stage went still—then came their wide-eyed grins of amazement. Shelley was a tall blond fair skinned white woman, a fourth generation South African of Norwegian-English ancestry. Her family employed several hundred Zulu and Xhosa laborers, owned orchards, cattle and farmed thousands of acres of sugar cane along the coast. She could speak like a Zulu girl from the rural areas because she was nursed and raised by a Zulu nanny, a woman she loved as her mother.

The strict adherence to a ten-minute time limit allowed for two long, or three short songs. Their song topics included love or marriage, and the belief in God or salvation through Jesus. On the rare occasion, a song topic involved a historical event significant to the Zulu.

Better groups would begin slowly and build, using smooth, illustrative gestures to accompany their songs. Their gestures

would synchronize with their songs, creating elaborate soft-shoe dances mashing Motown and Zulu war dance steps. Movements were in unison and most were rounded, restrained, and almost gentle. However, an occasional sharp, angular movement or stamping would offer a quick glimpse into Zulu ferocity.

The better groups had choreography worthy of James Brown. With a rhythmic shuffle, arms bent at the elbow and moving back and forth, the singers would split and interweave around one another, rearranging themselves into a series of tableaux.

These groups' elaborate movements on the small stage were something to behold. With mercurial fluidity they split lines, forming crosses and 'V' shapes with their collective movements. A line of stamping legs—one element of a Zulu war dance—would appear and disappear amidst prayer and Motown-inspired gestures. Sometimes the harmony of dance and song would combine perfectly and carry us away—it was then that being a judge was most delightful.

Ever mindful of disqualification for exceeding the time limit, each group leader would often consult his watch during the course of his presentation. When a dance took longer than anticipated the leader would stop abruptly and bow, the group waving and singing as they quickly swayed and shuffle-danced off stage.

Besides their matching jackets, slacks, ties, shoes, and gloves, many groups had little gimmicks to set them apart from the others. Style was everything, and each group not only tried to outdo the others in song and dance, but also with accessories like little silver chains on their vest pockets. One group had little flashlights tucked in their vest pockets, which they used during the climactic moment of their final dance. Several groups had monogrammed jackets; one had black and white striped gloves; one group wore glittering nametags; another, dark sunglasses. The slickest group



had color-coordinated turquoise shoes, socks and matching shirts.

Even a group's name attempted to set them apart. Names, written with sequins or glitter on sashes proclaimed: the "Zulu Messengers," "N.B.A. Champions," "Nongoma Master Voices," "Durban New Mountains," "Zulu Home Soldiers," "Pietermaritzburg Lucky Boys," and the "Jama King Boys."

After we had judged for hours, the morning light pierced through the auditorium's tattered window shades. The audience had thinned out to a sleepy-eyed few dozen. Several people slumped, sleeping in their chairs. Paulus brought us coffee and informed us that the time of deciding was upon us. One of the bouncers rolled out a blackboard and with that action, the groups and their well-wishers who were waiting outside, entered quickly to fill the hall.

Groggy from lack of sleep and fatigued by the intensity of concentration, I went carefully over my scores. After seeing so many groups, their qualitative differences were obvious. The excitement and anticipation in the hall gave me a second wind. Paulus made no attempt to keep people quiet, nor could he if he wanted to. Voices and the sound of wooden folding chairs against a wooden floor echoed off the high ceiling—the smell of sweat, the rising heat of day, and exhaustion closed in. I was worn out, swimming through reality, my eyes and thinking strained. It was nearly 9:30 a.m.

The room went still as I wrote the names of the top three groups on the blackboard.

When we turned the freestanding blackboard around, the room exploded into pandemonium. Some singers stood stunned and staring, chairs were knocked over, grumbling blended with cries of delight.

The all-male Isicathamiya was an act of disobedience stating in effect, “We Zulu are here, alive, fighting, hoping, dancing, singing.”

The members of the three winning groups went crazy, shouting, jumping, embracing one another, and running crazily around the auditorium unable to contain their excitement. Paulus told us that after several years of performing it was the first time either the “Natal Love Singers” or the “Zulu Home Soldiers” had placed in the competition.

Paulus congratulated us, patting us on the back saying we had picked well.

“Usually white people pick groups that sing many English songs and that is why certain groups sing their songs in English, to please the whites. You picked the best groups. I think the people agree.”

Both the first and second place winners insisted on performing a “thank you” song. Group members, some with their jackets off, or shirts unbuttoned, jumped onto the stage and sang these two joyful, exuberant songs that woke me like no coffee could.

Paulus and his assistants escorted us out of the hall, pushing their way through the crowd and into the steamy tropical morning. A taxi would take us back to my apartment.

Paulus’ last words, however, were worrisome, “Thank you. Don’t worry, you will be safe, the driver is a friend.”

“What?”

Outside, several hard faced, disappointed people were packed around us jostling, making the opening of the taxi door difficult. The competition was taken more seriously than I thought. I was suddenly alert, the morning and scene quickly becoming tense. Where were the bouncers? I grabbed Shelley’s arm and feared for the worst.

One man shouted something at Shelley in Zulu knowing she understood, accusing her of influencing my judging. Another shouted, “You should not have been a judge!” Both men were from losing groups. Another man confronted me wanting to know why his group lost and how could they improve.

A tall man with coal black skin angrily grabbed my arm. He was from the group that had won several times previously but had not placed in our judging. Several others from his group surrounded the taxi; all were still wearing their bright red coats trimmed with black piping. Hard faces, tensed jaws, sweaty skin, and drilling eyes surrounded us.

Suddenly the bouncers appeared, shoving the men away, pulling truncheons from their pockets in threat. There were shouts and heated words, which ignited into a scuffle. Members of the winning group poured from the building; their expressions of jubilation snapped to consternation as they sized up the situation and joined the fray in our defense.

We were shoved into the taxi and told to lock the doors; hands banged on the glass and hood before it sent us speeding into traffic. The sun was high, its angle excruciatingly sharp and the inside of the taxi like an oven.

“Well, that was exciting,” Shelley said drolly, checking her camera bag to make sure nothing was missing.

The street bustled with the setup of another market day. I slumped into the headrest and closed my stinging eyes. All I could see were Zulus dancing. .a



3

FOLIO

Sentience as An Outing to the Zoo

Nomi Stone

Children throw pebbles
at the jeweled head
of the peacock and bark back
at the seals. Who

can say what happens
inside each bright life?

Scientists study the brain's
ancient core in insects:
no, not dark inside, not simple
reflex—*it feels like something*

to be a bee. Livid with loss,
a hive rears a new queen. Bees,

groggy, hold each others' legs
as they fall sleep. Bees! They cling
to a car all the way down I-95,
their queen inside.

This poem was originally published in *The American Poetry Review*.

Grassy Knoll Covid Morning

Tom Palaima

Step into your shadow,
let your heart flower
in every second,
minute and hour.
Nurture our delicate
ties to each other.
Reach out to a friend,
a stranger, a lover.

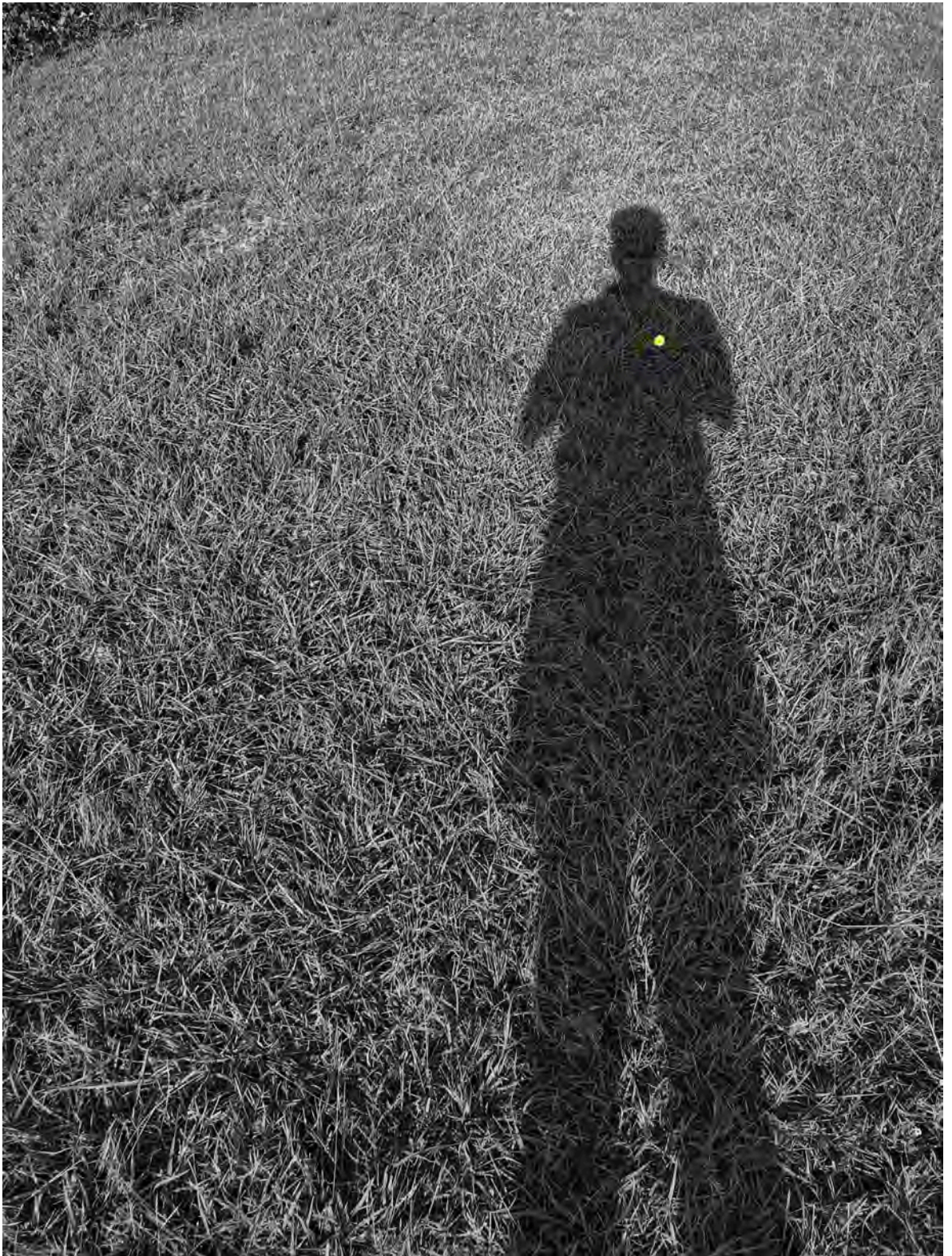
Living in gray now
you will see things right,
like fabled Teiresias
who saw truth without sight.
Our world can blend
the black and the white.
Through night's gift of darkness
stars give us their light.

Bright colors amaze us
through their separation.
Yet they dazzle in rainbows
when they reach integration.

After Kenneth Josephson, *Matthew*, 1963. Art Institute of Chicago.

Photo and Poem by Tom Palaima June 17 2020 | photo edited by Jen Garica.

An essay by the author, introducing the poem and photograph, is published online at athenaeumreview.org/essay/grassy-knoll-covid-morning.





Photos by Paula Mazur, Dallas, 1976.

Endless

Poems by Jane Saginaw

An introduction by the author is published online at athenaeumreview.org/essay/endless

1.

Endless

She tried to convince me—
Warm Springs was like
a private Georgian resort
really, nothing like
a rehabilitation hospital

I watched her pin-pointed pupils pulse

Often, she reminded me—
Roosevelt's lover lived
in the little white house beneath
the shady pines

I noticed how she lifted her chin, faintly flared her nostrils

But it was when she insisted
my grandmother took perfect care
of my older brother, her newborn, who she abandoned
in Detroit, that my mother's weak smile sunk my heart—

Daughter-love blossomed in my chest
as I studied the tips of my fingers
It wasn't stories of polio
that paralyzed the beating of my heart

Not her fancy images, but my own disturbances that swelled.

As if she believed words contained her stories.

As if the mark at the end of this line halts your thoughts.

2.

Songbirds, 1969

Fifteen years old when my mother announced
I'd like to take you to Warm Springs

Rusty orange dirt, screen doors sprung open with a tap
I studied silent songbirds in the courtyard

Magnolia blooms guarded crisscrossed sidewalks
rolling paths really, crossroads

Gliding through waxed linoleum hallways
to the corset shop and brace shop and physiotherapist office

We squared our shoulders in unison
No buildings with stairs, no doctors with answers

My mother's wedding band clicked
against her wheelchair's rim

And my walking legs stumbled—
Not my polio, hers

But my thighs still twitch, torque
when I remember the rust-colored soil

Perhaps the sidewalks never crossed
Maybe the songbirds cried

Echocardiogram, 1999

rare beauty descends
blends with pulsing neon spheres
of open-flutter orange-yellow-red swells

a cool jelly-tipped probe tickles
my bare flesh exposed—who knows
sources of my congenital click?

swishes and gushes,
blood rushes back towards open-valves, flapping gaps
and skipping beats

mystery peeks, swoops deep, dervishly whirls
stretched too far—a loose chord's sweet grief bursts now
with dangerous daughter-love





4.

Seder, 2020

we parsley together
internet-cross-stitched tablecloth
hard-boiled, shank-boned

chanting questions
this night of difference
Why? How long? Where

is our leader? In this wildness
afflicted us then, consumes us now

matza cracks, wine dribbles the rim
of this plague—our shoulders curl,
longing for the cucumbers of egypt, we sing:

enough! terrified! no structure! abandoned!
ritual, small changes, learn bridge,
vulnerable- raw- huddled alone-
useful/useless humbled/dissolved
(reframe) (draw circles) (let go)
accelerate— on hold— on-the-cusp-of-something-rare—

Morning Love Poem

Before rice cakes and sunflower butter,
 Before espresso and news of the day,
 I slide open the door to our terrace, and

I stand and I breathe and I gaze. Tangerine glow or
 Milky-thick fog. Grey whips of cirrus or drizzle.
 Those lights to the east (Mesquite or Balch Springs?)

Revealed or obscured today? No river overrunning
 Its rim. No ah-ha revelations to bare. But I welcome the
 Rhythm of the morning. Beating, exquisite and rare.

Rare air. Rare blossom of sky. Rare circling centers of darkness to light. Rare
 deepest pockets of heliotrope horizon. Rare elusive dew on this metal rail. Rare
 fractured sparks of sun. Rare this glorious daybreak. So rare, that heavens calls.
 Rarer, I think, that I answer. Rare, just the inhale. Rare knowing we are safe, we
 are safe. Rare lavender scent, like the lather of our soap. Rare the muscles in my
 face, so slack. Rare notice of that crane's distant call. Such rare openness. A rare
 pattern to that flashing red light; does it blink to the beating of my heart? Rare
 question, I believe. Rare, repetition, repeating. Rare silkiest kiss of this morning.
 Rare, you teasing wind. Rare, us, under our quilt, just moments ago. Rare, vivid,
 so vivid and rare. Rare wonder when I fill my lungs. Rare, the ecstatic exhale.
 Rare your delicious joy. As rare as my rare zeal.

Not an answer for the pangs of our aching moments.
 Mysterious, the puzzlements we share. And then we return
 to the rhythm of our morning. Our container, crafted, with immaculate care.





Evita Tezeno, *When the Flowers are in Bloom*, 2019. Mixed media collage, 18 x 27 inches. Copyright © Evita Tezeno. Photo courtesy Evita Tezeno.

Jammie Holmes, *Endurance*, 2020. Acrylic and oil pastel on canvas, 66 x 40 inches. Image by Emery Davis, courtesy of the artist and Library Street Collective.



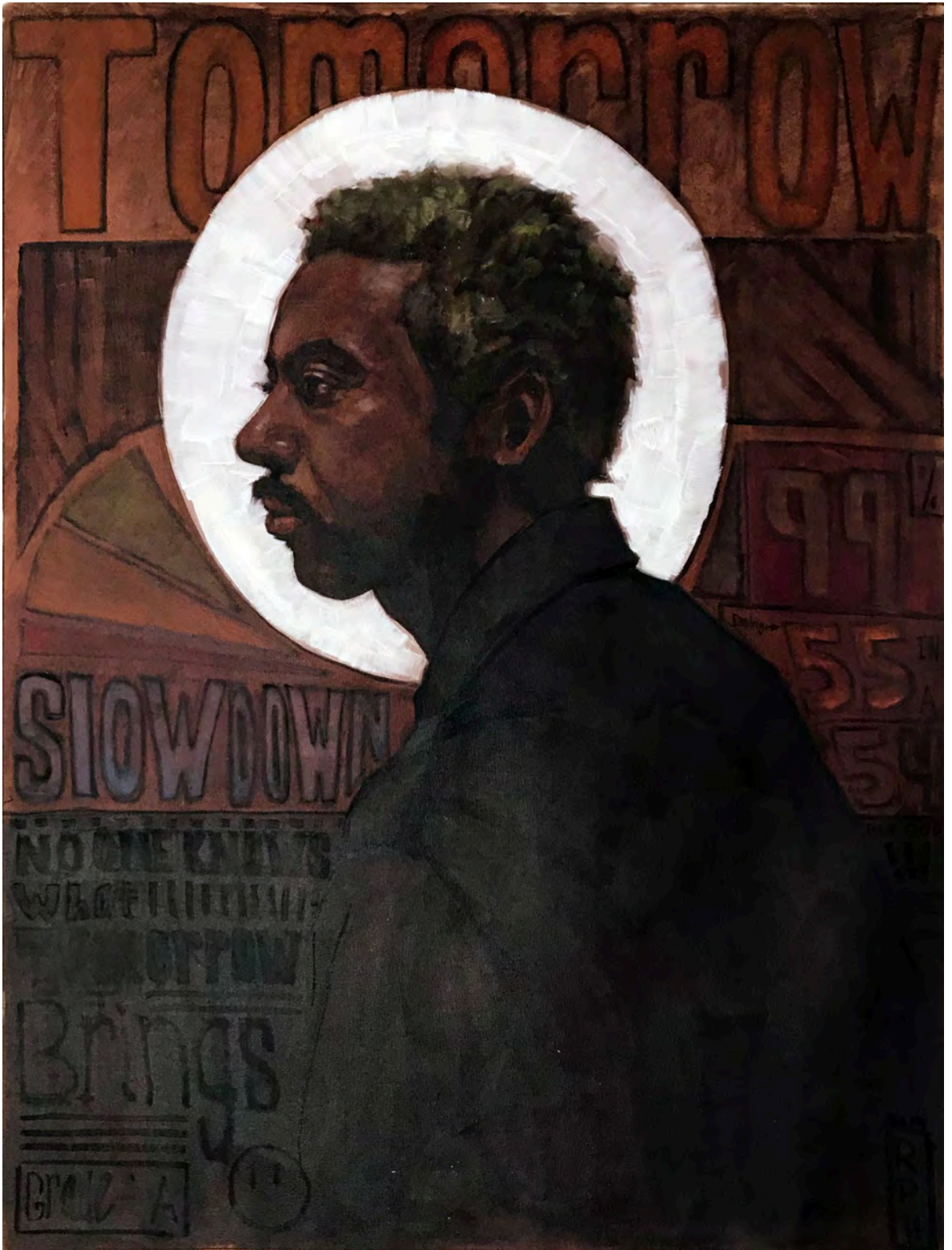
Desireé Vaniecia, *The Father and The Son*, November 2019. Acrylic, gold leaf and resin on wood, 11 x 17 inches. Copyright © Desireé Vaniecia. Photo courtesy Desireé Vaniecia.



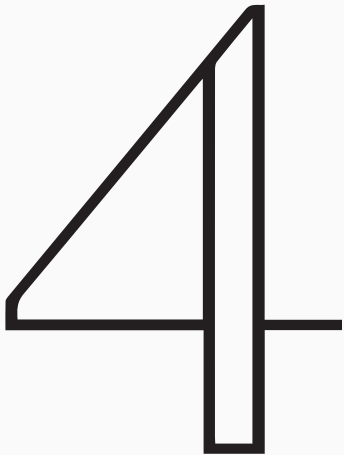
Sedrick Huckaby, *Jaiden and John Marcus*, 2020. Oil on canvas panel, 48 x 120 inches. Copyright © Sedrick Huckaby. Photo courtesy Sedrick Huckaby.



Letitia Huckaby, *Sister Jean*, 2014. Pigment print on fabric,
38 1/2 x 32 1/2 inches. Courtesy of the Artist and the Liliana Bloch Gallery.



Riley Holloway, *Tomorrow*, 2019. Oil on canvas, 56 × 44 inches.
Copyright © Riley Holloway. Photo courtesy Riley Holloway.



4

**SCIENCES
AND ARTS**

The Ancient and Future Art of Terraforming

Frederick Turner

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The University of Texas at Dallas

BETWEEN ROUGHLY TWO BILLION AND ONE BILLION YEARS ago the first known terraforming event took place on this planet, the Oxygen Catastrophe. During this event, cyanobacteria used photosynthesis to fix nitrogen and build robust adaptive structures in the reducing atmosphere of the early Earth, and in the process they excreted oxygen in global quantities. Once all the iron on the Earth's surface had rusted, absorbing as much oxygen as it could, the planet's atmosphere changed radically, into something close to what it is today.

Stromatolites, corals, and shellfish changed the geology of the planet, creating colossal limestone deposits which, when subducted under the mantle, caused new forms of volcanic and rifting activity. Hydrocarbons were laid down by plants. The colonization of the land by arthropods, insects, and vertebrates was a similarly dramatic event, as was the evolution of the angiosperms, the flowering plants. Termites and ungulates produced greenhouse gases; worms and grasses changed the soils; beavers altered watersheds profoundly; climax forests changed the local climates.

In the Anthropocene epoch, a new terraformer entered the scene. Human hunter-gatherers may have been using fire at least 20,000 years ago, as they do today, to destroy scrub and forest to provide fresh grazing for game. The extinction of large fauna across the Americas and Australia tracks the human colonization of both continents, and huge areas of Europe and North America are only now becoming reforested after their Paleolithic transformation into grassland. Some have suggested that early herders contributed to the desertification of much of Africa and Asia. Were the increasingly frequent ice ages themselves affected by intelligent vertebrate behavior?

Agriculture is perhaps humanity's largest and most radical effort at terraforming. Beginning about 11,000 years ago it had transformed the planet. The dust-bowls of America and Asia, the drying up of the Aral Sea, the reduction of the Mississippi delta, the saline poisoning of the soil in Mesopotamia and Egypt, and so on, are obvious results of such industrial-age events as the farming of the prairies and the damming of the great rivers, as are of course the rise in greenhouse gases and global climate change. But such changes are not new.

The point is that we in our time did not create the issue of anthropogenic terrestrial change, but stepped into it; before the advent of humans, the Earth was always already in a state of crisis and emergence. The big mistake is to imagine a state of the planet that was ever in balance and harmony. Certainly humans have moved very fast in altering the planet, but many purely "natural" events have moved even faster, like major volcanic explosions that cause planetary winter, the breakthrough of slowly rising oceans into millions of square miles of lowland (the flooding of the Mediterranean and Black Sea basins, the emptying of Lake Agassiz in what is now Canada, etc), the joining or separation of continents, the emergence of volcanic islands, and the impact of supermeteors like the one at Chicxulub in the Yucatán Peninsula.

Life, and human life par excellence, is enormously adaptive, innovative, and constitutively emergent. Harmonious balance is a rare and temporary achievement, a synergetic resolution of otherwise destructive forces. The beautiful and complex forms that DNA assumes are the result of an enormous abundance, an exuberant process of niche-creation and niche-discovery; they are not the precious fragile remnants of a greater and better past order. We took too seriously, perhaps, our nineteenth-century discovery of the second law of thermodynamics and the increase of entropy or thermal disorder over time. What we thought was the enemy of life was actually its fuel, like the oxygen that the early phyla excreted into the atmosphere of the young Earth. Life *runs* on decay.

In this perspective it might be worth re-evaluating our whole contemporary discourse of the environment, and especially of the problems we face and the measures that have been proposed for their amelioration. Most salient of all, perhaps, is the issue of our responsibility for the planet and the technological means that we have for fulfilling it. But the issue is larger still—our environment is not just this planet, but the solar system too, at least. Many ethical arguments about whether we should leave other planets to their own destiny may be rendered moot by the strong possibility that, first, life on Earth may have already seeded or been seeded by exchanges of DNA between planets by impactor collisions, so that it is the solar system, not the planet, that is the relevant ecosystem and, second, DNA may be universal, hugely abundant, and not endangered, and our duty is general solidarity and interaction with biota everywhere. The existentialist

vision was one in which we fancied ourselves as alone in an alien universe; it is now beginning to look as if we were at home all along, in a very big house indeed.¹

We are already embarked. The planet is a self-terraforming place, and an acceleratingly self-terraforming place. We are only the most potent agent of the planet in this enterprise. Which means both that we should be extra careful, *and* that we sit as many risks, as Thoreau said, as we run. Inaction on global climate change may be much more dangerous than action.

So the whole question of our responsibility for the planet turns on how it is imaginatively conceived—a matter of culture, philosophy, ideology, poetry. Only if our imaginative net is wide enough will we be able to capture the good hard facts that really put the case in perspective. If we have a hammer, everything looks like a nail: and this limitation applies just as much to the environmental ethicist as to the pragmatic engineer.

The best things that ever happened to the human species—the obsolescence of slavery, the (advancing) liberation of women, the staggering recent increases in longevity, literacy, prosperity, public health, rule of law, democratic governance, and the economies of the marketplace—are all based on the progress of science and technology. That progress is built upon the concept of consilience, that is, a fundamental coherence and unity in the world. Modernity—now usually redefined to include the Renaissance—has been a state of debate and argument about the “magisterium” of that notional unity. Is it to be understood by reduction, deconstruction, and the assumption of determinism, or by the concepts of emergence, evolution, and the common origins of very different outcomes?

For my money, the Renaissance, in the old sense of the fourteenth through seventeenth century period of discovery, had it right the first time. There is a wonderful exchange on this problem in Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*. The shepherdess Perdita, according to custom, has been giving flowers to the guests at her feast. But she doesn't like the fancier, cultivated flowers of the time.

