

# Athenaeum Review

Issue 7 • Summer 2022

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**Athenaeum Review**  
**Issue 7**

**Summer 2022**

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# **CURRENT AFFAIRS**

# Against Linear History

David Hawkes

David Graeber and David Wengrow,  
*The Dawn of Everything: A New History  
of Humanity*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux,  
692 pp., \$25 paperback, \$35 cloth.

**T**O BE MODERN IS TO PRIVILEGE THE PRESENT OVER THE PAST. It is characteristic of modern people to assume that our cultures and societies are more advanced than those of previous generations. Modernity is unique in this regard however, and the presentism of the modern mind therefore demands explanation. The present can most plausibly be judged to have surpassed the past by material, technological or economic criteria. Modernity therefore assumes that such criteria are the most appropriate means of evaluating progress, which in turn involves the prior assumption that progress is desirable. These assumptions inspire the kind of pop-anthropology to which this book claims to be the antidote. *The Dawn of Everything* is an effective debunking of the self-satisfied narrative of progress espoused by such bestsellers as Yuval Noah Hariri's *Sapiens* (2017) and Jared Diamond's *Guns, Germs and Steel* (1997).

Modern societies are distinguished from their predecessors by their commitment to unceasing change: to never-ending economic growth and, as a result, to permanent social revolution. This faith in social progress is rationalized by analogy with the scientific concept of evolution. The contention that living creatures are formed by adaptation to their environments was never seriously disputed by scientists. Over the course of the nineteenth century, however, it became widely accepted that this adaptation