PERDITA Sir, the year growing ancient,
Not yet on summer's death, nor on the birth
Of trembling winter, the fairest flowers o' th' season
Are our carnations and streaked gillyvors,

Which some call Nature's bastards; of that kind
Our rustic garden's barren; and I care not
To get slips of them.

¹ A universe of living abundance—which may well be the case—would render invalid systems that presuppose a fixed or diminishing stock of value in the universe, such as Nordic paganism, feudalism, Malthusian mercantilism, religious millenarianism or predestinarianism, Marxism, and Trumpism. All such systems imply a death-struggle for the possession and consumption of a limited stockpile.

She refuses to grow the gaudier, “fairer,” late summer and early fall flowers, hinting that there is something improper in their ancestry. A “slip” is a cutting, from which a new plant can be propagated or cloned. Her guest Polixenes pursues the matter, intrigued by Perdita’s evident discernment, eloquence, and strength of mind.

POLIXENES Wherefore, gentle maiden,
Do you neglect them?

PERDITA For I have heard it said,
There is an art, which in their piedness shares
With great creating Nature.

But now she has opened up one of the perennial questions of philosophy. What she has just said is that she objects to the art of selective breeding and hybridization by which Renaissance horticulturalists transformed simple wildflowers into elaborate multicolored blooms. She is suspicious of artificial interventions into nature; for her, Great Creating Nature is a goddess like the Gaia of our own environmental philosophers. There is perhaps a further unconscious thought lurking in her mind. She has just been anxiously worrying about her own presumption in entertaining the amorous advances of a prince, whose blood and breeding are so far above what she imagines to be her own humble origins. She is embarrassed about the fine clothes she is wearing for the feast, and about the rustic garments that her lover Florizel has taken on in order to woo her without revealing his princely identity. Nature and human art should not mix, nor should commoners and nobility; if they do, appearances become deceptive and things will not be as they seem. Perdita is innocent, straightforward, and honest, and dislikes adulteration and deceit. Her decision not to cultivate the carnations and gillyvors is based on a personal code of sincerity:

PERDITA I'll not put
The dibble in earth, to set one slip of them;
No more than were I painted, I would wish
This youth to say 'twere well, and only therefore
Desire to breed by me.

Perdita dislikes the hybrid flowers because they use their attractive looks to gain the advantage of being reproduced, instead of their more modest sisters. It is as if she were to paint herself with cosmetics in order to make Florizel cultivate her with *his* “dibble” (garden trowel). But there are wider implications still. For if Perdita is right, art itself is a profoundly questionable enterprise. The very art of drama in which she is portrayed is a fiction. An actor is playing her part—in Elizabethan times, that actor would have been a gifted prepubescent boy, and so the whole enterprise is fraught with

dissimulation. And what is art? For Shakespeare the word had an enormous range of related meanings, which had not disentangled themselves from each other. It could mean “art” in the contemporary sense of what we find in an art gallery, a book of poetry, a symphony hall, or a theater. But it was also a normal term for skill or technique, and by extension for technology, machinery, and mechanical devices of all kinds; and it also meant magic, alchemy, and the mystical sciences of astrology and prognostication. It could be a humanistic discipline, as in “liberal arts.” It could also mean deceptive practice or cunning imposture.

The ambivalence and complexity implicit in Perdita’s use of the term are surely quite familiar in our own times. At present we are struggling with the ethical and health implications of the science of genetic engineering by means of recombinant DNA. Should we buy the new genetically-altered tomatoes on the grocery shelves, or drink the milk produced with the aid of bovine hormones? What about the strawberries with their chimeric pesticide genes, the experimental fruit flies with eyes growing out of their legs and antennae, or the patented strains of cancerous mice? We must balance the benefits of insulin, thyroid hormones, oil spill-eating bacteria, interferon and gene-grown taxol against the specter of laboratory killer viruses; gene therapy for inherited diseases against sinister eugenic schemes to improve the human gene pool; in-vitro fertilization and implantation against the legal and kinship dilemmas that result when the birth mother is not the same as the genetic mother. And, of course, there is the biggest art of all: terraforming or geo-engineering.

Reading Shakespeare, we become aware that our problems are not new; Perdita’s unease prefigures ours. Indeed, since the Neolithic agricultural revolution, when we first began selecting plants and animals to breed future stock, we have been in the business of genetic engineering and recombinant DNA. Our humblest domestic and culinary techniques are just as “unnatural” as the activities of the biochemists. Brewer’s yeast, sourdough, ginger ale plants and cheese-mites are all out-and-out examples of human tinkering with natural genetic processes. When we divide a clump of irises in the garden we are literally practicing clone technology; when we enter a pedigree dog or cat or pigeon in a show we are practicing eugenics on an entire species. Worse still, when we choose what we believe to be an exceptionally kind, intelligent, attractive, healthy and honest person to be our mate and bear or sire our children, we are engaged in human eugenics on our own local scale. There is no escape.

Thus, Perdita cannot evade the fact that as a tool-using animal—the “dibble” she uses for gardening is a cunning little technological device—she must alter nature in order to survive. She needs “art” in its technological sense. Likewise, as a social, role-performing animal she must put on appearances—her festive party dress—in order to coexist with other humans (the theatrical sense of “art”).

How may this contradiction between nature and art be resolved? Polixenes' reply to Perdita reveals a wisdom that we could do well to take to heart. Recall that she has just disparaged the gillyvors on the grounds that there is an art that went into their ancestry.

POLIXENES Say there be;
Yet Nature is made better by no mean
But Nature makes that mean; so over that art
Which you say adds to Nature, is an art
That Nature makes. You see, sweet maid, we marry
A gentler scion to the wildest stock,
And make conceive a bark of baser kind
By bud of nobler race. This is an art
Which does mend Nature, change it rather; but
The art itself is Nature.
(IV.iv.88)

The image that Polixenes uses to explain the relationship between nature and art (or rather, perhaps, between potentially artful nature and fundamentally natural art) is the horticultural technology of grafting. This is what he means when he speaks of marrying a “gentler scion to the wildest stock.” A gardener or vineyard-tender will cut off the upper stem of a vigorous wild plant, and bind to the stock that remains the stem and upper branches of a more delicate hybrid plant. Nature is accommodating enough to allow the graft to “take,” and the two plants are fused into one. The resulting combination has the virtues of both—the resistance to disease, pests, and frost of the wild stock, and the hybrid’s desired characteristics of productiveness, excellence of fruit or flower, or perfume. “A bark of baser kind” (the wild stock or root) is made to “conceive” (become pregnant) by a “bud of nobler race” (the hybrid cultivar). The Elizabethan word “conceive” had for them as for us the further meaning “to engender a new idea,” so Shakespeare is also suggesting that there is a natural continuity between the miracle of sexual fertility and the even greater miracle of imaginative creativity.

The main point of Polixenes’ remarks is that the art of genetic engineering by which we improve nature, or even change it, was itself created by nature. The plain ancestral gillyvors have the genetic potential to produce the gaudy streaks that attract the eyes of men and women, and persuade human gardeners to propagate them. Humans become a way for streaked gillyvors to make more streaked gillyvors, to extend the diversity of the gillyvor species by branching out a new breed specially adapted to the environment of human culture. The gillyvor is by nature an art-using plant. And we humans are by nature art-using animals. We survived to reproduce because we had the capacity to make tools like sheep-hooks or dibbles, and to breed domestic species like sheep or gillyvors for our own purposes. Moreover, our capacity to make fictions—to tell lies and put on disguises and mount plays and enhance our looks by clothing or cosmetics—is likewise a natural talent, like the eagle’s to fly or the mole’s to

dig. It is of a piece with our ability to express our thoughts in words, and to build families, tribes, cities, and nations.

It is also the foundation of all economic activity. Human art, human fiction, human invention, human technology, are not unnatural forces that have suddenly erupted into nature, but are the natural continuation of nature's own evolutionary process. Since they are natural productive forces in their own right, they participate in nature's own mysterious capacity to grow and reproduce. Furthermore, human economic production cannot be separated from human reproduction; the family is still the primary unit of economic cooperation, and marriage is the major means of distributing the wealth that accrues to production.

Perdita's hard-and-fast distinction between sterile insincere art and creative honest nature will not hold up. Nature will accept the graft of the wild and the artificial: nature can be artistic, art can be natural. There is nothing wrong in themselves with fictions, contrivances, and masks, nor are such things unique to human society: the gillyvors mask themselves in order to be cultivated.

So the issue has changed profoundly. It is no longer a matter of having to choose between the innocent creative sincerity of nature and the sophisticated sterile deceptions of art—a choice in which we would be forced to abandon all the advantages of technology, consciousness, language, and social communication if we were to opt for moral purity. Art and nature are one: we must now use our moral and aesthetic judgment to choose between courses of action, not some simple formula that labels one artificial and the other natural. The past course of nature as we can discern it in the evolution of plants, animals, and humans—and even, today, in the cosmos of physics and chemistry—can act as a suggestive and potent guide in making such decisions. But the decision we make will itself be part of nature, and it will take its place beside other natural events, both beneficial and destructive. When we choose to alter nature by a technological intervention, or when we choose to alter society by some new fiction, we should do so with the whole tradition of natural evolution in mind. But we cannot abdicate the prerogative of choice itself that nature has endowed us with.

In the centuries since Shakespeare, we have seen one side or other of this argument take precedence. The Enlightenment tended to reduce the world to a classical mechanical system of cause and effect: the world is mechanistic clockwork, animals are robots, and human beings are only other than physical robots if they are inhabited by a ghost of pure reason—a ghost, since reason gives only one answer to any question, that is itself deterministic.

The romantic reaction—against the dark satanic mills of Blake and against the atomism Blake derided in Voltaire and Rousseau (and by implication, Newton)—came next. Natural spirits were excavated from the dustbin of history and restored as creative and energizing forces. Civilized life was critiqued as inauthentic. There was a profound refusal to take responsibility for nature (a refusal that Goethe in turn rejected in *Faust*).

And then there was the modernist reaction to the romantic reaction: the heroic futurism, the formation of totalitarian solidarities of class, race, nation, culture, gender, and religion, identity politics, and the instrumentalist view of human and natural life.

We are now entering a period in which the wisdom of Shakespeare's renaissance formulation may once more be possible. The new sciences of interdependence, systems, emergence, coevolution, nonlinear dynamics, modeling, and whole-to-part logics, like quantum computation and Boolean mathematics, promise kinds of understanding that may once more be called "arts." Such sciences

- a. Don't simply crush nature
- b. Don't attempt to withdraw from it
- c. Don't attempt to submit to it
- d. Do try to understand it as it understands itself, to lead it, guide it, tweak, garden, cultivate, protect, breed, and provide a nervous system for it.

Science fiction is the major instrument by which such further thinking has been done and is still being done. This has taken place by means of an unexpected revival of the genre of epic. I have argued in my 2012 book *Epic: Form, Content, and History* that epic is humanity's common story of how we became human in the first place: our account of our evolutionary emergence from the inside, handed down by unforgettable narrative memes over the millennia, and adapted to the present needs of the society in which it is recomposed. As the responsibility for taking care of our planet and our solar system is forced upon us, we have begun to revisit the epic techniques by which we think through what our actions should be. They are world- and city-creation, extrapolation—the construction of narrative trees of decision and the scenarios that might emerge from them—and imaginative immersion.

Science fiction also offers a diagnostic tool for the whole realm of cultural zeitgeist, poetics, and myth, that we are embroiled in at this moment in history. Science fiction sensitively tracks our cultural moods, problems and opportunities.

The pervasive sense of disappointment and betrayal felt by the more adventurous members of western societies at the abandonment of a serious space program seem to lead from the optimism of Heinlein on the right and Asimov on the left to the exciting but deeply pessimistic dystopias of cyberpunk. Instead of the Sputnik boost to education, which really energized the economy, we got the war on poverty, which everybody came to feel was a failure: instead of Mars we got Vietnam and other demoralizing and unheroic wars with third world countries. The State could no longer be trusted to inspire us. The hugely successful *Hunger Games* books and movies were, I believe, one indicator or symptom of the collapse of cultural hope that produced the Occupy movement, the Tea Party, Black Lives Matter, Trump, America First, MeToo, and the white opioid crisis. Like rats trapped in a cellar with no exit, we turn on each other and ourselves, or seek out scapegoats when what we need is space.

Harmonious balance is a rare and temporary achievement, a synergetic resolution of otherwise destructive forces.

The argument that a space program was too expensive when there were urgent social problems to be solved is based on an economic misconception. One of the things a healthy economy needs is an attractive sink of value, some really big activities that suck money at high velocity through the system and empower ideas and work. The most successful continuous society on earth was that of Egypt, which for thousands of years poured money endlessly into vast tombs and monuments. Europe created the Renaissance out of the economic explosion fired by its own expensive “space program,” the building of the great cathedrals. What saved America from the Great Depression was the enormous expense of World War II. It’s not money that counts, it’s the velocity of money and the pervasiveness of its flow. The Great Society might not have been needed if we had been spending billions and hiring millions of people to put humans on Mars. We slumped in the seventies because we did not have enough things to spend money on, as evidenced by the spike in inflation.

Allow me to articulate in mythic terms some of the themes that a fiction writer senses today under the surface of the news. Trapped on this planet, enterprising young males and newly-emancipated females had no worlds to conquer, no frontier territories to light out to, no enemies that were worth fighting without destroying the whole world. We have divided ourselves into increasingly balkanized identity groups, in order to find suitable villains for our steel. At the same time our ideological prohibitions against playing God forbade us from taking on the heroic task of rebuilding and healing our own planet, and carrying life out into other worlds. Instead we were enjoined to limit, humiliate, and stifle ourselves, our children, and our imaginations to propitiate the ghost of the ancient deities that once flooded the world, and who promised with the rainbow not to do it again. Deities can of course rescind promises if they feel like it, and it is beginning to look as if that is what they are about to do. Some of us refuse to believe it, others do believe it and wish to punish and sacrifice themselves and others on the psychological pyramid-altars of political virtue. Guilt and despair tell us that the one thing we must not do is simply fix the problem; we would rather obey and be punished by the Parent than grow up and become parents ourselves.

Epic offers stories that articulate the great tragi-comic drama of human responsibility. The oldest one of all, *Gilgamesh*, begins with two episodes that directly confront the relationship of humans with the rest of nature. The first is the transformation of the beast-man Enkidu into a conscious language-using mortal human being—a story adapted in the

Book of Genesis to illustrate the Fall of Man from innocent idiotic immortality into a thinking historical actor. The erstwhile natural man then challenges the tyrant Gilgamesh and teaches him humility, decency, and friendship. The second episode is the great expedition of the two heroes to defeat the nature-god Humbaba, cut down the cedar-forest of Lebanon, and use the wood to build the city of Uruk. The poem explicitly recognizes the beauty and spiritual aura of the forest and its god, and recognizes the pathos of Humbaba's defeat, but also celebrates the glory and spiritual significance of the city that emerges and the heritage it establishes. We swap a sterile immortality for all the open-ended creativity of time. You cannot make an omelet without breaking eggs.

In the *Odyssey*, Odysseus must defeat the nature-god Polyphemus to become his true self and earn his name (which means "Trouble" in Greek). But it is not a simple victory: he must leave Polyphemus alive so that he can roll away the great stone that locks Odysseus and his men in the monster's cave, and Odysseus must pretend to be an animal in order to escape. We need nature to transcend the rest of nature, and transcendence does not mean eradication but responsibility.

We see the same patterns in epics all over the world—in the Mayan *Popol Vuh*, in the Persian *Shahnameh*, in the Chinese *Journey to the West* in which a redeemed beast-man helps rescue the sacred writings of the Buddha. It's in the Icelandic saga of the Volsungs, in the Korean epic of Jumong, in the African epic of Mwindo, told by the Nyanga people of the Congo, and in the Indian *Mahabharata*. All epics are about a great journey, a quest, that recalls our amazing walk around the globe, our colonization of the shores of the Mediterranean and the wilds of the Himalayas. These are the early science fictions of our species, the fictionalized story of our own evolution as a species from our own roots in nature.

And now we see the ideas developed in the science fiction of the last two hundred years, from Shelley, Verne and Wells through Burroughs, Heinlein, Asimov and Stapledon, to LeGuin, Banks, Bujold, Cherryh, Bear, Brin, Benford, Robinson, and other contemporary SF giants.

My own three epic poems take up the same themes. The two most recent, *Genesis* and *Apocalypse*, deal respectively with the terraforming of Mars and the geo-engineering of the Earth to reverse global warming. Both use natural processes—bacteria adapted to survive on Mars, and massive plankton blooms in the southern oceans—as the new agriculture of a new Neolithic. Both envisage a different kind of city, that is the flower and fruit of nature, not its defeat. Both acknowledge the tragedy inherent in any change of our condition, and the condition of our biosphere, even when the change is for the better. Both attempt to define what we might mean by "better" in the first place. Is it our mission to be the bees and birds of a new pollination and seeding of our local piece of the universe, as it was that of the ocean-dwellers that crawled onto the land half a billion years ago? A

Coins, Trinkets, Bits and Bobs

Lydia Pyne

Crystal B. Lake, *Artifacts: How We Think and Write About Found Objects*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 272pp., \$35 paper.

BY 1699, DR. JOHN WOODWARD, a prominent English naturalist, geologist, and antiquarian, had acquired a particularly curious shield as part of his antiquities studies. The shield was just over thirty centimeters in diameter, fantastically carved, and contained traces of gilding. In the ensuing years, Woodward became convinced that he had acquired an authentic bit of weaponry from ancient Rome—a view that Woodward felt was validated through his correspondence with a number of fellow antiquarians, historians, and other experts.

The shield—a buckler made of iron with a raised center circle—was elaborately engraved with what Woodward believed to be the Gallic chieftain Brennus’s attack on Rome in 390 BCE. “The scenes are so close to ancient accounts by Livy and Plutarch that Woodward thought the Shield had been made at the same time as the events depicted rather than as illustration of the text,” the British Museum’s catalog describes of the artifact today. It turns out,

however, that the shield wasn’t as ancient as Woodward supposed; it was most likely manufactured in the 1540s.

Almost immediately, Woodward’s shield—and the story of Woodward’s shield—quickly became more than the material, physical weapon. (“Woodward’s treatise on the shield, printed in 1713, prompted [Alexander] Pope’s satire of the same year on the follies of antiquarianism,” the museum’s catalog dryly notes.) The shield, and by extension, antiquarianism, became a bit of cultural shorthand, an allegory, and even punchline in the eighteenth century, thanks to the satires of Alexander Pope and Jonathan Swift. In truth, to presume that the shield really was what Woodward supposed it to be—an artifact from Brennus’s reign—took a lot of Gaul.

This incident—indeed, this artifact—begs the question of what we ought to make of the artifacts collected, studied, and catalogued by antiquarians centuries ago. How did such artifacts shape the developing social and political theory of England during the eighteenth century? And do such antiquarian relics hold any similar cachet or explanatory power for audiences today?

History is full of stuff. Material, tangible, physical stuff.

This stuff—what we call material culture—shows the relationship between people and their things in how it’s made, how it’s used, and how it’s discarded (or not) over time. For centuries, historians, archaeologists, philosophers, politicians, and antiquarians have used such stuff to establish what they claimed was a “true” account of history. One of the long-held expectations about material culture is that it offers a set of historical texts—in the form of objects—that are implicitly free of agendas, biases, or politics. Stuff, such logic goes, is simply the sum of its material properties. Stuff is a primary historical source, thus a more reliable text for understanding the past than secondhand accounts. However, as was the case with Dr. John Woodward’s shield, stuff is never “just stuff.”

Because older material stuff—artifacts, really, in proper parlance—is decoupled from its original contexts, artifacts can easily be co-opted into symbols and icons of those that find and collect them. Artifacts become palimpsests, as different eras inscribe their own meaning onto this historical stuff, thus becoming relic things of the past twice or thrice over. As such, the meaning of the same physical thing—the same artifact—can be made, unmade, and remade over time.

In *Artifacts: How We Think and Write about Found Objects*, Crystal Lake argues that artifacts are not, in fact, agents of fact—an assumption that is generally put forward by contemporary archaeologists and anthropologists. Rather, she argues, artifacts are incomplete texts that invite us to fill in their histories with our own imaginations, because artifacts are fragmentary by their very nature. Artifacts are a bit more like inkblots, the argument goes, because they tell us more about the people describing them than anything else.

“Artifacts, in short, were objects whose states of fragmentation allowed them to enter into the categories of fact and art but also prevented them from settling into either category for good,” Lake offers in her introduction. “As such artifacts thrived in textual networks where they could be discursively interpreted and debated, but they eventually receded from the networks where objects were valued as either obstinate things or constructed entities.”

Lake takes her readers through a history of artifacts that people dug up or collected in England during the eighteenth century, focusing on coins, manuscripts, weapons, and grave goods as specific case studies. These specific types of artifacts, Lake argues, were “everywhere” in eighteenth-century England, influencing everything from natural history to the debates about the natural rights of the monarchy. Specifically, *Artifacts* examines such stuff through the writings of Enlightenment thinkers like Percy Bysshe Shelley, Horace Walpole, Jonathan Swift, and Lord Byron who, Lake argues, used artifacts to inspire speculative—and often contradictory!—reconstructions of history.

The term “artefactes” first appears to English readership in Sir Kenelm Digby’s *Two Treatises [on] the Nature [of] Bodies [and] Mans Soule*, published in 1644. In Digby’s assessment, “artefactes” were simply all things that were human made. What immediately follows from Digby’s treatise is the question of whether such “artefactes” had agency to act or influence; or whether they were simply the by-products of human actions. And this question of artifact agency remains highly debated and largely unanswered in a plethora of contemporary fields from art history to archaeology. From the beginning, however, and this is perhaps one of Lake’s main theses, “artefactes”—artifacts—have been political.



Figure 1 Dr. Woodward's Shield. Embossed iron buckler, French, 1540s. 14 inches diameter, 2.75 pounds. British Museum, OA.4710. Photo: British Museum.

Not only have artifacts always been political, they have also always been provocative—intellectually as well as socially. Although antiquarianism has long been out of academic fashion, the study of ancient artifacts was foundational to the conceptualization of a plethora of intellectual disciplines from paleontology to art history to contemporary archaeology. (The word “fossil,” for example, comes from the Latin *fossa* and simply referred—originally—to objects that were in the ground. Consequently, this could and did

include rocks, coins, “figured stones” with plant and animal impressions, as well as gemstones.) But more than anything else, Lake points out, antiquarian collecting was a great equalizing activity among people over centuries—from amateurs to professionals. The seemingly never-ending flotsam of coins, trinkets, bits, and bobs has offered a material record for humankind to interpret and re-interpret for millennia.

Lake contends that it's easy to dismiss the stuff of antiquarian collections because it's all rather overwhelming in its material

volume. “But we’ve forgotten about most of the old, dirty, rusty, moldy, and broken items—the small bits and bobs whose origins or backstories were unknown and whose worth or meaning was not self-evident—that once called out to so many people,” Lake claims. The “we,” however, is a bit ambiguous. For museum curators and collectors, provenance is a way of keeping historical memory; for archaeologists and historians, the fragmentary nature of objects is often taken for granted as the encountered or found state of a thing. Perhaps, the more interesting claim, that Lake alludes to, is the idea that these artifacts—any artifacts—are still very much alive and active as they continue to influence how history is told.

Historically, there has been a deep split between classical archaeology, historical archaeology, and prehistory. All three use artifacts to reconstruct lives and human interactions from the past—but what cachet artifacts carry and how artifacts are read as texts is deeply different depending on the type of archaeology (or anthropology, for that matter) at hand. Traditionally, artifacts from the Paleolithic, for example, are studied, utilized, and read very differently than Roman coins. Lake’s book reinforces the temporal divides between different types of archaeological inquiries; this is, one would venture to guess, in large part, due to the artifact classes that Lake focuses in on—historically, artifacts collected by antiquarians were more likely to be tied to “complex civilizations” of the past. “By testifying for themselves, antiquities seemed like they were capable of resolving the conflicts over the nature and history of England’s government that people themselves could not resolve,” Lake

theorizes. The question of where some of these artifacts ended up centuries later (natural or regional museums? private collections?) could push to extend the social and political lives of these artifacts even further.

Coins, manuscripts, grave goods, and weapons carry a neat duality of social and political theory of England’s long eighteenth-century; Lake is unendingly upfront and clear that this is the focus of *Artifacts*. It would be curious, however, to consider whether other artifacts picked up by antiquarians and natural historians—like Paleolithic handaxes or prehistoric artifacts made of bone—could be subjected to the same duality of social and political theory that Lake ascribes to the artifacts under her study.

A *rtifacts: How We Think and Write About Found Objects* is a smart, careful reading of how certain sets of objects in the long eighteenth century of England influenced developing social and political theory. Although then-contemporary historians and philosophers claimed that considering these artifacts as merely material objects insured that “these artifacts spoke for themselves” and offered an unbiased look a history, Lake’s analysis shows that artifacts and their interpretations are, as ever, products of their contexts.

Today, Dr. John Woodward’s shield has become more than just a historical anecdote—it’s OA.4710, bequeathed to the British Museum by John Wilkerson and currently on display in the museum. It’s a powerful reminder that the cultural history of such antiquarian artifacts is still very much being written. **A**

Voyaging with Charles Darwin on the *Beagle*

Amit Majmudar

1

I DID RESEARCH A LONG TIME AGO. Not because I wanted to do research, but because I wanted future residency program directors, years later during interview season, to ask me about expression of the CXCR3 receptor protein in multiple sclerosis. I planned to sit back, gaze intellectually into the near distance, and deliver a prepared speech on the promise of immunological markers towards “a treatment, and, we hope, a cure” that I had been involved with for maybe four weeks between ten in the morning and two in the afternoon.

During my research summer, I would look through a high-powered microscope and count cells. The cells I needed to count were stained a deep green—simultaneously dark and fluorescent, if you can imagine that. My immediate superiors were two brilliant twentysomething green-eyed blondes, one a Swede named Pia, another a German named Corinne. I had to count these dark green stars in one field of view, then ease the slide north until the topmost star was just below the margin, and count again. Eventually I’d make it through a whole slide and jot down a number.

This seemingly tedious task went very quickly, once I realized all the slides had counts that fell between 25 and 45 cells, except for the outlier slide that had under 5. Soon, I could just kind of sweep back and forth and get a feel for the count. “Thin-slicing,” Malcolm Gladwell might call it, though I think it’s 10,000 hours of experience before you’re supposed to do that.

As you can imagine, I made a serious mistake that first morning: I assumed that box of slides was my morning’s work. I made short work of the whole batch so I could read Nabokov. That was a rookie researcher’s mistake; the box had been meant to occupy me for a week.

Corinne and Pia were so impressed by my efficiency that they had a small conference with much enthusiastic nodding. I realized I had gotten myself assigned a whole new task in exchange for three chapters of *Pale Fire*. Fortunately, the next task was actually pretty cool: I was going to be the “runner,” fetching freshly tapped cerebrospinal fluid from the main Cleveland Clinic hospital and getting it back to the research facility.

I showed up at the main hospital that afternoon and received my package, a light styrofoam box about the size of a toaster oven. I secured it under my arm, took a deep breath, and started running. I ran through the lobby, into the summer traffic, through the line by the hot dog stall. I hurdled a stroller, punched a kid and stole his bike, ditched the bike and hopped over car roofs against the flow of traffic, and eventually burst through the door of the lab, holding the styrofoam box over my head like Charlton Heston holding the tablets on Sinai. "I've got it!" I shouted.

Pia turned to me. "How hot is it out there?"

I lowered the box, hiding the sweat blotches under my arms. "Seventy-two, seventy-three?" I felt my left earlobe drip.

Corinne rose and looked closely at me. "Are you okay? What happened?"

"I ran."

"Why?"

"I'm the runner." I regretted the tautological sound of this immediately. "And I, um, didn't want the heat to, uh, denature our cells."

Corinne took the lid off the box. "The CSF is on ice, ja? Look."

A test tube full of clear liquid nestled in about forty ice cubes.

"In fact," commented Pia, "the only thing that could damage the cells is if they were jarred about."

I walked after that. Once I realized that I had a lot of time before the ice melted, and that they *wanted* me to take my time on the errand, I went to the falafel place for a wrap on every trip. If I'd already had lunch, I'd treat myself to a baklava piece. The CSF would sit on the chair next to me, freshly drained from some unfortunate MS sufferer's spinal canal, and I would stare at it and think about how terrible it would be to grow old and have health problems, and on the other hand how shitty it would be to die young having sacrificed your twenties to memorizing the mechanism of insulin and the Krebs Cycle. I couldn't even enjoy my summer vacation without tainting it

with this mindless research. Well, I thought, maybe I'd get a publication out of this. That would look great on a resume. A real conversation-starter.

I actually *did* get a paper out of it (the coveted "fifth author" spot), and this is what I/we sounded like:

T-cell accumulation in the central nervous system (CNS) is considered crucial to the pathogenesis of multiple sclerosis (MS). We found that the majority of T cells within the cerebrospinal fluid (CSF) compartment expressed the CXC chemokine receptor 3 (CXCR3), independent of CNS inflammation. Quantitative immunohistochemistry revealed continuous accumulation of CXCR3+ T cells during MS lesion formation. The expression of one CXCR3 ligand, interferon (IFN)- γ -inducible protein of 10 kDa (IP-10)/CXC chemokine ligand (CXCL10) was elevated in MS CSF, spatially associated with demyelination in CNS tissue sections and correlated tightly with CXCR3 expression. These data suggest a critical role for CXCL10 and CXCR3 in the accumulation of T cells in the CNS of MS patients.

In other words, our writing was

1. the work of a collective, not an individual
2. unbeautiful
3. uninteresting to a layperson
4. from a verbal perspective, overly Latinate and jargon-laden (see no. 2)
5. divorced from direct observation (unless counting cells through a microscope counts)
6. really, really "zoomed in" on one specific detail with no hint of a larger perspective.

You may think no. 6 only seemed the case to *me* because I was a medical student with no eagle's-eye perspective on MS research. Yet despite repeated attempts to find out—from Pia and Corinne and eventually the chief neurologist in charge of the whole lab—exactly what our paper meant from the standpoint of treatment, experimental therapies, or even our "understanding" of the (still-obscure) pathogenesis of MS lesions, there was no answer. The distances among act, interpretation, and application were just too great. Our paper was "another piece of evidence" that the immune system "played a

role” in ms. What we were doing was necessary to the furthering of neuroscience—but we were focused not on the forest, not on the trees, not on the leaves, but on a single segment of single vein of a single leaf, tracing it back and forth, going nowhere in particular.

What did I expect? Research isn’t visiting a faraway place and adumbrating a fundamental secret of biology while chasing bugs over the rocks. Or at least research isn’t that anymore. That ship has sailed, as they say.

Its name was the *Beagle*.

2

The place it sailed for, as every biologist knows, was the Galapagos islands. Darwin’s research happened in an environment nothing like the stainless steel basins and glass panes and microscope-slide-nudging quiet of the modern laboratory. We have to imagine the father of evolutionary science clambering over volcanic landscapes, reeking of sweat, covered in dirt and beetles, like some kind of animistic shaman communing with the wilderness. Darwin got to evolutionary theory by traveling very far indeed—deep into the stubbornly prehistoric, pre-human rockscapes of these islands off the coast of nowhere.

I’ve never visited the Galapagos except through the eponymous BBC One documentary, which happened to be available for streaming on Netflix the same week I started reading *The Voyage of the Beagle*, No. 104 in the Everyman’s Library collection. Apparently are no resorts on these islands, no parasailing Missouri-based insurance agents with their freckled wives and daughters, no weed-smelling islanders offering to braid the wife’s hair into dreadlocks, no piña coladas with the little umbrellas: The Galapagos remain as pristine and forbidding as they were one hundred and fifty years ago.

As I watched these baroquely decked-out birds and weird insects, I thought about Darwin poking around on these islands—and how he never records a single bug bite, though he must have experienced his share. I thought about modern-day Darwinists—the slick academics and symposium atheists, Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris, and all the

self-certain undergraduate ramen-slurpers who scoff at traditional religion in his name. Darwin’s Darwinism feels *earned* in a way these campus Darwinisms don’t.

On the 13th the storm raged with its full fury: our horizon was narrowly limited by the sheets of spray borne by the wind. The sea looked ominous, like a dreary waving plain with patches of drifted snow: whilst the ship laboured heavily, the albatross glided with its expanded wings right up the wind. At noon a great sea broke over us, and filled one of the whale boats, which was obliged to be instantly cut away. The poor Beagle trembled at the shock, and for a few minutes would not obey her helm; but soon, like a good ship that she was, she righted and came up to the wind again. Had another sea followed the first, our fate would have been decided soon, and for ever. We had now been twenty-four days trying in vain to get westward; the men were worn out with fatigue, and they had not had for many nights or days a dry thing to put on. Captain Fitz Roy gave up the attempt to get westward by the outside coast. In the evening we ran in behind False Cape Horn, and dropped our anchor in forty-seven fathoms, fire flashing from the windlass as the chain rushed round it.

To go on a sea voyage in the early 1800s was to put yourself, literally, at mortal risk, particularly when the sea voyage was so far outside the usual trade routes. Darwin took on risk in a way even the most dedicated evolutionary biologists today don’t, or don’t have to. Challenging nearly two millennia of Christian dogma involved an intellectual fearlessness that mirrored the physical fearlessness involved in boarding the *Beagle*.

Because the *Beagle*, by sailing into the history of science, sailed through the history of religion as well. That is an inextricable part of Darwin's history as it is of Darwinism's. He chased butterflies like *Papilio feronia* directly into the sanctum of theology. This had happened before with astronomy (Galileo) and history (David Strauss's 1835 *The Life of Jesus, Critically Examined*). In 1859, with *On the Origin of Species*, another investigation into Nature would prove an accidental investigation into God.

The traditional sense is that evolutionary theory contradicted the parts in Genesis about God creating Adam and the animals and so on—Genesis 1:25.

And God made the beast of the earth after his kind, and cattle after their kind, and every thing that creepeth upon the earth after his kind: and God saw that it was good.

But that's just the literal contradiction. Darwinism calls out Brahma and Pangu just as it does the Old Testament God, but it's only in the Abrahamic monotheisms that this truly bitter resistance to evolutionary theory shows up. (Every Hindu I know, for example, seems quite at ease with the idea.) This is because the source of the revulsion resides in the verse immediately *after* the one where it's God creating all the animals.

And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth.

And let them have dominion. In Abrahamic religions, we human beings are set apart because we are made in God's image, and we sit imperiously at the top of a hierarchy. In the Eastern religions that believe in rebirth, the hierarchy exists—it's better to be born a human being than to be born a monkey—but human beings are always risking slippage. The Jataka

tales tell of the prior incarnations of the Buddha. It turns out he had appeared in the past as a rabbit, a deer, a mallard.... Of the ten incarnations of Vishnu, the first three are animals, a Fish, a Tortoise, a Boar, while the fourth is a man with a lion's head and claws, as if transitioning to the human avatars to follow. There is no sharp boundary between the animal world and the human world, and the animal can "lord it" (literally) over mankind: Lord Ganesha has an elephant's head. The Scopes Monkey Trial is unthinkable in a civilization where there are temples and hymns to Hanuman.

That is why the *Voyage of the Beagle* is so crucial a counterpart to Darwin's later scientific work. It shows us the image of this biologist—this biological philosopher—seeking out nature at its harshest and most indifferent and most beautiful.

The day was glowing hot, and the scrambling over the rough surface and through the intricate thickets, was very fatiguing; but I was well repaid by the strange Cyclopean scene. As I was walking along I met two large tortoises, each of which must have weighed at least two hundred pounds: one was eating a piece of cactus, and as I approached, it stared at me and slowly walked away; the other gave a deep hiss, and drew in its head. These huge reptiles, surrounded by the black lava, the leafless shrubs, and large cacti, seemed to my fancy like some antediluvian animals. The few dull-coloured birds cared no more for me than they did for the great tortoises.

There is something proud and unconquerable in these tortoises, both the one that hisses and the one that turns away. They can be caged or killed or driven to extinction. But no human being can have dominion over them. Darwin came face to face with nature radically unbowed, and eventually, he placed himself (and the human species) in a continuum with it: After millennia of Abrahamic hubris, a scientific humbling.

Darwin got where he got intellectually by sailing there and hoofing it, all for the sake of knowledge. The Everyman in my edition's logo was a powerfully striding fellow, too. I used to think he looked jaunty, but now I know he looks determined. (And if he's going to get through *The Tale of Genji*, he'd better be.) If I could pencil in a detail, I'd draw in a headphone cord leading to his ears, since I do most of my "reading" in audiobook form. (Audiobooks allow me to lead my other life as a diagnostic radiologist and still blaze through a small library's worth of literature a year.)

Diagnostic radiologists, incidentally, are the most hands-off of medical specialists. Never do we venture onto the tectonic and sulfurous Galapagos of patients' social histories. We avoid boarding the *Beagle* and coming face to face with the species we study. I myself "see" about 16,000 patients a year without ever actually *seeing* them, except in pixelated form, on a set of computer screens. After my summer of research, I ditched neurology and set my sights on radiology instead, precisely because

it would keep me from having to see, and smell, and touch patients. I go through whole workdays without meeting a single patient. I spend my day delivering catastrophic diagnoses...into a voice recognition software that asks me no heart-rending follow-up questions.

I chose radiology because I wanted to be a writer and I didn't want my day job to bleed into my time outside the hospital. It's hard to take the CT appearance of Stage IV cancer home with you; it's natural to remember the face of the 36-year-old woman who got the news from you. I chose radiology to insulate myself from the realities of medicine—from life and death and human suffering, basically—so that I could create art about...life and death and human suffering. It's paradoxical, I know. I chose detachment over compassion, sterile lab work (office work, technically) over the messy surgical "field." I preferred to be Siddhartha in the climate-controlled palace, not Buddha in the mosquito-ridden forest. Much less Darwin on Tierra del Fuego.

Dante went down to the Inferno; Darwin's descent was latitudinal, but both of them, one below sea level, the other by traversing the sea, ended up exploring a "Land of Fire."

The theme of the Descent is the one of the oldest in all literature. Gilgamesh, Odysseus, Aeneas, Dante—and those are just the poetic examples, where it's out there in the open. You see the theme crop up again, in a masked form, wherever a mythopoetic talent wanders into the novel. Quixote gets lowered into the dreamlike Cave of Montesinos. *Les Misérables*

has an extended discussion of the catacombs under Paris, and at one point, Jean Valjean is actually fake-buried. Melville, like Hugo, was a poet working the prose beat—and sure enough, the voyage of the *Pequod* around the horn of Africa, mapped out, graphs the descent-and-rise we find in the old poetic epics. You have to go down to the Underworld in order to rise again, enlightened and ready to save the world. Jesus was said to have visited the Underworld, too, during the period between the crucifixion and resurrection—the so-called Harrowing of Hell. This event shook hell with an earthquake,

and Dante (in that journal of his own transformative Voyage) documented a collapsed bridge in Hell that dated back to it.

The ground in many parts was fissured in north and south lines, perhaps caused by the yielding of the parallel and steep sides of this narrow island. Some of the fissures near the cliffs were a yard wide. Many enormous masses had already fallen on the beach; and the inhabitants thought that when the rains commenced far greater slips would happen. The effect of the vibration on the hard primary slate, which composes the foundation of the island, was still more curious: the superficial parts of some narrow ridges were as completely shivered as if they had been blasted by gunpowder.

That's Darwin, on Quiriquina Island, off the coast of Chile. He, too, descended to a Land of Fire and came back up, in his case, to England. He wasn't quite the enlightened Teacher yet, but in time, he would end up

changing the human self-conception as profoundly as the founder of any religion.

More profoundly, that is, than any poet or other scientist. This is the other reason Darwin ends up in theological discussions while Galileo, who also ran afoul of Christian dogma, doesn't anymore. Galileo, Kepler, and Copernicus all challenged the Mother Church on the organization and mechanics of the heavens. Because they challenged it on astronomy, they challenged the old story about *where* we are. Darwin was the first scientific teacher to challenge the old story about *what* we are. The two challenges point different ways: One at the sky, the other at your heart. That's why the astronomical challenge has been successful. Today, even the most conservative cardinals in the Vatican subscribe to the heliocentric model. Evolution is another story.

6

And a story *The Voyage of the Beagle* is, one in a genre. (Incidentally, David Mitchell imitated it in one of the sections of his novel *Cloud Atlas*.) Darwin worked before the development of academic science writing as we know it; he also came before serious scientific research itself completed its divorce from the literary culture. Galileo wrote dialogues about astronomy that were modeled on Plato's. For that matter, the central figure in Western science, Aristotle, was famed in his own day for a literary style that Cicero, no mean stylist himself, called "a river of gold." Aristotle's surviving books are, apparently, mere lecture notes.

Darwin's journal was part of a now-defunct branch of scientific literature: the literature of exploration. The greatest practitioner of this, and Darwin's inspiration, was the German explorer-scientist Alexander von Humboldt, who

also wrote about his visits to South America. Humboldt, the most famous scientist of his day (in 1842, Darwin made a pilgrimage to see him in London), has enjoyed something of a revival recently with Andrea Wulf's *The Invention of Nature: Alexander von Humboldt's New World* (Knopf, 2015). Humboldt didn't accompany Darwin on the *Beagle*, but the predecessor was never far from Darwin's thoughts:

*On a point not far from the city,
where a rivulet entered the sea,
I observed a fact connected with a
subject discussed by Humboldt.*

*Travelling onwards we passed through
tracts of pasturage, much injured by the
enormous conical ants' nests, which were
nearly twelve feet high. They gave to the
plain exactly the appearance of the mud
volcanos at Jorullo, as figured by Humboldt.*

The house in which I lived was seated close beneath the well-known mountain of the Corcovado. It has been remarked, with much truth, that abruptly conical hills are characteristic of the formation which Humboldt designates as gneiss-granite.

During this day I was particularly struck with a remark of Humboldt's, who often alludes to "the thin vapour which, without changing the transparency of the air, renders its tints more harmonious, and softens its effects."

Humboldt has related the strange accident of a hovel having been erected over a spot where a young crocodile lay buried in the hardened mud. He adds, "The Indians often find enormous boas, which they call Uji or water serpents, in the same lethargic state. To reanimate them, they must be irritated or wetted with water."

I could go on—*The Voyage of the Beagle* converses with Humboldt's work in almost two dozen places.

Today, it's only popular "science writing" that uses sustained narrative, descriptive passages, jargon-free language, and the first person. Such writing summarizes the findings of "serious" scientific studies for consumption by laypeople. In Darwin's day, important scientific work was still being done by inspired amateurs. You didn't need to learn a discipline-specific jargon and get a university degree to be taken seriously. The sciences were like poetry and fiction today: Credentials *helped* (in those days, from the Royal Geographic Society or whatever), but they weren't *necessary*.

Even better, the scientific disciplines themselves were indistinct. I notice how both Humboldt and Darwin observe rock formations, insects, flora, fauna, weather patterns, tribes, and troubled histories with equal interest.

As it was growing dark we passed under one of the massive, bare, and steep hills of granite which are so common in this country. This spot is notorious from having been, for a long

time, the residence of some runaway slaves, who, by cultivating a little ground near the top, contrived to eke out a subsistence. At length they were discovered, and a party of soldiers being sent, the whole were seized with the exception of one old woman, who, sooner than again be led into slavery, dashed herself to pieces from the summit of the mountain. In a Roman matron this would have been called the noble love of freedom: in a poor negress it is mere brutal obstinacy.

Today, a geologist, an entomologist, a botanist, a zoologist, a meteorologist, an anthropologist, and a historian would each board a hypothetical *Beagle* with his or her separate agenda. Their eyes would zero in on what related to their disciplines.

I thought about Darwin poking around on these islands—and how he never records a single bug bite, though he must have experienced his share.

Darwin's scientific bombshell was probably the last readable one in scientific history. We've come a long way from the pre-Socratic speculations on the natural world in Heraclitus and Parmenides. Today the great advances require mathematics, and where they require words, the words require abbreviations; a word like "deoxyribonucleic" uglifies every sentence it enters. Crick and Watson's original April 1953 paper in *Nature* positing the structure of DNA may well, over the next 100 years, transfigure us (literally) far more than our intrepid Victorian's speculations on apes and men. But the Everyman Library would be hard pressed to justify, on literary grounds, the inclusion of paragraphs like these:

If it is assumed that the bases only occur in the structure in the most plausible tautomeric forms (that is, with the keto rather than the enol configurations) it is found that only specific pairs of bases can bond together. These pairs are: adenine (purine) with thymine (pyrimidine), and guanine (pyrine) with cytosine (pyrimidine).

This is why I like Darwin's *Journal* so much: It takes me back to an era when doing good science and writing well, my own two ideals, were at one. I write far more pages professionally as a radiologist than I do as a poet or novelist, but when I write that stuff, I am always trying to imitate a computer:

2.3 x 2.1 cm left renal superior pole hypodensity has a Hounsfield unit value of 7 consistent with a simple cyst.

I dictate these sentences into a voice recognition microphone, and to make sure the software picks up and transcribes the words accurately, I actually flatten my voice into a computer's monotone. I never wax poetic; the radiology report is part of

the medical record, and using poetic license could get my medical one revoked.

The scientist's eye is not so different from the poet's or novelist's—observation is all-important—but their voices, in the modern world, have nothing in common. Best to end with a passage from Darwin—like this one, where he describes rubbing a zoophyte. It responds by glowing.

Having kept a large tuft of it in a basin of salt-water, when it was dark I found that as often as I rubbed any part of a branch, the whole became strongly phosphorescent with a green light: I do not think I ever saw any object more beautifully so. But the remarkable circumstance was, that the flashes of light always proceeded up the branches, from the base towards the extremities.

This is the responsiveness of the natural world to his curiosity, growing luminous at his touch, "from the base toward the extremities," welling up with the color of life. Darwin's image hybridizes the precise and the magical. So does his book. ♪

From Laboratory to Museum

Displaying Scientific Discovery With a Lab Notebook

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A KEY COMPONENT OF ANY RESEARCH process is documentation and record-keeping, so that results and conclusions can be shared as well as verified. In the sciences, this record takes the form of the lab notebook—traditionally a physical notebook with handwritten notes that document the scientific process and resulting knowledge produced by the entire lab. Lab notebooks document a process and thus rarely provide a final conclusion, or especially the sought after ‘aha’ moment that occupies public imagination. The reality is that the day-to-day of research is usually boring, iterative, and messy, and a lab notebook is a space to house this process. Despite their essential role in the research process, lab notebooks rarely make it to the headlines. During the COVID pandemic, with the demand for fast, new knowledge and cures, the scientific research *process* has been atypically thrust into the 24-hour news-cycle. This intense focus on research has amplified the huge divide between what we, the public, want—objective proof and conclusions—and

the fuzzy, gray reality of research, which must be interpreted, re-investigated, debated, and confirmed until an overwhelming abundance of evidence leads to a consensus. This ambiguous reality is expressed in a recent article about a faux disease model for a hypothetical epidemic, cheekily dubbed Simulitis, giving readers the chance to “model some scenarios—and see what epidemiologists are up against as they race to understand a new contagion.”¹ The reader adopts the role of scientist and uses the model to estimate the number of expected cases—with the caveat that “so much information remains unknown and is changing at a rapid pace.” In other words, there is no single conclusion because scientific research is messy. With the widespread realization that scientific knowledge is not a single set of facts, but a moving body of knowledge, the focus has

1 H. Stevens and J. Muyskens, “Disease modelers are wary of reopening the country. Here’s how they arrive at their verdict.” *Washington Post*, May 24, 2020, www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2020/health/disease-modeling-coronavirus-cases-reopening.

shifted slightly from celebrating the ‘aha’ to explaining the processes leading up to that discovery, as they emerge from the many moments included in a lab notebook. The Simulitis model does this in a small way, but a more comprehensive example exists at the Perot Museum of Nature and Science in Dallas, where the laboratory notebook of Nobel Laureate Bruce Beutler is on long-term display. Like any lab notebook, Beutler’s notebook records his original data, but as will be discussed below, it now provides insight into the process leading to his momentous discovery and serves as an inspiration to younger generations of scientists. Examining this notebook provides a potential model for narrowing the gap between perception and reality of scientific research processes, by bringing the laboratory directly into the museum.

The Beutler notebook seems like an average, used computation notebook, the type that can be easily purchased at any university supply store. For anyone who has ever taken an introductory biology or chemistry course, the lab notebook looks relatively familiar—it has slightly green-tinted, quad-ruled pages that you’d use to record your work. Even for those who have never set foot in a lab, notebooks are commonplace, everyday objects—certainly not something you’d expect to find in a museum display case. The Beutler notebook is unique, however, because it is not on display to convey certain, important scientific facts or specific concepts—the content on the pages is barely legible—but instead, to emphasize the *development* of scientific knowledge (Figure 1). Museums have always served as spaces that collect, display, and create knowledge and with objects such as the Beutler notebook, they also illustrate the process of scientific discovery.

Bruce Beutler was awarded the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine in 2011, along with Jules Hoffman and Ralph Steinman, for their research on innate immunology, the ability

of the immune system to recognize pathogens without any previous priming or direction. Unlike the mechanism that vaccines co-opt to teach the immune system what is dangerous and should be fought, the innate immune system is born ready, inherently suspicious of pathogens. At the Perot Museum, Beutler’s notebook is part of an installation dedicated to Nobel laureates in the biosciences from the Dallas region, including Bruce Beutler, Alfred Gilman, Johann Disenhofer, Joseph Goldstein, and Michael Brown (Figure 2). Each laureate is represented by an over-life-sized headshot, a short description of his area of study, his Nobel prize, and at least one physical memento signifying the scientific discovery leading to the prize. For several of the laureates, this memento is some sort of model representing their research: e.g., a 3D printed protein. For Beutler, the lab notebook serves this purpose—it contains research that led to his Nobel prize, and the specific pages on view record a significant moment during that research process.

In its current display, the notebook could easily be overlooked, or seen simply as a token of a specific period in Beutler’s research career. A label identifies each of the objects in the case with basic information including title and lender, but provides no explanatory information about the background or significance of each item. For a visitor unfamiliar with the scientific research process or the research itself, the notebook would likely be unfamiliar. It is opened to show a spread of two pages that were integral to the Nobel-winning research. In fact, the two pages record a moment in time when the researchers realized they had made a significant discovery. The pages display a series of handwritten notations around six rectangular photos of nucleic acid electrophoresis gels, which show the separation of DNA fragments by size (Figure 3). Many of the notes written on the pages provide mundane details of the experiments—things a researcher would write



Figure 1 Installation view of the Nobel Exhibition in the Being Human Hall at the Perot Museum of Nature and Science, as displayed 2020. Copyright Perot Museum of Nature and Science

as a record for future reference—but across the top of the left page in large, all-capital letters are the words: “TOLL, TOLL, TOLL.” These three words, although referencing a specific scientific observation, also mark the researcher’s realization that the data revealed a long sought-after receptor in mice—called Toll-like receptor 4—that led to the lab’s eventual Nobel prize. The identification of Toll-like receptor 4 resulted in a revolutionary new understanding of the human immune system—one that was evolutionarily conserved to guard us from ubiquitous bacteria. The receptor, although known to exist but previously unidentified, plays a critical role in sensing the presence of bacteria to initiate a response. The importance of this finding is evidenced by the original paper being cited over 5500 times.² None of the photos taped

to the pages on display in the notebook made their way to the final Nobel Prize-winning publication, which is not unusual since researchers usually redo experiments to confirm their data, but the “TOLL, TOLL, TOLL” written across the top captures the specific “eureka!” moment that stirs the imagination of any young aspiring scientist. Unfortunately, few visitors to the museum would be aware of this significance when viewing the notebook.

Originally a record-keeping device for the development of new scientific knowledge, the Beutler notebook is transformed by its context in the Perot Museum into a token of achievement. While the Beutler notebook *does* celebrate the results of a successful research process, it also draws attention to that process—and the fact that research takes time, includes failures as well as successes, and is rarely a singular and objective ‘aha’ moment—just think of all the pages written before and after the experiment that led its

2 A. Poltorak, et al. “Defective LPS Signaling in C3H/HeJ and C57BL/10ScCr Mice: Mutations in Tlr4 Gene.” *Science* 282.5396 (1998): 2085-2088.

author to scribble a victorious “TOLL, TOLL, TOLL.” Although the researcher who wrote those words in the notebook clearly knew the data was significant, he or she did not know at that time that it would result in a Nobel Prize. Instead, the Beutler notebook and other scientific notebooks included in public displays draw attention to the gray areas of science, and make the public aware of the importance of data that must be interpreted before drawing conclusions and enacting new solutions.

Lab notebooks in the lab

Part of the Beutler notebook’s significance lies in the fact that it is not just a regular notebook, but a *laboratory notebook*. Laboratory notebooks fill multiple roles in the scientific research process, the most obvious of which is as a record. Importantly, lab notebooks track procedures as they occur and collect the raw data, such as the photographs of electrophoresis gels in the Beutler notebook. Like any researcher’s notes, lab notebooks include much more than what is eventually included in a published article or presentation, because the ideas and data must be synthesized to form conclusions. A lab notebook acts as a second brain for the researcher by maintaining detailed protocols of experiments for future reference and troubleshooting; a chronological account of progress made; and a repository for data acquired. Beyond the research itself, the lab notebook is the basis for claims of intellectual property as well as an invoice to funding sources for work done. For these reasons, lab notebooks are *more* than a record or diary of one’s path to discovery; they can be messy, repetitive, full of failure, and sometimes, as in the Beutler notebook’s exclamatory, “TOLL, TOLL, TOLL!” include nuggets of discovery.

Although lab notebooks are records kept often by only one individual in that lab, they serve the lab as a whole. The Beutler notebook on display, for example, was kept by one researcher, yet it is the property of the lab itself and there are likely many notebooks that preceded and followed it with similar research. Notebooks can provide continuity as members of a lab (e.g., graduate students or postdoctoral fellows) cycle in and out, and provide a record for the research activities of that lab, in which many projects are likely occurring at one time. Some of the stringent record-keeping required for lab notebooks reflects their purpose not only as documents of process, but documents of proof. In some instances, pagination is used to ensure no pages have been removed from the book or lab. Dating every page provides proof of when certain experiments were done and conclusions were made. In industry labs where intellectual property challenges can cost millions or billions of dollars, pages are signed by a supervisor to witness the veracity of the basic information such as date and page number. These policies may seem overly cautious, unless one keeps in mind that lab notebooks can potentially serve as the main proof of discovery for patents, prizes, and funding. The research—good and bad—is not private, but recorded for the possibility of future scrutiny.

Although lab notebooks are by definition not private, most researchers, including the scientist who scrawled “TOLL, TOLL, TOLL” would never expect their notebook to end up on display for public consumption in a museum setting, largely because they are considered part of the research process. Data, notes, and observations included in a lab notebook are raw and require context, synthesis, and interpretation before conclusion can be made. A lab notebook is not itself a final product, but a tool in the research process. When combined with additional tools—additional research, comparison with

other scholarship, analysis—it can serve as evidence for conclusions. It is rare for researchers to publish a notebook itself as evidence, and often researchers will redo experiments to get ‘cleaner’ data for publications. The photos in the Beutler notebook, for example, are not published in the final paper. The rapid expansion of information storage, as well as the push for transparency, has led researchers to include even more data, meaning that the imperfections of a lab notebook are less objectionable. In 2011, Gregory Lang and David Botstein, for example, published a scanned version of their entire lab notebook for a paper in the journal *PLOS ONE*, a move that emphasizes the importance of the notebook itself, but diminishes the subsequent processes of synthesis and interpretation.³

Of course, the act of recording, synthesizing, and analyzing as part of the research process is not exclusive to the biosciences, but is important in many disciplines. In his recent account of field notebooks, naturalist Michael Canfield makes the case that field scientists have developed a sort of hybrid notebook that is unique to their discipline and research process. This hybrid notebook is equal parts journal, illustration, and documentary, and it has evolved to fit the specific act of research, which largely means observing nature. In many ways, the efficacy of these notebooks relies largely on their being handwritten and hand-drawn, making them in some cases closer to a diary or even sketchbook.⁴ The modern lab notebook has precursors in field notebooks—the most

famous field notebooks are probably those of Charles Darwin from his 1835 expeditions on the *H.M.S. Beagle*, which are not full transcripts of his journey and everything he planned to do, saw, or recalled, but limited to his important observations, notes, and drawings. Darwin later used field notebooks to piece together his full conclusions, in some cases with the help of other scientists at the University of Cambridge. While this more painstaking and process-oriented research shatters what we may have imagined as Darwin’s ‘aha’ moment while visiting the Galapagos and observing the finches or tortoises, it is very much in line with how the modern lab notebook is used in the research process: plan, execute, gather data, synthesize, and draw conclusions.

Lab notebooks in the museum

Given the very specific purpose of a lab notebook, why display the Beutler notebook in the museum and how does its purpose change in this new setting? At the Perot, the Nobel installation is part of the museum’s “Being Human Hall,” which is described on the website as “the story of YOU” where visitors will “be transported through the human journey as [they] explore the traits and abilities that are essential and unique to being human.” Installations in the Hall range in topic from DNA to the human brain to a virtual reality experience of a South African cave where researchers found the *homo naledis* species in 2015. The Nobel installation greets visitors and serves as a sort of introduction to the world of scientific discovery and achievement. According to Mike Spiewak, Director of Exhibitions at the Perot, the exhibit was the brainchild of Nobel laureates Gilman and Diesenhofer, who approached the museum looking for a way to inspire younger generations to be interested in science and thinking that the Perot could

3 G. Lang “A Test of the Coordinated Expression Hypothesis for the Origin and Maintenance of the GAL Cluster in Yeast,” *PLOS ONE* 6.9 (2011): doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0025290.

4 M. Canfield. ed. *Fieldnotes on Science and Nature*. Harvard University Press, 2011.

provide an appropriate platform. Gilman, Spiewak recalls, shared his own story about being inspired by the New York City planetarium as a child.⁵ Spiewak developed an earlier iteration of the current installation, working one-on-one with the scientists to understand their backgrounds, personal journeys, and projects. He explained that they wanted to excite young people and make the concept of scientific research more accessible to the general public. In that context, the notebook is not presented as a resource for the scientific discoveries, (for this purpose, one would do better to reference the resulting paper published in *Science* in 1998) or to establish the intellectual property for the discovery it contains (the Nobel prize on display in front of the notebook's case is likely sufficient for this goal). Besides serving as a token of Beutler's scientific achievement, why choose the lab notebook?

The Beutler notebook is the only object in the Nobel display that is original and from the actual research process—it is, in effect, an artifact. The Perot Museum's vision is to “be an extraordinary resource and catalyst for science learning through innovative, highly accessible experiences that broaden understanding of our world,” and that mission of accessibility is highlighted in the display of the Nobel laureates. According to Spiewak, each laureate emphasized their desire to invoke the feeling for visitors that “this could be you.” To convey that, alongside the prizes and other objects is a screen that rotates through the five laureates' images. There, Beutler's image is shown paired with a quotation that reads, “Just like a prospector finding gold, I knew we had found it.” In some ways, the lab notebook drives home this metaphor of momentary discovery— with the “TOLL, TOLL, TOLL” inscription, it records the researcher's notably unique moment of

5 Personal correspondence with Michael Spiewack, May 14, 2020.

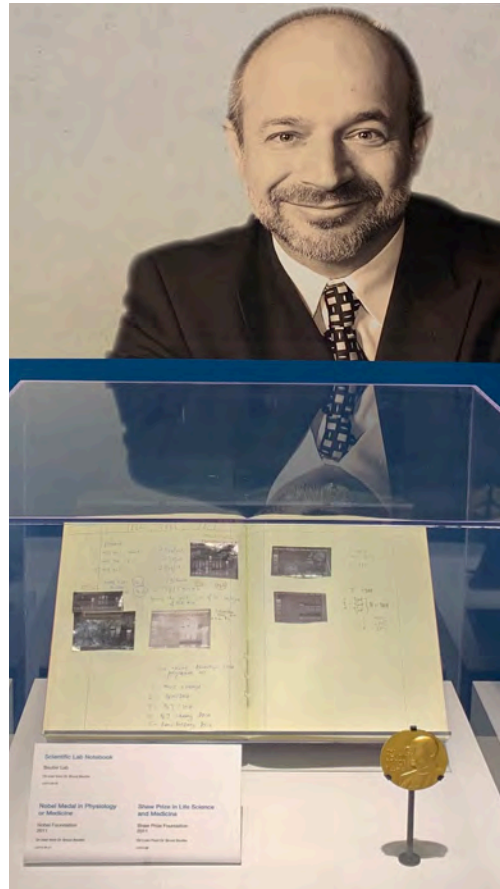


Figure 2 Installation view of the laboratory notebook from the lab of Dr. Bruce Beutler at the Perot Museum of Nature and Science, as displayed 2020. Copyright Perot Museum of Nature and Science.

realization, but at the same time, the object itself makes this moment tangible. A visitor does not have to imagine an abstract or complex concept, such as a specific protein, but can understand, by viewing the physical object, what it must have been like to make this discovery.

The impetus to collect, and even display, scientific objects, artifacts, and writing is not a new one, but something whose development mirrors the development of science itself. In antiquity and the medieval period, the desire to understand the natural world by cataloguing and collecting was evident in the writings of naturalists such as Pliny or Galen,

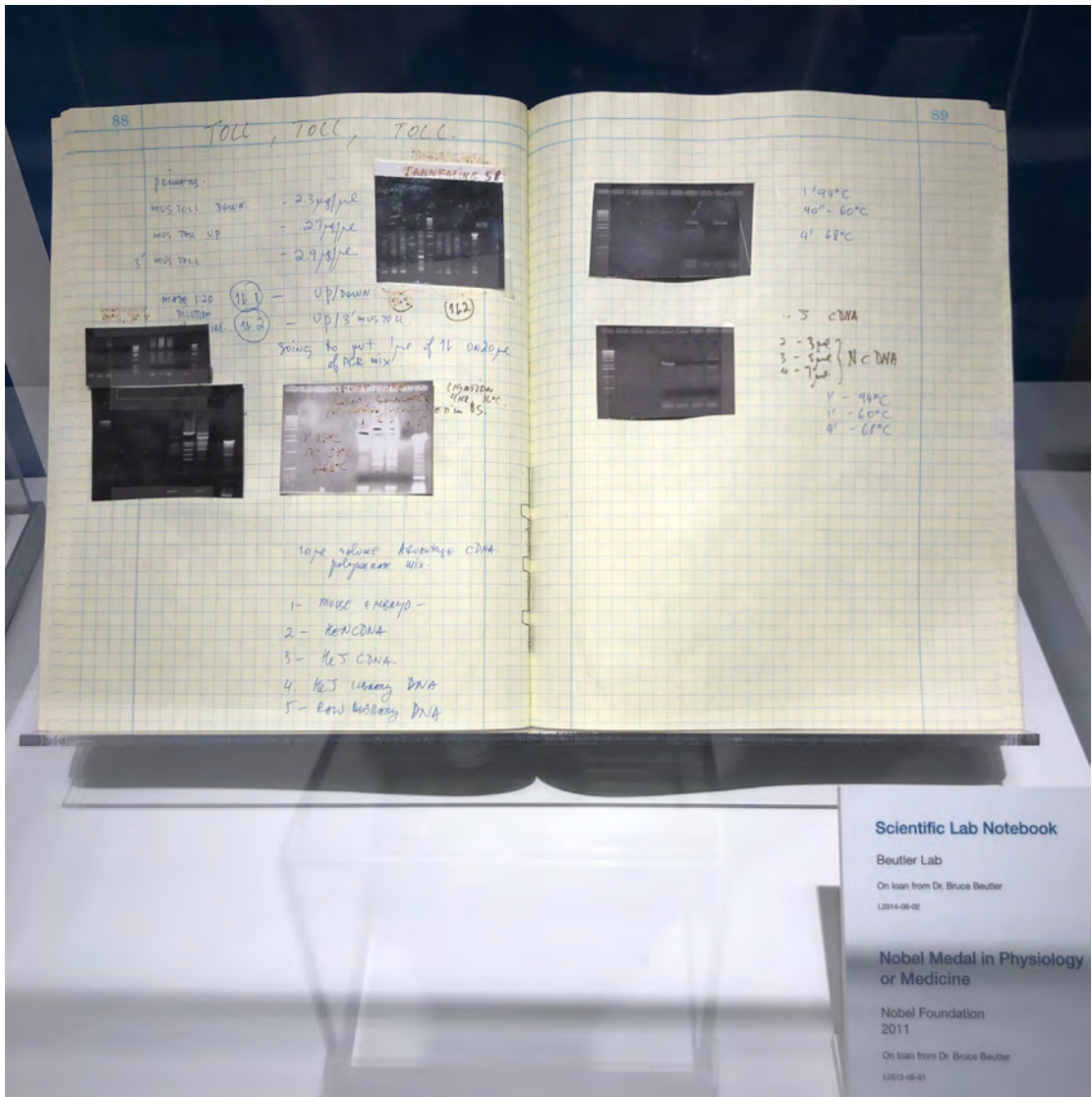


Figure 3 Detail of the laboratory notebook from lab of Dr. Bruce Beutler in the Perot Museum of Nature and Science. Photo by Elizabeth Molacek. Used with permission of the Perot Museum of Nature and Science.

as well as mathematicians such as Ptolemy, whose work attempted to make sense of the natural world by categorizing or theorizing. The work of these early naturalists was collected by educated individuals throughout Europe during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. As the world became increasingly global, knowledge in many forms began to

be spread more widely, so that collecting scientific material and objects became an important means of displaying evidence of such knowledge, even if it became increasingly impossible for one person or group to understand it all. These personal collections took the form of cabinets of curiosities, or *wunderkammer*, which skewed

towards the exotic, rare, and luxurious. They were less scientific than carefully curated miniature universes emphasizing the wealth, intelligence, and knowledge of the aristocrat who amassed the collection. These aristocratic curiosity cabinets eventually gave rise to natural history museums, which were still different from what we find today at the Perot Museum—they were more focused on making sense of the natural world through empirical observation and objects or artifacts. Over the course of the 18th century, science became a more defined discipline, meaning that museum collections continued to acquire and display objects—including scientific books—in a more focused way, reflecting the increased emphasis on empirical observation and rigorous research methods.

The Beutler notebook is the only object in the Nobel display that is original and from the actual research process—it is, in effect, an artifact.

Many scientific notebooks and treatises could be considered some precursor to a modern lab notebook and are popular items for display in history, science, and even art museum collections—perhaps emphasizing their role as artifact. The Codex Arundel in the British Library (Ms Arundel 263), for example, is a diary-like compilation of Leonardo's drawings, writings, and scientific observations from throughout his life, concerned primarily with mechanics. The codex was gathered and bound *after* Leonardo's death, however, and thus cannot be considered a real-time documentation of processes or discoveries. Today the codex is

treasured more as an artifact of Leonardo the genius or for the drawings that it contains, an example of the object or artifact far outshining the scientific content or discovery. In contrast, some lab notebooks are collected more as historical records. An example of this might be Marie Curie's personal lab notebooks, now in the Bibliothèque nationale de France, which were used for the preparation of her thesis *Recherches sur les substances radioactives*, published in 1904, which led to her first Nobel Prize in Physics (she went on to win a Nobel Prize in Chemistry in 1911). Although these notebooks are certainly a far cry from the beautiful, sketch-like notebooks of Leonardo, and filled with scientific content that moved the field forward, they are extremely inaccessible to the public both intellectually and physically—they remain radioactive and can only be seen under special circumstances and after donning the appropriate protective gear, making the lab notebooks almost exclusively a token of achievement.

Marie Curie's radioactive notebooks are an extreme example of a scientific token, but many museums of the history of science and rare books libraries do maintain collections of more modern lab notebooks that serve as teaching resources or references for intellectual history. The British Library, the Museum of the History of Science at Oxford University, and Harvard University's Center for the History of Medicine, among others, now collect what could be considered modern lab notebooks, including those of current professors, which can be accessed for research purposes. What remains slightly less common is the display of such notebooks in a museum environment, particularly as objects of *inspiration* for a more general public—such as we find with the Beutler notebook in the Perot Museum. One recent instance was the 2016 special exhibition at the Melbourne Museum *Biomedical Breakthroughs: A New View of You* that included several lab notebooks

from Australian Nobel Prize winner Sir Frank McFarlane Burnet, who won the prize in 1960 for his work on immune systems. The notebooks were displayed along with other objects that could help tell the story of scientific progress, but the goal of the exhibition was to, “shake up [the visitor’s] old view of science by showing biology as colourful and dynamic.”⁶ This goal was achieved by including a huge number of interactive, artistic, molecular animations created by an artist-in-residence at the city’s Walter and Eliza Hall Institute of Medical Research. In this context, Burnet’s notebooks played a similar role as the Beutler notebook: they engaged visitors in the scientific process by highlighting scientific *progress*.

The future of scientific discovery in the public sphere

The Beutler notebook is a clear instance of the scientific process on display in a public forum; however, it is an artifact and the knowledge within it is no longer novel, nor actively contributing to new ideas. Beyond the museum, lab notebooks continue to be vital tools as research plays out in the public sphere. Recently, two high-profile articles discussing hydroxychloroquine as a treatment for COVID were retracted from *The Lancet* and the *New England Journal of Medicine*, for the absence of supporting data from lab notebooks. A third-party auditor was denied access to the raw data used for both papers by the company that had collected it, Surgisphere, whose founder was listed as a co-author. Surgisphere claimed that sharing the data violated confidentiality requirements. In other words, they refused to share their *lab notebook*. The ability to verify original data

6 J. Bailey. “Biomedical Breakthroughs takes close look at our bodies at Melbourne Museum,” *The Sydney Morning Herald*. August 19, 2016.

is so inherent to the scientific process that the other co-authors elected to retract their publications, in effect confirming the importance of a scrutinized process in the semi-public research setting.

The COVID crisis is a dramatic instance of heightened awareness and interest in medical research, but the issues it raises—the need for scientific literacy and the role of museums or other accessible collections in building this knowledge—is relevant far beyond the pandemic as information becomes increasingly available and transparent. Just as the cabinets of curiosities were the 16th century solution for processing a surge in new information, the public today is discovering ways to collect, sort, and absorb the deluge of data. Museums like the Perot continue to explore *how* we acquire knowledge rather than just the knowledge itself, equipping visitors with tools to digest information in the public sphere. Nonetheless, the sheer volume of new research and data remains impossible for even the most avid individual researchers to keep up with. The journal *Science* estimated that 23,000 new COVID-related papers alone were published between January and late May, with that number expected to double every 20 days.⁷ What could this mean for the interested public and how does it affect the way we intersect with new scientific knowledge? One signal might be COVID 19, which is an effort to “curate and archive” a “growing resource of scientific papers on COVID and related historical coronavirus research.” This effort, partly funded by the Chan-Zuckerberg Initiative, uses AI tools to explore the scientific literature, by methods such as extracting information from large amounts of published data or investigating visual patterns between sets of published

7 J. Brainard. “Scientists are drowning in new COVID-19 papers. Can new tools keep them afloat?” *Science*. May 15, 2020. www.sciencemag.org/news/2020/05/scientists-are-drowning-covid-19-papers-can-new-tools-keep-them-afloat.

texts. Making huge amounts of data available, curated by AI, offers a potential, albeit controversial, solution for bridging the divide between laboratory and public, creating a collective “laboratory notebook” for the world’s processing of COVID. And while it is unlikely that most of us will experience the ‘eureka’ moment that Bruce Beutler and his lab felt when they scrawled that excited “TOLL, TOLL, TOLL” across the top of the notebook, perhaps mining these available sources will give us a small sense of discovery—like a prospector finding just a dusting of gold. **A**

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**CURRENT
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The Cost of Discipleship

Weber's Charisma and the Profession of the Humanities

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Max Weber, *Charisma and Disenchantment: The Vocation Lectures*. Edited by Paul Reitter and Chad Wellmon; translated by Damion Searls. NYRB Classics, 176pp., \$16 paper.

ACCORDING TO MAX WEBER, charisma is the supernatural, or at least extraordinary, power that disciples ascribe to their leader. It may be a good thing or a bad thing. Jesus had it; so did Napoleon. We can see it today in Oprah Winfrey and Donald Trump. Academics have had it too: Michel Foucault, Paul de Man, and Edward Said have all been credited with charisma. But Weber would caution that charisma properly belongs to the sphere of politics, not scholarship. In making that argument, ironically, Weber constructed a new and adaptable model of the charismatic professor: not the gifted seer behind the lectern, but the stoic who faces a disenchanted world and refuses to promise salvation.

Weber's two lectures on vocation, recently reissued by NYRB Classics under the title *Charisma and Disenchantment: The Vocation Lectures*, carefully distinguish the work of scholarship from the work of politics. For Weber, politics requires dealing with the devil;

the scholar keeps his values out of the classroom, sticking to the facts. Great politicians have charisma; great scholars eschew the cult of personality. Charismatic leaders empty their followers' personalities; good teachers inspire their listeners to choose their own gods.

Weber gave these talks in Munich in 1917 and 1919, amid war and pandemic. The editors of the reissue, Paul Reitter and Chad Wellmon, with translator Damion Searls, present these lectures as a resource for practicing scholarship in hard times. The bad conditions of the job that Weber lamented then certainly resemble ours now. For the students who gathered to hear him in 1917, Weber set a dismal scene: the job market is awful; if you even get a job, you'll be overworked and underpaid; your teaching will be drudgery; you'll see mediocre people rise to the top. Conditions are such that "only the rich can pursue an academic career under the German system." That system had become irrevocably rationalized, rendering education a numbers game and a popularity contest. Universities were bound to a "ridiculous competition for enrollment" that had college-town "property owners" "throw[ing] a party" to "celebrate the thousandth" or "two-thousandth" student who matriculated.

Weber opens with this bad news, but his lecture does not prescribe solutions to these structural problems. The best you can do, Weber tells his student audience, is to pursue the passion of scholarship knowing that it won't change the world and accepting that you aren't a prophet with all the answers. Reitter and Wellmon offer their own dismal update, noting that current student activism takes place "mostly outside of the classroom" while university presidents "spend their days overseeing multibillion-dollar global enterprises." "Who but a blessed, tenured few," they ask, "could continue to believe that scholarship is a vocation?" They don't directly answer that question. Reitter and Wellmon do propose Weberian vocation as a universal possibility which, if we all acted on it, would grant us more meaningful lives. But an equally plausible conclusion is that there is something wrong with Weber's ideal of vocation. At the very least, we have maladapted it by turning ourselves into his disciples. That discipleship is partly why the bad conditions of higher education have persisted over the last hundred years.

The very grimness of Weber's vision—his view of politics as the exercise of violence, of scholarly insights as tiny and quick to expire—exerts a charismatic force. Even more potently attractive is his narrative of decline: long ago, thinkers and artists could pursue capital-t Truth; today, there is no authority that can validate such universal truth. Striding into this rationalistic and relativistic world is Weber's existential hero, exemplified by Martin Luther declaring "here I stand, I can do no other." Anyone making such an assertion must recognize that his commitment is finally unprovable and yet irresistible. This is what finding one's vocation looks like, and Weber insists that we all have the capacity to do it.

This modern hero is the figure that Weber's academic disciples have used to build a false but durable relation to the university. And his disciples include most of us, since a version of

his model of vocation has become an academic default setting. The university is our necessary institutional shelter, but we disdain it as fatally flawed. Weber's narrative of disenchantment allows us to regard ourselves as the saving remnant reluctantly lodged in a corporatized structure. We represent the wisdom and clarity that are perpetually under threat by capitalism's ever-expanding reach, a crisis we claim to be uniquely capable of handling and one that maintains our job security forever. We have, in short, made Weber guilty of being what he tells scholars not to be: a charismatic leader who spins a magical story through which his followers maintain power. Little wonder that the bad working conditions that Weber described have not improved.

This outcome accords with Weber's analysis of the routinization of charisma. Charisma itself is essentially unstable. A charismatic leader initially breaks with tradition. But if he succeeds, his disciples create their own tradition, entrenching their "authority and social prestige" and their "power over economic goods." The power offered by a charismatic leader may be illusory. But it is emotionally effective, if nothing else. Analyzing Trump and Winfrey through the lens of Weber's theory of charisma, Natasha Zaretsky observes that both figures rose to power by giving their followers a sense of control in the face of late-twentieth-century cultural and economic shifts. Trump provides a bracing confirmation of capitalism's winner-take-all reality; Winfrey provides a fantasy of healing within that reality. Neither offers any strategies for redressing injustice, but they do model an attitude of self-possession in the face of economic predation.¹

Weber can be seen to offer his faculty followers all that and more: self-possession

¹ Natasha Zaretsky, "The Odd Couple: Donald Trump, Oprah Winfrey, and Contemporary Charisma," *The Hedgehog Review*, Spring 2020, hedgehogreview.com/issues/monsters/articles/the-odd-couple.

plus genuine economic and cultural stability. For Weber, there is no turning back the capitalism that has corporatized the university. In a disenchanted modernity, professors must abandon old pretensions to teach the path to universal wisdom. But they can maintain authority, and a sense of vocation, as guides to a relativistic moral landscape. Weber does not promise to make the university great again. He urges carrying on scholarly ideals inside academia's faulty structure. The promise that Weber's disciples have made is to guard the jewels in a house that is permanently on fire.

Charismatic leaders empty their followers' personalities; good teachers inspire their listeners to choose their own gods.

In telling this decline-and-fall story, Weber may be seen as improving on Matthew Arnold's initial job description for humanities professors: to claim cultural authority by pointing to a lost past that only the scholar can properly curate and preserve. So argues Bruce Robbins, who sees such a "professional myth" of decline as having "allowed criticism both right and left the luxurious anomaly of being both established and oppositional."² We are the disruptors in the corner office. Reitter and Wellmon admiringly call Weber an "insider outsider": after an early promotion to full professor, Weber burned out and quit academia. But to deny one's insider-ness, to bark at the hand that signs your paycheck, is a false position. It makes us adversarial but not confrontational, and its valorization of distance covers our own self-interest.

² Bruce Robbins, *Secular Vocations: Intellectuals, Professionalism, Culture* (New York: Verso, 1993), p. 126.

A declinist myth posits freedom somewhere outside the apparently blighted institution in which the scholar works. It seeks a putative haven which is only actually available because of others' servitude—for instance, in a library whose tranquility is made possible by custodians who lack union protection or health care.

This disenchantment narrative is the key to Weber's charismatic appeal. But it is certainly possible to exaggerate the degree of disenchantment he preached. Both charisma and vocation are terms grounded in religious life, and they manifest Weber's recognition of our modern faith in transcendence. If Weber laments that we can no longer believe in a real sun outside the Platonic cave, he does not imagine there was a time when faith was pure and simple. Even a supposedly pre-secular age of Christendom had its faith "forced into... compromises and accommodations." Weber worries that we have been "blind" to "our polytheistic past." And he suggests that we are not so different, after all, from the premodern souls who offered sacrifices to Aphrodite. The difference is in name only: what we used to call gods, now we call "impersonal forces." But "the behavior is the same, through stripped of its magic and its mythical (but psychologically true) trappings. Fate determines the outcome of this battle of the gods—in any case, certainly not 'science' or 'scholarship.' All the latter can do is explicate *what* is divine for this or that system, or rather, *in* this or that system." The scholar here is a modest observer on the sidelines, analyzing the logic of other people's faith and the fights they pick over what they deem transcendent. This is a useful position to occupy insofar as it prevents overt moralizing in the classroom. But by ascribing to fate the role of the referee, and by dismissing the work of scholarship as mere explication of the system, Weber opens the path to complacent spectatorship.

Further, leaving the outcome to fate is a way of not acknowledging that scholarship

is one of the gods in the battle. Reitter and Wellmon acknowledge the common critique that Weber offers a “bleak liberalism, a hopeless capitulation to modernity made up as a heroic realism.” Such a reading of Weber, they say, overlooks the tension in his thinking, “the double bind that is both the burden and the possibility of living” in a world with no final answers. No one can tell us our belief is wrong, and that is freedom; on the other hand, we can never know if we’re right, and that is awful. The scholar negotiates this double bind by combining a valiant faith in making footnote-sized gains in knowledge with an ascetic self-denial that forbears preaching that faith. Again, we are the sideline explicators. Unlike the charismatic demagogue, the scholar must not attempt to re-enchant the world (or his students’ minds) with claims to have the one right answer. Instead, as Weber says, the scholar helps others navigate a polytheistic world, to “find and obey the daemon that holds in its hands the threads of our *own* life.”

The trouble is that one can authentically choose, or be chosen by, a bad daemon. Faculty who pretend to think there is no such a thing as a wrong commitment are doing their students no favors. Weber observes that in reading the Bible, one can equally well find a god of mercy and a god of vengeance, and “it is up to the individual to decide which is God and which is the devil *for him*. And that is how it goes with every other decision about how to conduct one’s life.” One problem here is the way Weber imagines such a clean decision-making zone inside a person’s head, as if we didn’t make such judgments with an eye toward what social status might follow a given choice.

Another is that not everyone gets to make such decisions. The kind of liberalism Weber is espousing here wants to put people in conversation in a room and let the best ideas win. It trusts those two people will be equal individuals confronting one another

respectfully—or at least that the format of respectful debate will make those individuals come to recognize each other as equals. But this fully accessible, evenly balanced public sphere has never existed anywhere yet, certainly not in a nation where armed white people storming the state capital in Lansing are “exercising their rights” whereas unarmed black people protesting police brutality in Minneapolis are “fomenting criminal unrest.”

Yet another problem is that Weber seems not to recognize such agnosticism as its own tendentious governing claim. To urge others to choose their own gods is already to promote choice as the only god. To advocate, as Weber does, that we forbear proclaiming our own values is to advocate something quite specific. It privileges a particularly detached way of being in the world. It might indeed be worth winning converts to irony and disinterest. But we should own up to proselytizing for these virtues. Weber can appear to overlook the interestedness of disinterest. His sharp distinction between politics that pursues power and uses words as weapons versus scholarship that pursues clarity and uses words as plowshares looks like a dodge of the fact that a university and the scholars who work in it are all political agents.

No doubt Weber’s concept of vocation favors self-discipline over social activism. But Reitter and Wellmon argue that Weber is neither an elitist nor a quietist. For one thing, the basic vocation of finding and obeying one’s own god is not reserved for intellectuals. Weber tells his student audience that people in “factories or laboratories” work with their whole souls, and even the “industrialist” needs “commercial imagination.” For another, Weber himself participated in politics: before the war, he publicly objected to the state picking favorites for faculty hires; after the war, he helped draft the Weimar Constitution, and he spoke out when the assassin of Bavaria’s socialist leader was pardoned. Wellmon writes that, if Weber urges students

to think less about institutional problems and to think more about “the character, habits and virtues that might sustain” their lives, Weber is not thereby counseling people to ignore “the material conditions of intellectual work and cultural authority.” Weber specifies that professors are duty-bound to protest injustice. They just need to express their political convictions in the right place and time. At public debates, yes; one-on-one with a student, okay; but not in the classroom, where the audience is captive.

It is important for scholars to keep out of politics, in Weber’s view, because politics ultimately relies on violence. Weber’s view of political possibility ranges from the “leaderless democracy” of faceless technocrats to demagogues who turn their followers into a spiritual proletariat. The only way to avoid that trap is to be a Jesus or a Buddha, who “didn’t work with the means of politics, which is violence: their kingdom was ‘not of this world,’ and yet”—Weber does not wish to dismiss the value of earthly life—“they had and have effects in this world.” Such leaders produced good unintended consequences. But most charismatic politicians want to convince us that the violence they unleash will be the last hurtful act required to usher in a realm of peace and justice. Weber perhaps did not count on these lectures providing his own disciples with the means to maintain power with nonviolent ease. But by reiterating a version of Weber’s disenchantment thesis, academics have been able to point to the crisis of humanistic faith to maintain our roles as crisis managers.

Weber’s allergy to what he calls the “politics of personal conviction,” and his deep suspicion of charisma, follow from his diagnosis of cosmic disenchantment. Because there is no longer a transcendent authority we all agree on, we must practice values neutrality, that is, the strict segregation of fact from value. Weber overstates the case when he says that “wherever the scholar lets his own value judgments intrude, he ceases to understand the facts.”

He also overstates the case for the loneliness that he sees as the only way to be intellectually honest in this world of competing values. What makes Weber’s “here I stand” hero so heroic is that his faith cannot be shared. With the waning of real religious faith—now that we all know we can explain things rationally—so has waned the possibility of true fellowship. Weber accordingly puts hope only in small brotherhoods, not big collectives. He has no faith in “new religious forms,” and he sees only “wretched monstrosity” produced by efforts to create big public art. He warns that “prophecy from the podium can only lead to fanatical sects, never to genuine communities.” The only genuine community possible now is “in the smallest circles, between individuals”; only there “something pulses corresponding to what once blazed through large communities as the breath of prophecy, fusing them together.”

True faith is lonely, but it is also what inspires followers. Just as it is the devotion of the disciples that empowers the charismatic leader, so it is the witness of spectators that authenticates the “here I stand” moment. You know an authentic human choice when you see it, because watching that choice moves you. An authentic choice has a style: it is not showy or loud, but dignified. Weber dismisses all those “windbags... getting drunk on sensationalized Romanticism.” He writes, “What does move me, immensely, is when a *mature* human being—whether old or young in years—takes real responsibility, with his whole soul, for the consequences of his actions.” That once-in-a-lifetime moment, which Weber sees as potential in every human being, reconciles fact and value. It shows a person committing to a given value even as he fully accepts the facts that constrain him.

It may be our own fault if we have adopted the style of Weber’s heroic cynicism, as Fredric Jameson called it, without much of the substance that Weber tried to imbue it

with. We can repurpose Weber's theory toward better ends. His declinist narrative does not diminish the merit of his call to help students give an account of the ultimate meaning of their actions. In its essence, what Weber is advocating aligns with what Bruce Robbins, following Edward Said, calls the "secular vocation" of the humanities. Robbins maintains that we owe "reverence" to any work that seeks to "change the world," provided it holds itself open to public accountability by making its sources of authority transparent. For Weber too scholarship is a secular vocation. Education is work "done by professional experts in the service of both self-understanding and increased knowledge of objective facts—it is not a gift of grace with seers and prophets dispensing holy objects and revelations." When we teach religiously faithful students, we have to insist they accept empirically grounded explanations in the classroom. Good teachers push "students to recognize *uncomfortable* facts...that go against their own partisan opinions." Weber's hard split between facts and values may seem the relic of an Enlightenment faith in objectivity that we no longer share. We are right to present facts as discovered and disseminated within particular value hierarchies. But we can acknowledge that without conceding in despair that everything is fake news. It feels more than ever necessary today to insist on the objectivity of research and data as a value itself.

It is because we live in a world of competing values with no final way to adjudicate them that professors are obliged to help their students sort those values. But again, in doing so, we should recognize that we are proselytizing for values neutrality. Robbins writes that when, in a secular age, we "recogni[ze] that the space of an ultimate judge must remain empty," the correct response is not to quit debating whose values have authority. The correct response is to make that debate "more self-conscious, more

troubled, more dramatic." The scholar is not a lone figure with a thousand-yard-stare, nor just a sideline analyst. And values neutrality does not represent a sad and lonely decline from collective belief, but the fought-over ground of our faith in the debate of values. For Robbins, we can call scholarship a vocation precisely because it is political, because it wants through its practice to change public values. This reads to me like a less charismatic restatement of Weber's own description of the scholarly vocation.

If we need not be lonely in our faith, we also need not regard ourselves as adversaries of the universities that house us. Weber's scholarly vocation is compatible with Lisi Schoenbach's "radical institutionalism."³ Schoenbach urges faculty to see the university both as a strategic ally, a potential and sometimes actual bastion of free thought that we depend on, and also as a thoroughly compromised tool of neoliberalism. This view emphasizes action more than detachment

But that's how Weber concludes his lecture on scholarly vocation. He tells his listeners to quit hoping for a superman to save them; "waiting and yearning is not enough," and instead "We should set to work and meet 'the demands of the day.'" Weber depicted the work of the politician in much the same terms: as "a slow and difficult drilling of holes into hard boards, done with both passion and clear-sightedness." The first part of that line is often quoted, and it sounds characteristically liberal: reform from within that is so patient as to be imperceptible. But the virtues of the second clause—passion and clarity—are what we need to recuperate from Weber if we want to make the scholarly vocation available to more than a few lucky ones over the next hundred years. **A**

³ Lisi Schoenbach, "Enough With the Crisis Talk! To salvage the university, explain why it's worth saving," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 16, 2018, www.chronicle.com/article/enough-with-the-crisis-talk/.

Classicism by Decree

Julia Friedman

IT IS NO SECRET THAT THE TRUMP administration doesn't subscribe to the idea of federal funding for arts and humanities. Its 2019 proposed "Budget for America's Future," once again, placed the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) in a section on "wasteful and unnecessary funding." But just as the arts and humanities are declared inessential, the White House made it a public priority to turn the architectural clock back, drafting an executive order titled "Making Federal Buildings Beautiful Again." For an administration well versed in the optics of success, such manifested awareness of architecture's symbolic and ideological significance to any long-term political project makes perfect sense. Their 2019 Independence Day extravaganza in Washington, D.C. (repeated, albeit on a slightly reduced scale against the background of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020) was just one recent example of splurging on pageantry, and their timing of the executive order in the run-up to the 2020 elections indicates the sociopolitical urgency of the outlined changes.

I first learned about the executive order from architecture-themed publications on my social media feed in early February—both *Dwell* and *Architectural Record* ran articles about the pending order that would mandate a "classical architectural style" for all federal buildings. Given the sources, the

articles did not appear to be fake news, so I followed a digital trail to the document itself, finding its PDF version embedded in a piece by the *Chicago Sun-Times*. I quote the opening section, "Findings" in full:

Section 1. Findings. The Founding Fathers attached great importance to Federal architecture. President George Washington and Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson consciously modeled the most important buildings in Washington, D.C. on the classical architecture of democratic Athens and republican Rome. They wanted America's public buildings to physically symbolize our then-new nation's self-governing ideals. Washington and Jefferson, both amateur architects, personally oversaw the competitions to design the Capitol Building and the White House.

For more than a century and a half America's Federal architecture produced beautiful and beloved buildings. Typically, though not exclusively, classical in design, buildings such as the White House, the Capitol Building, the Supreme court, the Eisenhower Executive Office Building, the Treasury Department, and the Lincoln Memorial have become international symbols of democratic self-government. These universally cherished landmarks, built to endure for centuries, have become an important part of our civic life.

In the 1950s the Federal government largely abandoned traditional, classical designs, and began adopting mid-century modernism, including Brutalism, for Federal buildings. This trend accelerated after the Ad Hoc Committee on Federal Office Space issued what has become known as the Guiding Principles for Federal Architecture in 1962. The Guiding Principles implicitly discouraged classical and other designs known for their beauty, and declared that design must flow from the architectural profession's reigning orthodoxy to the Federal government.

The Federal architecture that ensued, overseen by the General Services Administration (GSA), ranged from the undistinguished to designs that public widely considered uninspiring, inconsistent with

their surroundings and the architectural heritage of the region, and even just plain ugly. Structures such as the Hubert H. Humphrey Department of Health and Human Services Building, the Frances Perkins Department of Labor Building, and the Robert C. Weaver Department of Housing and Urban Development Building inspired public derision instead of admiration. In 1994, having recognized the aesthetic failures, including ugliness, of the buildings it was commissioning, the GSA established the Design Excellence Program in order to adhere to the Guiding Principles' mandate that Federal architecture "must provide visual testimony to the dignity, enterprise, vigor, and stability of the American Government."

Unfortunately, the Design Excellence Program has not reintegrated our national values into Federal buildings, which under the Program have often been works of, or have been influenced by, Brutalism and Deconstructivism. For example, the new San Francisco Federal Building, Austin U.S. Courthouse, and the Wilkie D. Ferguson, Jr. U.S. Courthouse in Miami have little aesthetic appeal. With a limited number of exceptions, such as the Tuscaloosa Federal Building and U.S. Courthouse, the Federal government has largely stopped building beautiful buildings that the American people want to look at or work in. Surveys show that the public prefers buildings that predate the Guiding Principles to those built under them. [Footnote with three citations for the same AIA Favorite Architecture list.]

After 57 years it is time to update the Guiding Principles to Make Federal buildings beautiful again. Federal architecture should once again inspire respect instead of bewilderment or repugnance. New Federal building designs should, like America's beloved landmark buildings, inspire the public for their aesthetics, make Americans feel proud of our public buildings, and, where appropriate, respect the architectural heritage of the region. Classical and traditional architectural styles have proven their ability to inspire such respect for our system of self-government. Their use should be encouraged. This preference does not exclude

experimentation with new, alternative styles. However, care must be taken to fully ensure that such alternative designs command respect by the public for their beauty and visual embodiment of America's ideals.

In response to the draft of the executive order, the GSA's Chief Architect and Director of the Design Excellence Program, David Insinga, resigned, and the American Institute of Architects (AIA) posted a statement, condemning the overhaul of the 1962 Guiding Principles, with its top-bottom direction of architectural styles, and warning that the mandated changes could jeopardize fundamental democratic principles:

The AIA strongly opposes uniform style mandates for federal architecture. Architecture should be designed for the specific communities that it serves, reflecting our rich nation's diverse places, thought, culture and climates. Architects are committed to honoring our past as well as reflecting our future progress, protecting the freedom of thought and expression that are essential to democracy.

To understand the reasons for AIA's concern, one only has to visit the U.S. General Services Administration (GSA) website. It introduces the 1962 Guiding Principles for Federal Architecture with a two-fold requirement of practicality and symbolism in all federal buildings as "efficient and economical facilities for use of Government agencies," that "must provide visual testimony to the dignity, enterprise, vigor, and stability of the American Government." The first section of the three-point architectural policy that follows, is mostly concerned with the quality and economy of construction, but it also states that "major emphasis should be placed on the choice of designs that embody the finest contemporary American architectural thought." (Presumably "contemporary" is what the executive order refers to when it says that the original Guiding Principles

“implicitly discouraged classical and other designs known for their beauty.”) The second section is even more unequivocal in regard to the dangers of government mandated aesthetics: “The development of an official style must be avoided. Design must flow from the architectural profession to the Government. [sic] and not vice versa.” Instead of mandating or even favoring a single architectural style, GSA defined the parameters to maximize innovation while guaranteeing quality and longevity of construction. The notion of originality was key to the Guiding Principles. Its preface even quotes President Kennedy’s January 9, 1961 address to the Massachusetts legislature in which he evoked Pericles’ words to the Athenians: “We do not imitate—for we are a model to others,” establishing the goal of not only maintaining the canon, but adding to it.

In the “Design Excellence Overview” section of the site, the GSA specifically mentions “rigorous assessment processes to ensure enduring value in that work” with the aim of creating “holistic environments that add contemporary form and meaning to America’s rich legacy of public architecture.” The process includes advisory boards consisting of “national peers, distinguished private-sector design professionals appointed by the Commissioner of the Public Buildings Service to advise procurement and to critique concept designs under development,” in order to allow for flexibility in the multi-step procedures that include charrettes (“studies of a design issue by a team of design professionals within a limited time frame”) and competitions. The GSA puts additional emphasis on green design and construction as well as on sustainability.

At least in its present form, the draft of the “Making Federal Buildings Beautiful Again” executive order is a peculiar example of either self-conscious denial or willful ignorance of the GSA Guiding Principles it intends to supplant. It sets up a straw opponent

through the fallacy of equating “classical architectural style” with beauty, then rhetorically topples this straw opponent, to arrive at a staggeringly disingenuous and unfounded claim of acting on the part of the American people who are sick and tired of looking at, and working in, modernist and post-modernist federal buildings. The order’s central assertion—that modernist and post-modernist architecture “ranged from the undistinguished to designs the public widely considered uninspiring, inconsistent with their surroundings and the architectural heritage of the region, and even just plain ugly”—is supported by informal polls conducted by The American Institute of Architects (AIA) and Harris Interactive. (That is the same AIA that promptly put out a statement condemning the drafted executive order on the grounds that “freedom of thought and expression [...] are essential to democracy.”) These informal polls are footnoted in the Findings section with three separate references, one of which is a link to “America’s Favorite Architecture” Wikipedia page (!). The “Criticisms” section of the Wikipedia page cites the AIA president R.K. Stewart acknowledging “that the rankings did not represent architects’ professional judgments, but instead reflected people’s ‘emotional connections’ to buildings.” Yet, despite that, and the fact that the 150 “Favorite Buildings” list includes “a few” modernist and post-modernist buildings, it is nevertheless used to assert the superiority of classical architecture.

If the AIA, whose survey is cited as a predicate for the order, is not at all on board with the pending changes, for whose sake is this drastic statute being proposed? The obvious answer is—the current administration. The “Making Federal Buildings Beautiful Again” executive order will bring federally funded architecture under the umbrella of MAGA executive legislation, outlining the program meant to revive a



Figure 1 Nevada Supreme Court and Nevada Court of Appeals building, 408 E. Clark Ave., Las Vegas, Nevada. Yohan Lowie, EHB Companies, 2017. Photo: Julia Friedman.

nostalgic utopia, which in architectural terms is equated to classical, pre-modernist architectural styles. But while it might be based on “emotional connections,” the overhaul by executive order will be anything but symbolic. The mandated changes are top-down and will be implemented almost immediately. Once the decree is signed by President Trump, the Committee that oversees its implementation will have 60 days to present a plan reversing the current U.S. General Services Administration Guiding Principles that specifically reject “the development of an official style.” Gore Vidal’s infamous moniker “the United States of amnesia” fits this unfolding situation well. In 1962, when President Kennedy signed the Guiding Principles into law, the notion of a mandated official style seemed antithetical to democracy, because it had clear associations with totalitarian regimes.

The members of the committee that put in place the original Guiding Principles were understandably reluctant to dictate a single approved style, since they witnessed, first-hand, contemporaneous examples of mandated aesthetics in Russia, Germany, and Italy. In each of those countries, the official architectural style was classical, expressly anti-modernist, and, supposedly exemplified “beautiful architecture” in the mind of the *demos* in whose name it was imposed and enforced.

The assertion that totalitarian regimes favor classicism over modernism has been well-documented by historians. In his 2004 monograph *The Dictators: Hitler’s Germany and Stalin’s Russia*, R. J. Overy reviews the record of architectural construction led by Hitler and Stalin, concluding that “both understood symbolic significance of architecture for the ideological project” and

that both vehemently rejected modernist architecture.¹ What's more, the two dictators acted proactively against modernist architecture, with Stalin championing the Central Committee's 1930 resolutions against experimental styles approved, and the 1931 resolution against "architectural formalism"—essentially, Bauhaus modernism. Hitler was a driving force behind the 1933 shutdown of the Bauhaus, the hotbed of modernist architecture. His own preference was for classical models "designed to reflect the imposing grandeur and historical permanence of the German empire."

"The alternative to Picasso is not Michelangelo, but kitsch," writes Greenberg.

Both Hitler and Stalin made their building plans a crucial ideological focus of their larger political programs. Both were very much hands-on: Hitler "saw himself as the German people's 'master-builder,' building the German 'New Order' in a very literal sense," and personally supervising every minute detail of the Haus der Deutschen Kunst ("House of German Art") construction. The museum was built in Munich to contain Germany's finest (classically inspired) art in the celebration of the triumph of the Third Reich. The Haus der Deutschen Kunst opened with great fanfare in mid-July of 1937, concurrently with the infamous display of "Degenerate," modernist, art across the street. Likewise, Stalin personally reviewed and approved all building designs for the reconstruction of Moscow. In fact, the blueprint for the

¹ All Overy citations here are from Chapter 6, "Constructing Utopia," pp. 221–239.

reconstruction came to be known as "Stalin plan." After the war, in the late 1940s, Stalin's building program culminated in the 'tall buildings' erected based on a sketch made by the leader himself.

Totalitarianism's assault on modernism was not limited to architecture. By declaratively walking out of the opera house during a performance of Dmitri Shostakovich's avant-garde opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* in January 1936, Stalin reset the course of contemporary Soviet music, ensuring that modernism would not remain in its creative vocabulary. Two days after the ill-fated performance, *Pravda*, the Communist Party's official paper, published an editorial entitled "Muddle Instead of Music," where it accused the young composer of "petit-bourgeois formalism." The argument put forth by the reviewer, was based on the premise that the Soviet people have a preconceived aversion to modernism: "The composer apparently never considered the problem of what the Soviet audience looks for and expects in music."² These words echo Hitler's rants "in the name of the German people" about "a so-called modern art" during his inaugural speech of the "Great Exhibition of German Art" in the Haus der Deutschen Kunst.³ Totalitarian dictators demagogically accused composers, artists, writers and architects—cultural elites—of creating useless cultural products that the public rightly despises.

An axiomatic notion, embedded in the *psyche* of the Soviet regime, stipulated that the workers "have a more concrete form of thinking... than bourgeois intellectuals," pitting experts and professionals against the monolithic mass of "the people," and

² Victor Seroff, *Dimitri Shostakovich: The Life and Background of a Soviet Composer* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1943), pp. 204-7.

³ "Speech Inaugurating the 'Great Exhibition of German Art,'" translation by Ilse Falk, published in H. B. Chipp (ed.), *Theories of Modern Art*, Berkeley, CA, and London, 1968, pp. 474–483.

presenting the experts as saboteurs and wreckers. All the more remarkable, then, is the part (d) of the second, “Policy” section of “Making Federal Buildings Beautiful Again,” from which we learn that the experts are to be expressly excluded from the open comment period when everyone else is invited to share their opinions on new designs:

With respect to the public panels, participants shall not include artists, architects, engineers, art or architecture critics, members of the building industry or any other members of the public that are affiliated with any interest group or organization involved with the design, construction, or otherwise directly affected by the construction or remodeling of the building.

Since the only difference between the general public and the experts is the experts’ excessive and inconvenient knowledge of the discipline, were these experts excluded for their likely bias against classicism mandated from above in the name of the masses below?

I believe they most certainly were. Architects, art historians, architectural historians are attuned to the 20th-century uses of classicism for political purposes thanks to the writings of the art critic Clement Greenberg, especially Greenberg’s discussions of the top-down academicism in Russia, Germany and Italy. His seminal essay “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” was published in 1939 as a contribution to the debate about the political role of art in the Trotskyist journal *Partisan Review*, has since become a staple of North American arts education.⁴ In it, Greenberg recounts the development and the current function of “kitsch,” which he defines as “academicized simulacra of genuine culture,” and as “vicarious experience and faked sensations.” According to Greenberg, “all kitsch is academic; and conversely, all

that’s academic is kitsch” because “the academic as such no longer has an independent existence.” Kitsch tends to be the default mode of cultures in which “the verities involved by religion, authority, tradition, style, are thrown into question.” The critic gives Soviet Russia as an example, with kitsch as the official culture of the state which opposes modernist, avant-garde art, favoring, instead, the “academicized simulacra.” As Greenberg notes, the dichotomy between “merely the old and merely the new” is false, and the choice is actually “between the bad, up-to-date old and the genuinely new.” “The alternative to Picasso is not Michelangelo, but kitsch,” writes Greenberg, tracing the route of preference for kitsch over genuine modern art to “a reactionary dissatisfaction which expresses itself in revivalism and puritanism, and latest of all, in fascism.” His conclusion is that decreeing kitsch as an official cultural policy is just pandering to the masses:

Where today a political regime establishes an official cultural policy, it is for the sake of demagoguery. If kitsch is the official tendency of culture in Germany, Italy and Russia, it is not because their respective governments are controlled by philistines, but because kitsch is the culture of the masses in these countries, as it is everywhere else. The encouragement of kitsch is merely another of the inexpensive ways in which totalitarian regimes seek to ingratiate themselves with their subjects. Since these regimes cannot raise the cultural level of the masses—even if they wanted to—by anything short of a surrender to international socialism, they will flatter the masses by bringing all culture down to their level.

Of course, Greenberg can be justly accused of dated elitism, and the masses, to whom he referred so disparagingly, should have their say. Besides, as history teaches us, their vote will not necessarily be for the *status quo* and against innovation. In 1401, the citizens of Florence decided that their baptistry

4 *Partisan Review*, New York, VI, no.5, Fall 1939, pp. 34–49.

(Battistero di San Giovanni) needed spectacular new doors. They did not mandate a specific style to a chosen artist, instead holding an open competition. Among the seven semifinalists, the jurors chose two finalists: a temperamental architect and designer Filippo Brunelleschi, and a young sculptor Lorenzo Ghiberti. While Brunelleschi worked in secret on his design, Ghiberti kept an open studio to allow the public view and comment on the designs. The visitors came from different strata of the society, making Ghiberti's inclusion of their feedback truly democratic. The resulting design was much more innovative in the treatment of space than the "classical" version proposed by Brunelleschi. In the end, Ghiberti got the contract, and the doors, known as the "Gates of Paradise," became a key Renaissance landmark.

So, why is classicism by decree such a bad idea? One obvious problem with officially-mandated style is that variety will be compromised. Although the order makes exceptions to the "Classical style" in principle, further sections indicate the improbability of anything innovative being approved. Part (b) of Section 6, "Agency Actions," stipulates:

... in the event the Administrator proposes to approve a design for a new applicable Federal public building that is not in a preferred architectural style (or, in the National Capital Region or for a Federal courthouse, not in the classical style) the Administrator shall notify the President of this fact not less than 30 days before the GSA could reject such design without incurring substantive expenditures.

The Administrator is then obliged to provide "a detailed explanation [...] of why the Administrator believes selecting such a design is justified, with particular focus on whether such design is a beautiful and reflective of the dignity, enterprise, vigor and the stability of the American system of self-government as alternative designs of comparable cost in

a traditional architectural style," along with "a description of the traditional or classical designs seriously considered for such project." This would make anything but the mandated styles practically impossible.

Another problem is that Hellenic classicism, originally developed in Mediterranean antiquity, cannot possibly meet the current criteria for sustainability. Those criteria are based on the steep technological advances of the past few decades, which made architectural Modernism possible. Buildings are more than façades, and the GSA is not supposed to raise Potemkin villages. It is telling, that the San Francisco Federal Building by Morphosis Architects, named in the executive order as an example of construction Americans regard with "bewilderment or repugnance," is known for establishing a benchmark in sustainable design. Large Federal buildings are complex engineering mechanisms and, by turning back the aesthetic clock, the Executive order will simultaneously turn back the technological clock.

A final problem is that classical buildings require appropriately dated and therefore costly materials and outdated methods of production. This would make it very difficult to match their quality to the models they are intended to emulate—the White House, the U.S. Supreme Court, the U.S. Capitol building. It also virtually guarantees that many of these new buildings will be contenders for inclusion into Kate Wagner's McMansion Hell Hall of Fame. An example of such a building is Nevada's Supreme Court of Appeals, constructed in the record period of fourteen months by the independent developers/builders EHB Companies (Figure 1). The building is an unfortunate riff on Neoclassical style that ineptly combines elements of the current and original U.S. Supreme Court buildings. Sixteen Corinthian columns that support the west entrance pediment of the U.S.

Supreme Court were substituted with four square-shaped half columns. These are out of scale and are pathetically weighted down by a portico and architrave that are too large for them (and appear even larger because of the stylistically incoherent bas-relief inscription on the architrave, in what looks like the Arial Rounded Bold font, designed in 1982). The functional columns that support the frieze along the façade are vaguely Roman Tuscan and seem made of different stone than the remainder of the building, which is done in white marble. The massive *brass* doors at the front are no doubt meant to reference the monumental *bronze* doors of the U.S. Supreme Court, except that the pediments are out of scale: the central door's pointed pediment is adjusted to the height of the doors on either side, making the central door look smaller. Because of its minuscule size, the bronze dome that tops the building looks more like a functional base for the statue of Blind Justice that it supports. The building is surrounded with fluted rectangular planters and one-ton stone balls, and an illogical single Neoclassical gate pillar on the northeast corner provides the *coup de grace*.

Clement Greenberg was right when he said that “the alternative to Picasso is not Michelangelo, but kitsch.” As described in “Definitions” section 3 of the executive order, “Classical architectural style” is derived from the forms and principles of classical Greek and Roman architecture, as later employed by such Renaissance architects as Michelangelo and Palladio...” After its initial antique phase, classical architecture in the West has already been reincarnated twice: during the Renaissance and then again during the Neoclassical period of the 18th and early 19th century. Any classical style of the 21st century is inevitably kitsch, because it is formulaic and academized, not to mention expensive and environmentally unsustainable. Imposing classicism by decree goes against not only the letter but also the spirit of the 1962 Guiding Principles. It rejects the notions of progress and evolution in American architecture. In the process, it transforms the GSA from a guardian of excellence in design to a prison warden, whose sole job is to keep architecture permanently confined in an ersatz-Palladian cell. ㊦

Will Laughing at and with One Another Save Us?

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Jeffrey Israel, *Living with Hate in American Politics and Religion: How Popular Culture Can Defuse Intractable Differences*. Columbia University Press, 363pp. \$65 cloth; \$26 paper.

Jeffrey Israel, a professor of Religion and Judaic Studies at Williams College, doesn't mention Eddie Murphy once in this book, but he surely has Murphy's type of comedy in mind in *Living with Hate in American Politics and Religion*. In his 1984 Saturday Night Live sketch "White like Me," Murphy, a comedic genius for reasons far greater than merely being funny, offered a prime example of what Israel contends about the social benefits of comedy in this challenging, learned, and at times frustrating book. In that sketch, Murphy channeled John Howard Griffin's then much acclaimed 1960 bestseller, *Black like Me*, which advanced the dubious premise that a well-meaning white man who temporarily dyed his skin could know what it was like to live as a black man in the Jim Crow South. In Murphy's adaptation, he plays "Mr. White," a black man who puts on white makeup and a conservative business suit, changes his haircut, affects uncool eyeglasses, and tries, he tells us, to walk with a tight butt. Looking perfectly plausible and utterly

anonymous, Mr. White then goes out into midtown Manhattan to see what he has been missing, and to understand how the secret world of American white people really works. Murphy's voiceover throughout is that of the same earnest *I-am-the-inquiring-documentary-reporter* that was Griffin's pose. First, Murphy visits a greeting card shop and begins to memorize the potted messages, as if they were revealed truth. Then he goes to a newspaper stand, where the owner, with a knowing, insider's look, waives the cost of the paper when he attempts to pay. He goes to a bank to ask for a loan, presenting no collateral and no identification: a black bank officer summarily refuses him, but a white bank official, with the same knowing look, intervenes, and not only gives him the loan, but opens a locked box and generously presents him gratis with as much cash as he wants. The sketch culminates on a public bus, on which there is one identifiable black passenger and a group of bored, white passengers, with vacant expressions, and, in his racial disguise, Mr. White. The lone black passenger leaves, and the white people immediately roll out a rollicking party, accompanied by music, which seems to be their standard practice as soon as they are alone with one another.

In the maybe three minutes that he has our attention, Murphy manages to make fun of everyone involved—himself, whites and African-Americans simultaneously—while reminding us of the utter implausibility of Griffin’s premise, no matter how well-meaning his white liberal intentions. African-Americans might imagine that life is ridiculously easy for these white people and consistently biased in their favor—free money, free newspapers, and secret parties in public space when black people are not around, but this is certainly not true. Who knows what tragedies, frustrations, failed aspirations and self-defeating habits are parts of the lives of everyone, race aside, whom we encounter impersonally, everywhere around us? Yet an elemental grain of truth nevertheless transforms Murphy’s comedy into social commentary. Life in America is a lot easier for these unknowing-looking, alternately genial and guarded, white people Murphy parodies, and white skin has its myriad privileges, even if they don’t include free money at the bank. An audience probably well-versed in the narrative Griffin constructed—the book continues to be read 60 years on—is reminded that, documentary-style objective reporting aside, it can no more easily imagine the multilevel struggles with race and identity of an African-American than Murphy could know what it is to be white.

Murphy did the same sort of telling setup, to take one last example, in his equally celebrated, “Mr. Robinson’s Neighborhood.” This was his series of parodies of Fred Rogers’ gentle, ever more appreciated children’s TV program from within a slum apartment, surrounded by drugs and violence, in which Murphy as Robinson concocts a variety of transparent scams one step ahead of the police and the landlord. Murphy uses a familiar scenario to hold a mirror up to Americans that instructs us in the realities of race in the United States. He reveals the depths of our comfortable and destructive

illusions, while making this bitter pill easier to swallow, because it is funny. It’s funny, because of Murphy’s genius for body language and his on-target dialogue parodying niceness, while playing the part of a very bad and yet also ridiculous dude. But if that were all there was about the comedy here, it wouldn’t mean much. It’s that mirror that makes it funny, because we need, all of us, occasionally to see ourselves naked and ridiculous.

As Jeffrey Israel would have it, for a moment in such comedy, through Mr. White and Mr. Robinson, we are brought into intimate contact with ourselves, all of us, whatever our seemingly profound differences, sharing life in Israel’s words in a “fraught society,” where for all of our self-aggrandizing national illusions and mythologies, the histories of racial and gender oppression and class exploitation hang heavily on our individual and collective shoulders. Almost everyone in America at present has claims to a grievance, and feels the odds are in one way or another stacked against us or, at the very least, that we’re not sufficiently understood or appreciated. At the foundation of these states of mind are vast and widening inequalities of wealth and power and mutual accusations and suspicions associated with the claims of identity politics. The liberal project of constructive tolerance and mutual understanding on which the culture of democracy ultimately depends is badly strained; public discourse is rife with invective, abuse, and name-calling and the institutions of democracy are stalemated. These states of mind are hardly funny, especially as they play out in today’s deeply polarized, bitter politics. But to the extent we exaggerate them, get lost in our separate grievances and lose track of our common, frail and confused American humanity, all of us, Israel thinks, need to draw back and cast some ironic reflections on ourselves. It isn’t a profoundly original point, but

ultimately he means to tell us that wisdom comes with self-reflection, both individual and collective. We need to reclaim our common humanity as part of the project of reclaiming our collective future and saving what in liberalism continues to be worth saving: the balancing of the rights of the individual and the good of the community and the polity.

That is Israel's central purpose, and it is imparted in his discussion of the subtle workings of comedy when it engages in social and political critique. While the book's prosaic title does not do its purposes or methods justice, that message does come after rough slogging through his first 170-odd pages, in which he is principally preoccupied with laying out his vision of social justice, citizenship, and individual and collective obligations through long, often difficult moral and political analysis. He doesn't seek to explain our possible transformation through projections out of our history, but through the examination of philosophies of rights and liberties and the good that probe at the weaknesses and abiding strengths of American, and more generally Western, liberalism. Among others, he argues with Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, Franz Fanon, John Locke, Thomas Hobbes, John Rawls, and Leo Strauss; who are discussed at length, juxtaposed, as Israel visits and revisits the analysis through many pages. So, too, does the eminent moral philosopher and legal scholar Martha Nussbaum, who writes the Introduction to the book. Nussbaum was Israel's mentor at the University of Chicago, and here he continues a spirited and apparently fond dialogue of agreements and disagreements, that probably has been going on for decades, and is a tribute to the best qualities of both mentorship and intellectual comradeship. Among their common concerns is a deep appreciation of what's funny and why it's funny, and why the funny, as Eddie Murphy understands, may be so important to us. The book's extended preface (though

I am certain Israel would see those 170 pages as a necessary and essential, morally driven act of obligation) lays out what an ideal America would look like, if we were to face ourselves and our past realistically, reconstruct our conception of democratic citizenship, valorize the lives of all of our people, and improve our institutions with human and humane ends in mind. We may then take seriously realizing what we have long liked to believe to be our national story, as it is ideally embodied in such expressive symbols as the Statue of Liberty, Plymouth Rock, and the Emancipation Proclamation.

If hopeful, Israel is far from utopian. Even in an America united in its dedication to its self-improvement, the burden of the past and the myriad of prejudices, resentments, and defensive-aggressive assertions of identity that are part of the burden, will continue to manifest themselves. We will continue to look backward to what pisses us off, and sideways to those around us, who seem likely to be self-righteous, pompous, and judgmental, even as we might strive to go forward. It's what Karl Marx called "the dead hand of the past," but no less real for being—maybe, hopefully—vestigial. This is the source for Israel of what is and will continue to be, even under much better circumstances, "fraught" about us, and form a part of our self-understandings and the social arrangements we form.

What is fraught can continue to be faced through mutual accusations, which will have us perpetually at one another's throats, or we can find ways to govern our complaints, and tame our ways of presenting our views to one another in the service of constructing a more humane and democratic American community. This is where comedy, which Israel advances, not as a palliative for individuals managing stress, but as a culturally and politically salutary form of play, presents itself. He does not advance comedy as therapeutic or cathartic; it is

instead ideologically constructive, but its portal into politics is through a back-door.

But not just any comedy. Israel is seriously—culturally more so than religiously—Jewish, and he finds in the Jewish traditions of ironic humor that juxtapose and reconcile opposites in improbable possibilities an antidote to the dead-end, irreconcilable bitterness of much of the current popular climate of opinion in America. Jews dominated American comedy for much of the twentieth century, just as Italian baritones did romantic crooning and African-Americans did jazz. The genealogy of American comedy is often analyzed as a Jewish genealogy, where styles developed by Jews begin trends picked up and taken to new heights by such distinctly un-Jewish performers as, not only Murphy, but George Carlin, Richard Pryor, Dick Gregory, Bob Newhart, Jonathan Winters, and Phyllis Diller.

What Israel has in mind is not the Jewish joke-tellers—the Myron Cohens, Groucho Marxes, and Henny Youngmans, who reached their apogee in vaudeville, night clubs and Borscht-belt resorts with their rapid-delivery quips and clever one-liners about traveling salesmen or nagging wives. He is instead thinking of the pioneer generation of those who invented stand-up—the monologists, beginning in the 1950s with Mort Sahl and a few years later, the notorious Lenny Bruce and ultimately encompassing, in all of their own variety, Elaine May and Mike Nichols, Shelley Berman, Joan Rivers, Woody Allen, Mel Brooks and Carl Reiner, Sid Caesar, and Don Rickles.

Dressed in a casual cardigan rather than the standard performance business suit and often sitting informally on his prop, a barstool, Sahl began a nightclub act in the heyday of the Eisenhower Era, when Lawrence Welk and Jackie Gleason dominated Saturday night TV and *Reader's Digest* formed popular tastes in literature. He declaimed ironically on the headlines and on cultural

trends, unmasking with a sly irony the hypocrisies and illusions of official America and its dominant public culture, not as tragedy but as farce, a situation comedy in which we somehow all had a starring role, but lacked confidence in the lines we were given to speak. This wasn't always easy to bring off, because much that Sahl dealt with—for example, the nuclear balance of terror and the arms race—wasn't at all funny. It was the improbable blind alleys and self-defeating meandering of public policy and the ultimately unconvincing arguments that explained it that he parodied. In effect, he asked the audience to wake up and get serious; you might not understand that at the moment you were taking in what he said, but perhaps upon reflection as you left the night club where he did his act you said to yourself, "This is actually serious."

We are brought into intimate contact with ourselves, all of us, whatever our seemingly profound differences, sharing life in Israel's words in a "fraught society"

Crucial here for the likes of Sahl and especially Bruce was the position of outsider, the classic position of Jews in Western societies. No matter how close they might come to the centers of power, as Israel explains, Jews feel themselves to exist at a distance from the dominant culture and its centers of authority, and thus may be singularly qualified to comment, albeit mostly among themselves, on both. A good deal of that outsider's posture is also an historically conditioned feeling of vulnerability that manifests itself, beyond irony, in distrust and

fear. Jews seem always to be waiting for the boot to come down on their faces. And why not? It often has. Typically for many Jews, when they are asked to reflect on the apparent philo-Semitism of a figure of great Christian rectitude, like Vice President Mike Pence, their response is a terse, “Just wait ...,” pregnant with foreboding.

**“I’ve always considered,
Israel quotes Lear as
saying, “that an audience
laughs hardest when
they’re concerned most.”**

What have the Jews done with this deeply engrained anxiety? Israel seems quite correct in his claim that if Melville’s Ahab, with his bitter rage at what is morally offensive and cosmically disordered, may be seen as a representative figure revealing the haunted soul of American white Protestants, for the Jews the complementary imaginative construction is the Yiddish writer Sholom Aleichem’s Tavye the Milkman. Tavye is a figure now so familiar from the musical *Fiddler on the Roof* that he has become a staple of class musical productions in high schools in unlikely places such as Iowa and Alabama. That familiarity has come at the expense inevitably of decontextualizing Tavye and his world, a small town (Yiddish: *shtetl*) in turn of the last century Tsarist Russia, a place of brutal anti-Semitic oppression. Tavye has seven daughters and their marriage prospects are circumscribed by his poverty. But all Jewish life is tentative in the midst of the difficult negotiations in daily life with gentile neighbors, which ultimately culminate in Sholom Aleichem’s cycle of Tavye stories in the expulsion of these Jews from their homes.

Through all, Tavye offers sly and ironic commentary. He is a victim, a person not in control of his fate, to whom bad things happen, and he is somewhat of a wise fool. He realistically expects the worst, but he hopes, too, for the best, which reflects his understanding ultimately of the duality of human nature and a rational calculation of the odds that somehow, a great deal of evidence to the contrary, things may just work out for the best after all. He is humorous, but certainly not “Funny, Ha! Ha!” His comment on the much misunderstood Old Testament grounded view of the Jews as a divinely “chosen people,” destined to live a life apart and be divinely judged apart from others, would be funny, if it didn’t comment so aptly on the history of the Jews from one who has to suffer the fate of being a Jew in a place like Tsarist Russia. “Next time choose someone else!” Tavye says, addressing God. To Ahab’s avenging angel, Israel posits Tavye, the *schlemiel*, victim and fool, ironist and wise man.

How this deeply culturally and historically grounded humor might salve America’s wounds, Israel confronts in his telling analysis of the ways that Jewish comedy, as social critique, has worked in three recent, Jewish-inspired American cultural productions. The first is Lenny Bruce’s pioneering stand-up performances, in which Bruce himself, and his martyrdom at the hands of police eager to bust him for obscenity or blasphemy, became increasingly the substance of his humor. Bruce examined the irrationality of mid-century cultural standards, and laid bare the frailty of contemporary cultural authorities, religious and secular alike, through what is in retrospect is rather benign humor. (The last time I showed tapes of a particularly controversial, at the time, Bruce performance to a class of undergraduates in my course *American Dissenters*, they couldn’t figure out why Bruce presented a problem to anyone.)

Bruce was quite conscious of the role he had come to play. Whatever the circuitous path by which Bruce, the sometime hustler and general wiseass prior to his notoriety, had come to play the role of cultural pioneer, he knew what he was about. It's well to recall that he titled his 1965 autobiography, *How to Talk Dirty and Influence People*.

The second is Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint*, the confused and often hilarious, again if not ultimately so serious, stand-up monologue in novel form driven by the sexual and cultural angst of a successful young Jewish professional trying to negotiate the gap between the limited but sustaining ethnic Jewish world into which he was born, and the world of seemingly unlimited possibility that American Jews began to dream of in the 1950s. Here, too, the serious point may be elusive in the midst of the manic, ribald energy of the narrative, but the narrative itself is framed as a therapeutic encounter between Alexander Portnoy and Dr. Spielvogel, his psychiatrist. That conversation culminates in the doctor's invitation to get serious, "So. Now vee may perhaps to begin. Yes?"

Finally, there is the familiar primetime sitcom, *All in the Family*, which ran for fully 205 episodes between 1971 and 1979—a record of longevity that marks the program as a veritable popular cultural institution. Readers might ask what *All in the Family* had to do with Jews. Memories of it may be fading, but it is generally known among those with even a passing acquaintance with recent popular culture history that the program centered around the iconic Archie Bunker, a middle-aged working-class white Protestant bigot, living in Queens. Bunker's freely expressed, and often more ridiculous and misinformed than obnoxious opinions, clashed regularly with those of almost everyone around him: his Polish-American, Roman Catholic son-in-law, Mike Stivic (who Bunker casually calls, "Meathead"),

a more or less left-wing, countercultural hippie who is generally unemployed and lives with and off Bunker; his African-American neighbors, the Jeffersons; his simple, sensible and good-hearted wife, Edith; Edith's outspoken feminist sister, Maude; the Jews with whom Bunker owns a neighborhood tavern; and his daughter, Gloria, who agrees with her husband and is as stubborn as her father. In his clashes with these and other characters, Bunker argues and gets wrong the Vietnam War, race and racism, affirmative action, homosexuality, feminism, religion, abortion, and every other source of intense political and cultural debate of the time.

Many people were hostile to the idea of featuring someone like Bunker in primetime, for fear that his views would be legitimated during TV's highly coveted, evening family hours. In reality, when not looking out of his depth in discussion of any question of importance, Bunker was less a bigot than the parody of a bigot, and too confused by the changing world around him to do any harm. Indeed the audience would come to see him as strangely loveable, if often badly in need of correction. In the artlessness with which he defended his positions and the comic confusions of his view of the world, he brought bigotry down to size. If you disagreed with him, you wanted to argue, not give him a bloody nose. You recognized him as a sort of American *schlemiel*. Maybe, you recognized something of yourself in him. Maybe something in you was also confused by the pace of change in the world around you, and by the accusations leveled by passionate advocates of tearing down what stood in the way of justice that you were in the way of progress. Under any circumstance, taking up big, difficult, and polarizing issues with humor softened the difficulties of confronting them and dealing with one another amidst that confrontation, and that is Israel's point.

Of course, the point of view here was left-wing or liberal. It's hardly surprising that William F. Buckley, Jr., the godfather of postwar American conservatism, objected to the frequently, comically illogical Bunker standing in as the representative of the movement which he had anchored in both Western philosophy and Christianity. Buckley didn't get it, of course: he would have influenced many more people with humor than with his highly refined ideas and tastes. Amidst bitter contentions about racial and class inequalities, he is remembered to have said that no society could be said to be truly undemocratic in which the Bach Brandenburg Concertos were available in mass produced, inexpensive phonograph records. Whatever standing Buckley had in the world of ideas, he was distinctly lacking in the common touch, and hence not unrelatedly in humor. Asking Buckley to consider humor would have been as profound a dead-end as asking him to accept the Rooseveltian welfare state. For all of the tasteless sitcoms that haunt the distinctly right-leaning FOX network, it is hard to imagine the American right coming up with a parody of the left, in which a conservative played the same ideologically deconstructive role, comically choreographed, that Archie's son-in-law Mike played in consistently getting the better of Archie. This is not to say there isn't plenty to parody on the left.

Israel would have no trouble explaining this, for it would bring him back to the salutary playfulness of the comedic, as it is found in the culture of the ever-left leaning Jews. What, might you ask, did Archie Bunker, the outer-borough reactionary, have to do with a Jewish style of comedy? How do we get, if you will, from Tavye to Archie? The culmination of Israel's book is his convincing analysis of why *All in the Family* worked for almost a decade, and how it had the power to generate such successful and often equally controversial spinoffs as *Maude*

(1972-1978) and *The Jeffersons* (1975-1985). At the center of *All in the Family* and its various sequels was Norman Lear. One of the most successful producers in the history of primetime TV sitcoms, Lear has been a longtime supporter of progressive advocacy and church-state separation. He founded People for the American Way in 1980 to counteract the influence of the Moral Majority, which had been founded the year before by the evangelical minister, Jerry Falwell, to combat secularism and the amorality that Falwell associated with liberal hegemony in culture and politics. A decorated veteran of the Air Force, Lear returned from World War II to a variety of dead-end sales jobs in the East and in California before, like Mel Brooks and Woody Allen, the 1950s found him writing jokes for TV performers. From there, he entered movie and TV production.

Apart from its domestic political vision, *All in the Family* had a complex genealogy. It was inspired by a British TV sitcom, *Till Death Do Us Part*, about a working class Tory involved in endless arguments with his son, a Socialist. In explaining the origins of *All in the Family*, Lear also gives formal credit to Lenny Bruce, who had died of a drug overdose in 1966 at the height of his legal troubles, for being a "prophet" of the possibilities lurking below the surface of comedy to deal with what enflamed public opinion and put people at one another's throats. Lear sought to put a different face, which turned out to be Bunker's, on the "white backlash" against the Civil Rights and Black Power movement and the antiwar protests that Richard Nixon had sought to mobilize in his successful 1968 and 1972 presidential campaigns. Lear's motive was less to change the world than to produce great television. But he was also aware, as he explained, that he was dealing with volatile materials. "I've always considered," Israel quotes Lear as saying, "that an audience

laughs hardest when they're concerned most."

Format and delivery of the message aside, Lear looked back into his own past. The characters were often lifted out of Lear's life. Archie, he explained, was not unlike his father, Hyman (Anglicized to the more acceptable *Herman*), the son of immigrant Jews, who was sent to prison for fraud when Norman was a boy. Edith resembled Jeanette, his Jewish mother, who had emigrated from Ukraine as a young girl. In arguments with his father, Lear recalls, the old man revealed a heightened sensitivity to the vulnerability of the Jews and in that connection a more or less desperate grasp of whiteness and respectability that led him to take on all manner of American biases. He was perhaps never more an (admittedly perverse) object of love than when he revealed this vulnerability in grasping at narrow-minded American prejudices about race, religion, and other ethnic groups—not unlike the way Others regarded Jews, of course. As Israel and others have seen it, packed into Archie, from all of these directions, was somehow the possibility of a kind of redemption for all of us.

So? As I was reading this book, rich in warm, humane purposes and democratic hopes and intelligent in advancing them, I was nonetheless haunted by a photograph taken at the disastrous, violent confrontation between aggressive white nationalists and peaceful antiracist demonstrators at Charlottesville, Virginia in 2017 that continues to seem a harbinger of the decline of democratic institutions and

the culture of liberal democracy itself. In the photo, off to the upper left, I recall an image, sticking out in a crowd of faces and bodies, that seems to symbolize these pessimistic forebodings: a large shirtless man, perhaps 250 pounds and prominently tattooed with Nazi symbols. The tattoos catch your eye, of course, but what really seizes the viewer's attention is the fierce expression on a face twisted by rage and hatred. Maybe there is something weirdly comic about the perversity of defacing your body with the symbols of mass murder, and probably getting stuck with them for the rest of your life, even if somehow you change your politics. That response might help bring this man and his ideological purposes down to size, and make him less menacing. In 1940, in *The Great Dictator*, Charlie Chaplin made Hitler and Mussolini objects of humor, though we need to recall that was before we fully understood the murderous legacies of both men. Removing menace from this image out of 2017, whether through comedy or anything other method, seems indeed to be a stretch. Yet it is not nearly as unlikely as convincing this twenty-first century Nazi to somehow understand that we're all in his life together. Constrained by a lack of moral let alone practical alternatives, we should perhaps learn to laugh at ourselves and laugh with others at being merely human, and then move on at peace to construct a just, humane future. Would he listen to this invitation to play? That may be the ultimate test of Israel's ideas. ♪

Dealing with Disappointment in Democracy

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IN CONDITIONS HANDSOME AND *Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism* (1990), the American philosopher Stanley Cavell identifies what I take to be a critical requirement for democracy.

Cavell writes of the need to respond to the “inevitable failures” of democracy “otherwise than by excuse or withdrawal.”¹ “Inevitable” is for me a crucial word here. I take it to mean that the failures of democracy recur; they don’t come and go with one presidential election, one Supreme Court decision or appointment, one act of Congress. Excusing the failures of democracy, or disengaging from political participation as a result of them, gives up on democracy and lets disappointment harden into hopelessness. Cavell goes on to praise Ralph Waldo Emerson for seeing that the “training and character and friendship Emerson requires for democracy” are necessary “as preparation to withstand not its rigors but its failures” (56): necessary, in other words, to keeping “the democratic hope alive in the face of disappointment with it,” disappointment that keeps coming back. Emerson, Cavell adds, is “forever turning aside to say, especially to the young, not to despair of the world” (56).

I want here to explore here how responding to disappointment in democracy can get beyond making excuses for its lapses or opting out. I will be drawing on two very different books published independently of one another in 2004. One of these books—Philip Roth’s novel *The Plot Against America* (published September 30, 2004)—has already attracted renewed interest in light of the 2016 presidential election. Many readers have recast *The Plot Against America* as a remarkably accurate prophecy of populist demagoguery paving the way for fascism, despite Roth’s disclaimer that he never meant the book to be a warning, let alone a prediction.² The other book I will be using—Danielle Allen’s philosophical study *Talking to Strangers: Anxieties of Citizenship since Brown v. Board of Education* (published September 6, 2004)—is more sanguine about the prospects of democracy. It also deserves rereading, not despite its cautious optimism but because of it.

Both Roth and Allen look back at recent American history. Roth imagines what might have happened if Charles Lindbergh had run for president against Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1940 and won, on an isolationist, America First platform sympathetic to the German Nazi leaders, against participation in what became World War II, and hostile to

what Lindbergh calls the self-interested “passions and prejudices of other peoples”—most notably “the Jewish people”—who were advocating for American intervention against Nazi Germany.³ *The Plot Against America* pictures fascism emerging from within America democracy, as later recalled by the narrator, not-so-coincidentally named Philip Roth, a seven-year-old child at the time of Lindbergh’s election who watched the terrifying events of the day disrupt the previously placid lives of his extended Jewish family.

Allen looks back at September 4, 1957, a traumatic day in the life of a 16-year old African-American girl, Elizabeth Eckford, who tried on that day to attend the all-white Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, as authorized by the 1954 Brown decision, only to be stopped by a mob of angry white citizens, who cursed her and called for her lynching. According to Allen, photographs of Elizabeth’s quiet suffering at the hands of the hate-filled people attacking her shamed other Americans into realizing that American democracy should be better than this ugly scene. The vitriolic local reception of Elizabeth, Allen writes, “fired public opinion in favor of the civil rights struggle” and “forced a psychic transformation of the citizenry.”⁴ That transformation, Allen adds, is not yet complete and the road from 1957 to the present (2004) has continued to be “a rocky one” (8). But after that disgraceful moment in 1957 “there could be no turning back” (8). Allen writes to dislodge ingrained, but vulnerable, patterns of racial distrust that still keep Americans from working together to shape a shared future. Although Allen understands the serious challenges that beset the path to racial equality, she remains hopeful. In her view, America “long ago abandoned modes of citizenship” that perpetuated racism “by means of domination, acquiescence, hypocrisy, and the production of invisibility” (19). Allen writes *Talking to Strangers* to hasten the development

of new forms of democratic citizenship still struggling to be born in 2004 but feeling more possible than they did when Elizabeth unsuccessfully attempted to enter Central High School.

These very different takes on American democracy—one imagining American democracy giving way to fascism, the other seeing democracy ultimately triumphing over an especially ugly eruption of racial hatred—complement one another. Roth’s novel provides ample reason for disappointment in democracy and probes the temptation to excuse or withdraw from a world that turns its back on democratic values. Allen’s study makes a strong case for not despairing of the world, for keeping democratic hope alive in the face of well-founded discouragement. Whereas Roth brings out the vulnerability of democracy, Allen highlights its resiliency. Taken together, *The Plot Against America* and *Talking to Strangers* make a timely point that I will be reinforcing in this essay: giving up on American democracy is as self-defeating as taking it for granted.

It Can Happen Here

Before looking more closely at these two books, I should acknowledge that I cannot say why they were published within weeks of one another in 2004. Each book seems detached from its immediate historical context. As one indication of this distance, neither book mentions what for many would have been the defining event of the early 2000s: the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, which set the stage for President George W. Bush’s war on terrorism. This distance from the present, however, is not a weakness but a strength. It allows Roth and Allen to arrive at insights into democracy that function as reminders proponents of democracy will always benefit from.

Giving up on American democracy is as self-defeating as taking it for granted.

Allen is a classicist by training, and her book reflects her deep indebtedness to classical political thought, especially Aristotle. Allen concludes her book with a hypothetical letter to the Faculty Senate of the university where she taught at the time, the University of Chicago. In the letter, she expresses her concern that the university is primarily represented in the Hyde Park area by its expanding police force. What if, she asks, funds financing this expansion were redirected to initiatives more conducive to building community trust in the university and more in keeping with the university's educational mission: for example, setting up off-campus satellite sites where neighborhood residents could take classes, consult with faculty on legal issues and other matters, and use otherwise unavailable information technology. Although these are serious proposals on Allen's part, by her own admission they are more illustrative than pragmatic or comprehensive. Allen calls her recommendations "a first sketch for a utopia" (175), or a community that would not need university police because by implementing what she calls practices of political friendship, the community members would peacefully resolve issues or keep them from escalating into crises requiring the intervention of force. For Allen, encouraging political friendship across differences should be a central effort of democracies everywhere and always. She reinforces this point by stepping back from Hyde Park and the University of Chicago and shifting her attention to ancient Athens, specifically noting the Athenian emphasis on "treating strangers well on the grounds that we are related to one another in more ways

than we know" (185). Talking to strangers becomes a quintessentially democratic attitude toward others Allen is adapting to her own community, her "polis," as she puts it, where "race and class have made it difficult for us to see [our] connections" (185) to one another—difficult, but not impossible.

I will be returning to Allen's argument, but for now want to note that in *The Plot Against America*, Roth similarly steps back from his immediate world, like a viewer moving away from a painting to see larger patterns that zooming in on the painting would obscure. Like Allen, Roth is more interested in arriving at an enduring perspective on democracy than in responding to the specific events of the day. When the novel first appeared, some reviewers combed through recent developments, searching for provocations that might have triggered Roth's worries about fascism: seeing, for example, echoes of Lindbergh-the-heroic-aviator in President George W. Bush landing on the carrier Abraham Lincoln in flying gear on May 1, 2003 and proclaiming Mission Accomplished in Iraq; or finding proto-authoritarian restrictions on democratic freedoms in the 2001 Patriot Act; or detecting incipient anti-Semitism in some critics of the war on Iraq who were then blaming Israel and President Bush's Jewish advisors for the invasion. I take these examples from Paul Berman's thoughtful October 3, 2004 review of the novel. Berman goes on to say that despite these possible allusions to recent events, the novel "is not an allegorical tract about the present age, with each scene or character corresponding to the events of our own time."⁵ Instead, Roth's novel reimagines the past to highlight a point about the fragility of American democracy that previous writers have also insisted on, including Sinclair Lewis in his 1935 novel *It Can't Happen Here*, which chronicles the damage done by a demagogue elected president. For Roth, the reminder that it can happen here will always be timely.

That reminder recurs in the American literary heritage Roth is drawing on.

Full-blown fascism, to be sure, erupts in *The Plot Against America* only towards the end of the novel, after President Lindbergh and his plane have disappeared and Vice President Wheeler has taken over as acting president. By full-blown fascism, I mean how, citing the danger to national security posed by the Jews allegedly responsible for Lindbergh's mysterious vanishing, Wheeler imposes martial law and a national curfew, sequesters First Lady Anne Morrow Lindbergh in Walter Reed Hospital, authorizes the arrests of dissident leaders, and shuts down independent radio stations and newspapers. These authoritarian measures arrive late in the novel because they could not have come earlier. They represent the culmination of several previous developments that make them possible. This is one of the novel's most important points: in an established democracy, as opposed to an unstable, coup-plagued society where democracy is struggling to take root, fascism does not burst on the scene but sneaks up on leaders and citizens.⁶ What was once unthinkable becomes permissible only because democratic norms have been incrementally weakened to the point where they can no longer ward off the threat. One of the leaders most opposed to Lindbergh, New York mayor Fiorello La Guardia, courageously calls out Lindbergh's receptivity to fascism, his admiration for Hitler, and his "dyed-in-the-wool" anti-Semitism (304), which are now running "rampant throughout this great land" (305). "It can't happen here?" La Guardia asks. "My friends, it is happening here" (305). "It" is fascism, and Lindbergh is laying the groundwork for its emergence, despite the disclaimers of some of his backers and the denials of Lindbergh himself.

Crucially, in *The Plot Against America* the descent into fascism is enabled by the anti-Semitism festering in American society long before Lindbergh decides to run for

president. At the outset of the novel, the narrator, Philip, recalls his family enjoying a safe, quiet life in New Jersey that made them proud and grateful to be Americans. Although a cause for concern, anti-Semitism lurks in the background or hovers around the edges of their steady lives, taking the form of Father Coughlin's despicable 1930s radio broadcasts from Detroit, Henry Ford's diatribes against Jewish bankers and international Zionists during World War I and the following two decades, the Ku Klux Klan's terrorism against Jews and African-Americans in the South, and memories of Irish gangs before World War I "armed with sticks and rocks and iron pipes" and "seeking vengeance against the Christ-killers" in the Jewish Third Ward of Newark (293)—to name only a few examples of lingering anti-Semitism Roth mentions. In addition to these still-worrisome virulent strains of anti-Semitism, Philip's parents are aware of quiet quotas curbing Jewish admissions to colleges and professional schools, tacit restrictions denying Jews promotions in nearly all corporations, and longstanding prohibitions against Jewish membership in numerous social organizations. But although Philip's parents know anti-Semitism persists, they are not unduly alarmed by it. Before Lindbergh's election they feel their minority status, but they aren't disabled by it. They can manage their awareness of anti-Semitism and keep it in proportion, away from their children, rendering it a source of pain rather than terror, an example of unfairness that could conceivably recede, if never go away, as times change.

Things do change in the novel, though not for the better, with the onset of World War II. In *The Plot Against America*, disillusionment with World War I makes some Americans skeptical about participating in yet another potentially devastating, remote conflict. On the face of it, there is nothing unreasonable about this reluctance to go to war again. But the availability of anti-Semitism—and

the willingness of a charismatic presidential candidate to tap into it—turns the anti-war effort from a possibly defensible choice into an angry crusade.

The charismatic presidential candidate is Lindbergh, a widely admired celebrity whom the public lauds as a “no nonsense realist and plain-talking man” (184), “lean, beloved, [and] handsome” (184), a “rugged individualist” (30) with a “low-key, taciturn, winning way” (179). Lindbergh’s refreshingly unorthodox campaign adds to his widespread appeal. Lindbergh’s likability paves the way for his electoral victory but does not by itself account for it. Here is the formula for his political success: he pins a perceived external threat (the danger of America entering the European war) on an already marginalized minority group: the Jews who are advocating for the United States to side with Britain and oppose Nazi Germany.

Lindbergh acknowledges that “a few far-sighted Jewish people” (13) realize the danger of going to war.

But the majority still do not...We cannot blame them for looking out for what they believe to be their own interests, but we must also look out for ours. We cannot allow the natural passions and prejudices of other peoples to lead our country to destruction. (13)

Far from endangering American democracy, Lindbergh claims he is going “to preserve American democracy by preventing America from taking part in another world war” (30) and by refusing to let self-interested “other peoples”—the un-American, pro-war Jews—impose their destructive will on the largely Christian majority. “Our” interests, he tells his adoring audience, must triumph over “theirs.” “We”—the majority—have the right to rule, and “we” must put America first, stopping the seditious enemies from within who elevate the priorities of their own group ahead of the general good. Staying out of the war abroad thus acquires new urgency by Lindbergh

linking it to winning a war at home: a war against a selfish minority who pose an even greater threat to America than Hitler, whose attack on Russia has made him, in Lindbergh’s eyes, “the world’s greatest safeguard against the spread of Communism and its evils” (83). Some of Lindbergh’s supporters, such as the German-American Bund, take the further step of identifying Communism itself with Judaism, pledging “to combat the Moscow-directed madness of the Red world menace and its Jewish bacillus-carriers” (176).

“Keep America out of the Jewish War” (177) proves to be an immensely popular rallying cry, with something for just about everyone. Lindbergh’s hard-core Republican supporters, his base, buy into his message every step of the way. Still others—Democrats as well as Republicans—sign on despite their misgivings about the anti-Semitism undergirding Lindbergh’s anti-war stance. For these supporters, some of them prominent Jewish leaders, calling the European war “Jewish” gives them pause instead of intensifying their commitment to Lindbergh. But they swallow their discomfort and excuse their support in a variety of ways: by accepting Lindbergh as a duly elected president and using the democratic electoral process to legitimize him; by letting their opposition to the war override their uneasiness with his bigotry; and by trusting that the courts, the Congress, and public opinion will keep Lindbergh’s animosity toward the Jews in check—keep it on the level of ugly campaign rhetoric, something Lindbergh says to attract and keep voters as opposed to something he enacts as government policy.

One Jewish leader in particular, Rabbi Bengelsdorf, goes to great lengths to explain how he can be one of the “few far-sighted Jewish people,” as Lindbergh would have it, who oppose the war and back Lindbergh. Bengelsdorf goes so far as to say, “I want Charles Lindbergh to be my president not in

spite of my being a Jew but because I am a Jew—an *American Jew*” (36). Casting his lot with America overrides the anxiety Bengelsdorf criticizes in other, less trusting and not-so-assimilated Jews. According to Bengelsdorf, even Lindbergh’s comfort with Hitler, Mussolini, and other foreign dictators can be redeemed as his siding with allies who will help protect America against Soviet communism, not expose it to destructive foreign wars. Thanks to Bengelsdorf and others, Americans could be reassured that with Lindbergh’s election

nothing had changed other than that FDR was no longer in office. America wasn't a fascist country and wasn't going to be... There was a new president and a new Congress but each was bound to follow the law as set down in the Constitution. They were Republicans, they were isolationist, and among them, yes, there were anti-Semites—as indeed there were among the southerners in FDR's own party—but that was a long way from their being Nazis. (55)

This exoneration of Lindbergh grades his anti-Semitism on a curve and shields it from stiffer opposition by setting it apart from unabashed Nazism. One of Philip’s relatives calls Bengelsdorf’s attempt to normalize Lindbergh “koshering [him] for the goyim” (40): that is, making it safe for otherwise discomfited non-Jewish voters to play down or look away from Lindbergh’s anti-Semitism and support him with a clear conscience because a Jewish leader was backing him, too. A fanatically loyal base, joined by more or less enthusiastic moderate voters, makes Lindbergh’s support broad as well as deep, with polls showing that he “continued to be supported by a record eighty to ninety percent of every classification and category of voter, except the Jews” (243).

Philip’s family and some of their friends are among the outliers. As I noted earlier, Philip’s family at the outset of the novel identify themselves as Jews and Americans, while

remaining aware that Father Coughlin and others stigmatize their Jewishness and reject their claim to belong. With Lindbergh’s election, this peripheral anti-Semitism enters the mainstream. Disturbing but avoidable anti-Semitic background noise turns into hateful comments Philip’s family now hears every day, from politicians, commentators and journalists, and random other people, as when on a vacation to Washington, D.C. strangers on two separate occasions call Philip’s father a “loud-mouthed Jew” because of his outspoken praise of Roosevelt and disgust for Lindbergh. Repulsed by the opposition to Lindbergh expressed by Philip’s father, one elderly lady swears, “I’d give anything to slap his face” (65).

From being at home in America, Philip’s family members and friends thus become unwanted aliens, newly aware of their Jewishness, feeling vulnerable and exposed by it, even sometimes ashamed. Philip recalls how, as a nine-year old child after Lindbergh’s election, he began to learn what not to talk about, how to lie low and deflect attention, as if he had something to hide or disavow: “I must already have begun to think of myself as a little criminal because I was a Jew” (167). Roth vividly captures the frustration, isolation, disbelief, and fear that grip Philip’s family after Lindbergh is elected president. “They live in a dream, and we live in a nightmare” (76), his exasperated father exclaims of Lindbergh’s supporters. “Can you believe these people?” he asks. “This fascist dog is *still* their hero” (126). Making matters even more intolerable, “these people” include members of Philip’s own family: his aunt Evelyn, who falls in love with Rabbi Bengelsdorf and shares his enthusiasm for Lindbergh; Philip’s cousin Alvin, who enlists in the Canadian army to fight in the war, only to return maimed, embittered, and disillusioned with the Jewish cause; and Philip’s older brother Sandy, who sides with Lindbergh and his aunt Evelyn. Sandy calls his father a dictator even

worse than Hitler because he won't let him attend a Lindbergh White House dinner. Sandy mocks what he dismisses as his father's alarmist, paranoid overreaction to Lindbergh. "You people," he screams at his own parents, are fools for buying into the groundless hysteria opponents of Lindbergh are spreading (230-31).

For that outburst and others, Sandy's mother smacks him across the face, not once but twice, and his father threatens to kick him out of the house, much as he angrily ejects Evelyn from a contentious family dinner and gets into a vicious fight with Alvin. With "Lindbergh's spirit hovering over everything" (75), invading vacation trips and family get-togethers as well as dominating politics, Philip's close-knit family comes apart. Invective and insults destroy conversation; violence takes over when persuasion fails. Even within the family, dialogue across political differences has become one more casualty of the extreme polarization that has infused every aspect of life and made peaceful coexistence between anti- and pro-Lindbergh citizens untenable.

No longer a begrudgingly tolerated minority but now openly besieged and despised, Jews who oppose the massively popular Lindbergh have few opportunities for resistance. A rag-tag volunteer militia called the Provisional Jewish Police gets put together but no one expects this "handful of flops," this collection of "the callous and the obtuse and the mentally deficient," to provide any serious protection (271). Moving to Canada comes up as a possibility, only to be rejected by Philip's father, who asks, "Why don't *they* leave?" (197): "Then *we* will have a wonderful country" (197). But they aren't going anywhere and Philip's parents can no more get them to leave or change than they can control their own Lindbergh-supporting son, no matter how many times they slap him or yell at him. Powerless, "all the Jews could do was worry" (55). At one point, Philip fears that his father

has committed suicide because he couldn't take any more of Lindbergh's anti-Semitism or do anything about it. The situation has become that desperate.

Lindbergh and his plane disappear in early October 1942, never to be seen again. During his short term as president, he keeps his promise to stay out of the European war. In addition, he continues his overtures to Hitler and other foreign despots. At home, he establishes an Office of American Absorption, which, under the auspices of a program called Just Folks, launches relocation initiatives aimed at dispersing Jewish communities and "encouraging America's religious and national minorities to become further incorporated into the larger society" (85). Under Lindbergh's watch, FBI surveillance of suspected dissidents, including Alvin and Philip's father, is ramped up. Whereas Lindbergh's supporters applaud these steps, his opponents see them as ominous proto-fascist attacks on Jews and others. These anxious but isolated opponents of Lindbergh wonder how far he will go or, more exactly, how far his fervid backers will let him go. The capacity of these supporters for accepting everything Lindbergh does seems limitless. As Roth observes, Lindbergh could have announced that, following a White House dinner with the Nazi foreign minister, "the First Lady would be inviting Adolf Hitler and his girlfriend to spend the Fourth of July weekend as vacation guests in the Lincoln bedroom of the White House and still have been cheered by his countrymen as democracy's savior" (179-80). Anything now seems possible: Lindbergh's supporters have given him a blank check. As Walter Winchell, one of Lindbergh's most trenchant critics in the novel, asks, "And who's next [after the Jews], Mr. and Mrs. America, now that the Bill of Rights is no longer the law of the land and the racial haters are running the show?" "Who else among us is no longer welcome in Adolf Lindbergh's Aryan America?" (229).

As mentioned earlier, the premature end of Lindbergh's presidency allows Acting President Wheeler to step in and answer Winchell's questions. Under Wheeler, hints of fascism mushroom into the real thing: imposition of martial law, shuttering of radio stations and newspapers, arrests of oppositional leaders, and so on. What is striking about Wheeler's actions is how easily and quickly he takes them. A cowed, fearful majority is prepared to support him and a battered, largely Jewish minority lacks the power to thwart him.

The triumph of fascism feels so inevitable, plausible and effortless that Roth has difficulty figuring out how to reverse it. As many readers of *The Plot Against America* have noted, the ending of the novel has a rushed, deus-ex-machina feel about it. On October 16, 1942, First Lady Anne Morrow Lindbergh speaks up in opposition to Wheeler and secures "the speedy dismantling by Congress and the courts of the unconstitutional Wheeler administration" (319), which had lasted only eight days. On November 3, 1942 Democrats retake the House and Senate and Roosevelt gets reelected president in a landslide victory. And in December 1942 America enters the war without a dissenting vote in the Senate and House, following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and the declaration of war on the United States by Germany and Italy. Here is how the narrator recalls the rapid succession of these events:

But then it was over. The nightmare was over. Lindbergh was gone and we were safe, though never would I be able to revive that unfazed sense of security first fostered in a little child by a big, protective republic and his ferociously responsible parents. (301)

That "big, protective republic" did not turn out to be so hospitable after all. Its sudden restoration as a democracy strikes me as lucky, not earned. I find it tempting to reimagine a novel that itself reimagines history: if the revered Lindbergh had attempted Wheeler's all-out suspension of democracy, he might have pulled it off.

Reconstituting Democracy

At one point in *The Plot Against America*, young Philip hears this typically explosive exchange between his brother Sandy and their mother.

"Lower your voice!" and the tension of the day now so overwhelmed her that she lost her temper, and to the boy she had so painfully missed all summer long, she snapped, "You don't know what you're talking about!"

"But you won't listen," he shouted. "If it wasn't for President Lindbergh—" (96).

"That name again!" (96), Philip recalls feeling. He is sick of hearing about Lindbergh, thinking about him, worrying what he'll do or say next, listening to others arguing endlessly about him. "I would rather have heard a bomb go off than to have to hear one more time the name that was tormenting us all" (96). Philip can neither escape talk about Lindbergh nor stop it from permeating every corner of his life.

In "The Frightening Lessons of Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America*" (2017), Richard Brody picks up on how Lindbergh saturates everyday life in Roth's novel. As Brody observes, Roth "shows how, unbeknownst to a child who has the good fortune to be raised in peace and freedom, so much of daily life depends invisibly but decisively on politics."⁷ With that insight in mind, I turn now to *Talking to Strangers*, where Danielle Allen, by contrast, shows how citizens interacting in everyday life can put pressure on politics.

Here is a key comment signaling the political importance Allen attaches to ordinary interactions among citizens. For reasons I will be exploring shortly, Allen argues that trust is essential to a democracy. She adds,

Trust is not something that politicians alone can create. It grows only among citizens as they rub shoulders in daily life—in supermarkets, at movie theaters, on buses, at amusement parks, and in airports—and

*wherever they participate in maintaining an institution, whether a school, a church, or a business. How can we successfully generate trust in all these contexts? (48)*⁸

Allen's caution that trust is not something "politicians alone can create" reflects her realization that the 1954 Brown decision did not by itself guarantee Elizabeth Eckford admission to Central High School on September 4, 1957. The Brown decision and the Constitutional principles it applied did not make a dent in the racist attitudes of the angry white citizens who kept Elizabeth from going to school that day. In returning to this history, Allen aims at countering the disappointment that sets in when progress stalls. She is reminding us that legislation, court decisions, and elected officials by themselves cannot resolve social crises and sustain democracy without citizens in their everyday lives doing their share.

For democracy to flourish, "powerful citizens" (the title of Allen's concluding chapter) need in their daily interactions with one another to fortify the trust essential to democracy, in tandem with effective leaders and supportive institutions. To clarify what she means by "powerful citizens," Allen draws a striking contrast between an insecure child and a confident adult as they confront others in public life. As Allen notes, parents often tell their children what her mother instructed her, namely, "Don't talk to strangers." It's too dangerous and risky. The image of intimidated, cautious children reappears when Allen goes on to say, "Eyes that drop to the ground when they bump up against a stranger's gaze belong to those still in their political minority" (161)—those still afraid, in other words, to look others in the eye and meet them on equal terms. "Still in their political minority" here means not just being outnumbered but also feeling not yet mature, powerful, or self-assured enough to participate on an equal footing with others in political life, to speak up, and to hold one's own, even when facing opposition.

Fearful people dropping their eyes to the ground recalls young Philip in *The Plot Against America* learning to keep things to himself after Lindbergh's election, to make himself small, inconspicuous, and silent, lest he trigger the wrath of the much more numerous and powerful pro-Lindbergh adults he is encountering. This shrinking from engagement results partly from Philip's youth (he is nine years old) and partly from his becoming aware of his increasingly stigmatized ethnic minority status, which pushes him to the margins of public life, reducing him to an outcast with no way back to the community that is ostracizing him. It's exactly the retreat anti-Semitic, pro-Lindbergh forces want to bring about.

In contrast to defensively recoiling from others, Allen imagines at the other extreme "how the most powerful citizen in the United States"—the United States President—experiences talking to strangers. Presidents, she suggests, find these encounters not threatening but "empowering." For United States presidents, Allen goes so far as to say, "the polity holds no intimidating strangers":

Presidents greet everyone and look all citizens in the eye. This is not merely because they are always campaigning, but because they have achieved the fullest possible political maturity. Their ease with strangers expresses a sense of freedom and empowerment. At one end of the spectrum of styles of democratic citizenship cowers the four-year-old in insecure isolation; at the other, stands the president, strong and self-confident. The more fearful we citizens are of speaking to strangers, the more we are docile children and not prospective presidents; the greater the distance between the president and the rest of us, the more we are subjects, not citizens. Talking to strangers is a way of claiming one's political majority and with it, a presidential ease and sense of freedom. (161)

This stirring advice urges us to move beyond "insecure isolation," fearful acquiescence, and cowering self-concealment toward the full exercise of our rights as

democratic citizens, much like Elizabeth setting out to attend Central High School that day in 1957. Allen urges us to claim our political majority, our right to participate and matter, not by helplessly complying with what people in power demand of us but by asserting ourselves with the assuredness and “sense of freedom and empowerment” that put presidents at ease with strangers. All citizens in a democracy should share this presidential confidence and should see themselves as “prospective presidents,” not as forever docile subjects. Allen’s exhortation echoes the encouragement offered by Emerson and other classic American writers committed to strengthening participation in American democracy. “Trust thyself,” Emerson similarly tells his readers in “Self-Reliance.” Democratic citizens should step forward like adults, “not minors and invalids in a protected corner, not cowards fleeing before a revolution, but guides, redeemers and benefactors.” The self-confidence Emerson is encouraging recalls for him “the nonchalance of boys who are sure of dinner, and would disdain as much as a lord to do or say aught to conciliate one.”⁹ Democracy requires that level of assertiveness.

Instead of disdainful lords and sure-of-themselves, nonchalant boys, Allen invokes United States presidents as her model for interacting with others. But as both Emerson and Allen realize, none of these models is perfect. *The Plot Against America* brings home the point that there is a spectrum of styles of presidential leadership as well as of democratic citizenship. The examples of Lindbergh and Wheeler show that some presidents can be invested not in creating trust among citizens but in destroying it. These presidents capitalize on bigotry and brand some citizens as aliens who should be feared, silenced, and suspected. They want these targeted people, stigmatized as threatening strangers, to feel anxious, to avert their gaze from the more powerful, and to retreat in shame and fear, as Philip does. In addition

to attacking some people, these presidents solicit the unwavering loyalty of others, who feel grateful that their leader, like a protective guardian, has shielded them from the outsiders they distrust. Unending fear, stoked by Lindbergh/Wheeler-like divisive presidents, ends up reducing all citizens to infantilized subjects, either dependent on the leader for protection or shrinking from his wrath.

Racism is toxic to democracy, Allen reminds us, in part because it destroys trust.

Even under these dark circumstances, citizens can exert their authority and keep alive the democratic values their elected leaders are betraying—or so I want to argue, extending Allen’s emphasis on powerful citizens regenerating trust in their everyday interactions with one another. *The Plot Against America* illustrates what I mean here by dark circumstances, but I can cite *Talking to Strangers* as well. Allen’s chief historical example of attempted social change—Elizabeth trying to attend school—revives the vilification of others that the fictional Lindbergh/Wheeler regime unleashes. In Allen’s example, angry local residents block progress at the expense of a young woman attempting to go to school as a unanimous Supreme Court decision authorized her to do. “Unanimous” is worth emphasizing because even a bipartisan ruling turns out to be ineffectual in forestalling the fierce opposition the decision triggers. As Elizabeth walks to the school, community anxiety, fear, and hatred collide with a young woman’s hopes, rights, and excitement—and the hostile community wins, at least initially. Protest signs reading “Race Mixing is Communism” and “Stop the Race Mixing March of the Anti-Christ” add

to the racist invective pouring down on Elizabeth as she heads back to her bus stop defeated, her entry into the school denied. Elizabeth has done what Allen says a citizen in a democracy should be entitled to do. She has acted on her rights, tried to claim her political majority, and lost.

Ideally, citizens stay engaged in a democracy not because things always go their way but because when they don't, these citizens retain hope for the future.

A second historical example from *Talking to Strangers* echoes this disgusting incident and offers a sobering lesson for believers in American democracy. Allen cites a June 2000 *New York Times* story noting a rise in the nation's unemployment rate, "with blacks and Hispanics absorbing most of the loss" of jobs. This story is juxtaposed with another one on the same page showing Wall Street investors cheering the news because they hope the slowing economy will mean that the Federal Reserve might be finished raising interest rates. For Allen, mixed responses like these are the norm, not the exception, even in a democratic society, which at any given moment resembles a zero-sum game more than we might care to admit. A snapshot of American society at any one time, like the opposed stories on the *New York Times* page, is going to include winners and losers, with the very same development enabling some people to come out ahead while others fall behind. In a chapter entitled "Sacrifice, a Democratic Fact," Allen argues that the distribution of wealth, power, and

advantage will inevitably be uneven at any given time in a society, a painful fact that is especially difficult to accept in a democracy: "The hard truth of democracy is that some citizens are always giving up things for others" (28-29). This is a hard truth because citizens rightly bring to democracy expectations of fairness, respect, and consideration, only to be periodically disappointed, as Cavell also reminds us in the passage I quoted at the outset. Our sense of autonomy is always getting waylaid by compromises with others who push back against what we pursue; our right to consent is always coming up against outcomes that appear out of our control.

I appreciate how Allen does not sugarcoat this recurrent experience of loss. The people protesting Elizabeth's admission to Central High School felt deeply aggrieved, wronged by what they regarded as a remote Supreme Court decision hostile to their values. They resented having to share with others what they regarded as their school, and they took out on Elizabeth their loss of control, fear of change, and outrage. The depth of their feelings does not in any way excuse their reprehensible behavior. But it does pose a problem that finally getting Elizabeth enrolled in the school was not by itself going to resolve.

Elizabeth's eventual admission as a student also was not going to make up for what happened to her on that shocking day. Her treatment by citizens in her community was disgusting, abusive, and terribly unfair. Although in hindsight her sacrifice may have one day enabled larger gains, for example by the civil rights movement, it still can't be explained away or minimized. Her pain that day shadowed whatever progress may have resulted from it.

As I have been stressing throughout this essay, loss—along with the disappointment, anger, and discouragement it spawns—keeps coming back in a democratic society, shaking our confidence in it. Here is why trust is essential to democracy. Ideally, citizens stay

engaged in a democracy not because things always go their way but because when they don't, these citizens retain hope for the future: hope that the system will be ultimately fair to them, that the sacrifices they are making today will be offset, if not overcome, by opportunities on down the line. Citizens who stay committed to a democracy, in other words, trust that others won't permanently exploit or forget them, that the status quo is not terminally rigged against them, and that they are not going to come out on the short end over and over again. Healthy democracies, that is to say, deal with the disappointment they continuously generate by keeping "winners" and "losers" fluid, always open to reconstitution, not hard-and-fast divisions. In vibrant democracies, the majority rules while accepting the provisional status of their ascendancy and making sure that no group's legitimate priorities get forever lost or put permanently on hold. As Allen says very well, "The central challenge for democracy is to develop methods for making majority decisions that, despite their partiality, also somehow incorporate the reasonable interests of those who have voted against those decisions, for otherwise minorities would have no reason to remain members in a democratic polity" (xix). Winners in a democracy should always be looking out for those currently on the losing end, making sure they have a good reason to keep playing the game.¹⁰ As an example of winners looking out for others, picture the investors described earlier applauding an economic downturn while keeping in mind the workers the downturn hurts, say by making sure an adequate safety net keeps these workers from giving up.

This need to keep "winners" and "losers" open to change reminds us why racism, anti-Semitism, and other forms of prejudice are lethal to democracy: they freeze what ought to be the free circulation of loss and opportunity, locking the haves and the have nots into fixed roles, presumably legitimized

by invidious racial, ethnic, and other differences. When interracial antagonism persists, it puts everyone on edge, those at the summit of the social hierarchy as well as those kept at the bottom. Each group eyes the other with suspicion, uneasiness, and fear, and they can only imagine their future together as at best a tense standoff or at worst an out-and-out struggle for self-preservation. Neither scenario makes good on the democratic hope that we can benefit from sharing the world the others.

Racism is toxic to democracy, Allen reminds us, in part because it destroys trust. As she puts it, "At its best, democracy is full of contention and fluid disagreement but free of settled patterns of mutual disdain. Democracy depends on trustful talk among strangers and, properly conducted, should dissolve any divisions that block it" (xiii). Democracies, in other words, depend on citizens feeling safe with one another, willing to entrust their fate to others serving on juries, voting in elections, enforcing laws, and maintaining institutions. But when racial, gender, and other divisions undermine that trust, democracies degenerate into power struggles. Talk across differences devolves into the mutual accusations, violence, and shouting matches that tear apart Philip's family, not to mention the curses rained down on Elizabeth as she walks to school.

No one is more entitled to disappointment in democracy than members of marginalized groups who, like Elizabeth, experience the full brunt of racism and are understandably inclined to lose hope that the majority will ever treat them fairly. Allen astutely pictures these groups facing a range of options, all of which I see surfacing in *The Plot Against America* when Philip's family struggles with disillusionment in an America where anti-Semitism is getting the upper hand.

In the first option mentioned by Allen—the most optimistic option—distrust of the electoral majority on the part of stigmatized

groups is somehow overcome and converted into trust. For the moment, I will let “somehow” stay vague here and the passive voice evade how this happens. But first I want to note how *The Plot Against America* approaches this outcome when toward the very end of the novel, American democracy comes back to life and ends the short-lived imposition of fascism. We don’t, however, see the Jewish community’s intensified distrust of the Christian majority growing into trust. The lingering suspicions felt by Philip’s family are one more sign that the rapid-fire series of events restoring democracy are more fortuitous than achieved. The sudden resumption of democracy leaves intact the disenchantment that the Lindbergh election and Wheeler administration have bred. Even though “the nightmare was over,” Philip will never again be able to revive “that unfazed sense of security” he felt as a little child (301). The final chapter of the novel is accordingly entitled “perpetual fear,” echoing its first sentence: “Fear presides over these memories, a perpetual fear” (1). Anxiety, uneasiness, and suspicion are here to stay in Philip’s life.

Withdrawal from the community that has turned against them can be another option for groups whose trust in democracy has been shaken. Some Jews do leave the United States in *The Plot Against America*, usually by going to Canada. Although leaving America tempts Philip’s family, they decide to stick it out, determined somehow to reclaim their right to count as Americans. But their determination to stay is always riddled with second thoughts about going away and leaving behind the hostility that they face.

In still another option mentioned by Allen, an oppressed group can rebel against the larger community and fight back. In *The Plot Against America*, resistance to Lindbergh comes from a few courageous leaders such as La Guardia and columnist Walter Winchell who publicly protest against his policies.

Angry individual citizens, especially Philip’s father, also continue to voice their opposition in heated conversations with friends and family members. But outright collective rebellion against Lindbergh never breaks out. Large scale protests and acts of civil disobedience are rare, partly because Lindbergh’s opponents understandably feel powerless and partly because some of them still hold out hope that the next election will put a stop to what is going on.

In one more option, the state uses military and police force to clamp down on the groups it seeks to exclude. For the dominant ruling group, recourse to force is always tempting, especially when they fear some slippage in their hold on power. In *The Plot Against America*, as we have seen, Acting President Wheeler takes this option by declaring martial law, an extreme measure ostensibly justified by riots breaking out against Jewish communities, synagogues, and businesses in several cities after Lindbergh disappears. Wheeler also arrests oppositional leaders on the fabricated grounds that anti-Lindbergh forces are somehow responsible for Lindbergh’s disappearance.

I called the first possible outcome—the conversion of distrust into trust—the most optimistic because as Allen points out it “alone suits democratic practice” (xix). This outcome expands and diversifies the majority to include the marginalized groups some members of that majority want to shut out. In this option, the claim of these groups to political majority, their bid to count as citizens, finally gets welcomed, not rejected. Opening up schools, elections, occupations, and public spaces redefines despised outsiders as trusted fellow citizens. The challenge I am addressing in this essay is how to bring about this resolution in a disappointing society that has broken down and is headed in an anti-democratic direction. To borrow from *The Plot Against America*, how can this democratic outcome be achieved in a world

where distrust is supplanting trust, hatred is shattering community, and a divisive president is stirring up ethnic tensions, cheered on by a xenophobic majority, a compliant Congress, and some complicit cultural and political leaders?

A striking quotation from Ralph Ellison provides the epigraph to Allen's book and points the way toward resisting a democratic society succumbing to fascism. In "Working Notes to Juneteenth," Ellison writes of America, "This society is not likely to become free of racism, thus it is necessary for Negroes to free themselves by becoming their idea of what a free people should be." By acknowledging that American society "is not likely to become free of racism," Ellison is confirming the claim that is my starting point in this essay, namely, that American society is always going to arouse not only hope and pride but also disappointment, rejection, and anger, in this case by perpetuating racism, one of the most destructive impediments to democracy. Ellison finds, however, even from within the imperfect context of American society possibilities for liberation, which he describes as oppressed groups becoming "their idea of what a free people should be": modeling, in other words, the kind of community they want the larger society to become.

This is a crucial shift in emphasis. Instead of waiting in frustration for others to change (as when Philip's exasperated father says of Lindbergh's unwavering supporters, "Can you believe these people?" [see above, 6]), Ellison urges us to explore what we can achieve on our own from within the oppressive circumstances we want to transform. Although attempts at persuasion continue, Ellison encourages advocates for democratic change not to hold back until others are ready to join them but instead to go first, to strike out on their own and exemplify the values they hope more people will one day embrace.¹¹ Persuasion gets supplemented, not by ineffectual force,

as when Philip's put-out parents slap their Lindbergh-loving son, but by the power of example, as when Elizabeth rises above the angry mob blocking her way to Central High School.

I applaud how Allen takes Ellison's injunction and translates it into our implementing here and now in our everyday relations with others what she calls the practices of political friendship.¹² By "practices of political friendship," I take Allen to mean, among other things, displaying to others—strangers very much included—the good will and mutual respect friends show one another; demonstrating to others a willingness to share power and take turns exercising control; making sure in our relationships with others that concessions even out over time, as opposed to one party always giving in to the other. In the spirit of political friendship, Allen notes, "each friend moderates her own interests for the sake of preserving the friendship" (126)—moderates her own interests, not suppresses them, for the sake of sharing the world with others and affirming their interdependence.

Allen has in mind the practices, not the feelings, of political friendship. She is not saying we should all suddenly pretend to be the best of friends, and she faults sappy Hollywood interracial buddy movies for suggesting that the contrived attainment of fellow feeling solves everything. In the everyday interactions that Allen is recommending, we are talking to strangers, not attacking or shunning them but also not presuming unearned intimacy with them. In these interactions, tensions and disagreements are invariably going to surface without, however, exploding into acrimonious, no-holds-barred battles. Mutually acceptable resolutions are going to get pieced together, not once and for all but day in and day out, as conflicts flare up, get worked through, and die down, only to come back to life again.

Allen, in short, is proposing that we treat strangers as we ideally treat our friends: respectfully working things out with them, not automatically turning them into enemies, as we shop together in crowded supermarkets, work together, and, in general, “rub shoulders in daily life” (see above, 9). Allen is right to remind us that over time these everyday interactions help shape public attitudes and put pressure on elections, legislative hearings, and other activities we may be inclined to seal off in some independent political realm. As Allen concludes, “Political order is secured not only by institutions, but also by ‘deep rules’ that prescribe specific interactions among citizens in public spaces; citizens enact what they are to each other not only in assemblies, where they make decisions about their mutually intertwined fates, but also when, as strangers, they speak to one another, or don’t, or otherwise respond to each other’s presence” (10). The influence on politics of how citizens respond to one another in everyday life is admittedly gradual, subtle, and cumulative, more like the impact of daily exercise than dramatic life-saving surgery. But tending to the “deep rules” of a society slowly but surely delimits how far political leaders can go, whether these leaders are promoting democratic values or subverting them. Even under the most challenging circumstances, everyday interactions with others can regenerate mutual trust and help counteract top-down assaults on it.²³

The Plot Against America indirectly illustrates this point when, as we have seen, it shows fascism gaining momentum by monopolizing the everyday interactions I have been describing. Earlier I cited Richard Brody’s sharp observation about how in *The Plot Against America* “so much of daily life depends invisibly but decisively on politics.” I think this is the case not because it has to be, but because Lindbergh’s election in the novel is so sudden and unanticipated that it swamps everything else and suffuses every

conversation, like an unpredicted, devastating storm people can’t get off their minds. The sudden end of the Lindbergh nightmare means that citizens in their everyday interactions have not yet had the chance to repair trust in one another: hence the residual uneasiness Philip feels even after Roosevelt’s landslide reelection. Earning the restoration of democracy at the conclusion of the novel, making it stick, will depend not only on responsive institutions and thoughtful leaders but also on citizens implementing democratic values in their daily dealings with one another.

I noted earlier that the power of example can supplement persuasion. Allen rightly makes much of the moving example Elizabeth sets as she tries to enter what she now has a right to call her school, despite the vitriolic denials of the community that is obstructing her. Elizabeth’s dignity, composure, and quiet anguish stand in sharp contrast to the racist invective swirling around her. Elizabeth’s dress, which she herself made for the first day of school, is especially important in this scene. The dress is partly made of equal black and white squares, a checkerboard pattern that Allen interprets as representing the post-segregationist future that the Brown decision intended to achieve. Allen calls the dress Elizabeth’s flag for the project of reshaping American society: the only form of speech available to Elizabeth at the time but forceful nevertheless in its impact on others and in fortifying Elizabeth’s own resolve. “The important thing,” Allen says, is

that the symbolic required real power, real fashioning, on Elizabeth’s part. Her ability to subdue matter to form with her skirt no doubt helped secure her belief in the possibility of doing the same with her fellow citizens, and her conviction that eventually she and they would together reweave their social fabric. The dress may well have reassured her of her ability to help reform the future. (23)

As Elizabeth walked silently to and from the school, her homemade dress became her way, “the only one available to her, of talking to strangers” (23), whether the community members who were shouting at her or the viewers watching from afar. For Allen, the dress—simple, handmade, self-designed—“provides an example of the powerful inventiveness that belongs to the true democratic citizen” (24).

With Elizabeth’s dress as an example, I see Allen encouraging us to reconceive how we can influence others—not just through verbal arguments, emotional outbursts, or top-down directives but also through works of imagination: pictures, gestures, stories, and, in Elizabeth’s case, a personally made dress. “Happily,” Allen goes on to say, “a photographer was there to amplify what Elizabeth had to say” (24) that September day: “happily,” because that photographer’s art extended the reach of Elizabeth’s example in ways she could never anticipate or count on. Just as happily, I would add, the larger community was ready to allow Elizabeth’s quiet heroism to move them into eventually supporting the civil rights legislation needed to reinforce the Supreme Court Brown decision.

I am not drawing a straight line from Elizabeth’s dress to the 1965 Voting Rights Act. Many other forces had to do their part to let Elizabeth’s experience serve as impetus for advancing a larger cause. Although not an all-powerful weapon, Elizabeth’s dress plays a role both in affecting others and in bolstering Elizabeth’s own determination to keep at the extremely hard work she was engaged in. Abstracting the passage of legislation from the complex process enabling it shortchanges what citizens can do along the way to promote democratic progress. I would go so far as to say that Elizabeth’s story illustrates how social change typically occurs, not in one fell swoop but when others are primed to pick up on cues to act and go

further wherever these prompts may occur. Kwame Anthony Appiah makes this point well when he calls into question “the myth of self-deliverance.” As Appiah notes, a minority group under assault “isn’t a colony that can rise up and overthrow the forces of oppression on its own.” Instead, “it needs the help of other people who recognize the struggle for equality as a moral one, universally binding.”¹⁴ With *Talking to Strangers* as my guide, I have been suggesting that everyday interactions can fortify this readiness to join the struggle for equality. A homemade dress can play a role, too.

Responding to the Inevitable Failures of Democracy

I started out this essay endorsing Stanley Cavell’s comment on the crucial need to respond to the “inevitable failures” of democracy “otherwise than by excuse or withdrawal.” As we have seen, *The Plot Against America* imagines a major failure of democracy: the election of a divisive leader with autocratic leanings who is willing to exploit anti-Semitism, intensify fear, court foreign dictators such as Hitler, and ease the way for fascism. Excuses for accepting Lindbergh abound in *The Plot Against America*. Some rabid supporters of Lindbergh embrace him without a second thought. Other supporters, however, arrive at rationalizations for backing him, for example, by arguing that his anti-war position justifies stomaching his anti-Semitism, or by reducing his anti-Semitism to a merely rhetorical campaign strategy aimed at getting votes. The complicity of these supporters, enabled by the special pleading they indulge in, shows why excusing the failures of democracy is so devastating. After all, Lindbergh is just being Lindbergh. But his acquiring presidential power, far from toning down his anti-Semitism, magnifies its impact. Electing him president, no matter

how his supporters justify it, permits anti-Semitism to flourish and make new inroads into politics, everyday life, and culture. Especially when reinforced by Allen's reminder that racism is radically at odds with democracy, *The Plot Against America* underscores this crucial point: in a democracy, racism in a leader is inexcusable and disqualifying—period. It can't be worked around, normalized, or subordinated to some greater goal without doing serious damage. The harm racism sooner or later does to a democracy cancels out any attempt to make do with it.

If costly rationalizations for supporting Lindbergh proliferate in *The Plot Against America*, the temptation to withdraw from a backsliding democracy makes itself felt in *Talking to Strangers*. The failure of democracy that concerns Allen occurs when a society allows those who come out ahead and those who fall behind to become hard-and-fast categories. Racism again plays a major role in segmenting society that way. Seeing the system stacked against them, people who keep coming out on the losing end sometimes imagine escaping the system, say by moving elsewhere or by dropping out of political life. Both options promise relief from the pain and frustration of continuing to hope for fair treatment, only to be disappointed over and over again. Allen counters the temptation to withdraw by expanding our sense of how we can make a difference in politics to include what we can do in everyday life to promote change, without waiting for

others to come along. Voting, taking political stands, and influencing legislators remain necessary to democratic progress—but not sufficient. They do not exhaust how we can influence politics. In addition to allowing our everyday interactions with others to count politically, Allen renews our appreciation for what we need to do outside of politics to sustain our determination to stay engaged. When Elizabeth sewed her dress, she wasn't wasting her time.

I return to young Philip's weariness when he listens to yet another argument over Lindbergh: "That name again!" he groans (96). As children sometimes do, Philip is registering and voicing what other characters are also feeling: he is inundated, at a saturation point, discouraged. Lindbergh is achieving one goal of autocratic leaders, which is to dominate every conversation and sap our energy, monopolize our attention, and crowd out what we can do to counteract them. The incessant drumbeat of "Lindbergh" is making Philip feel even more powerless. I am suggesting in this essay that we should trust the weariness Philip is feeling and use it, not as a reason for retreating from politics but as an incentive for nurturing what Lindbergh-like leaders try to destroy, namely, the practices of political friendship in everyday life that feed the resiliency of democracy. After reading *The Plot Against America* and *Talking to Strangers*, we would be foolish to underestimate the threats that endanger American democracy. But we would also be foolish to let these threats have the final say. A

Notes

1. Stanley Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 18. Subsequent references are to page number and are inserted in the text.
2. Judith Thurman, "Philip Roth E-Mails on Trump," *The New Yorker*, January 22, 2017. Roth goes on to call Donald Trump's election more improbable than Lindbergh's. According to Roth, Lindbergh was at least a celebrity with genuine accomplishments whereas Trump is "just a con artist."
3. Philip Roth, *The Plot Against America* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004), 13. Subsequent references are to page number and are inserted in the text.
4. Danielle S. Allen, *Talking to Strangers: Anxieties of Citizenship since Brown v. Board of Education* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 3. Subsequent references are to page number and are inserted in the text.
5. Paul Berman, "The Plot Against America," *New York Times Book Review*, October 3, 2004.
6. Several recent studies have reinforced this gradualist picture of authoritarianism emerging from within societies that have allowed democratic institutions and values to erode. See, for example, Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (New York: Crown, 2018).
7. Richard Brody, "The Frightening Lessons of Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America*," *The New Yorker*, February 2017.
8. Alex de Tocqueville also emphasized the importance to democracy of citizens developing trust in one another through everyday interactions. See his classic study *Democracy in America*, Volume 1, Chapter XVII: "Principal Causes Which Tend to Maintain the Democratic Republic in the United States" (1835). Other writers who have extended Tocqueville's point include Robert Putnam (whom Allen cites), especially in *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (1993) and *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (2000). I see Allen applying this line of thought to the disappointing aftermath of the Brown decision as well as reminding us how classical thinkers, in particular Aristotle, also explored "how the expertise of friendship [could] be brought to bear on politics" (140).
9. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance," *Selected Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York: The Modern Library, 1950). pp. 146-47.
10. In *How Democracies Die*, Levitsky and Ziblatt call forbearance one of the "soft guardrails" of American democracy (9). By "forbearance," they mean something similar to what I describe as winners looking out for losers or, in the words of Levitsky and Ziblatt, elected leaders resisting "the temptation to use their temporary control of institutions to maximum partisan advantage" (9).
11. In *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome* Cavell similarly speaks of redirecting our energy from "restraining the bad" in others to "releasing the good" in ourselves (18). Cavell goes on to offer this beautiful tribute to the potential power of example: "a philosopher will naturally think that the other has to be argued out of his position, which is apt to seem hopeless. But suppose the issue is not to win an argument (that may come late in the day) but to manifest for the other another way...a shift in direction, as slight as a degree of the compass, but down the road making all the difference in the world" (31).
12. Allen draws on Aristotle, in particular his *The Art of Rhetoric*, in fleshing out the practices of political friendship. But she also cites what may be a more familiar source: the work on negotiation undertaken by the Harvard Negotiation Project (she mentions *Getting to Yes* [1981] by Roger Fisher and William Ury). I think the literature of dispute resolution continues to be an underutilized resource for observers concerned about the future of democracy.
13. For a brilliant recent example of how talking to strangers might work, see Claudia Rankine's account of her conversation with a fellow passenger on a plane in "Brief Encounters with White Men," *The New York Times Magazine*, July 21, 2019.
14. Kwame Anthony Appiah, "Stonewall and the Myth of Self-Deliverance," *New York Times*, June 23, 2019.

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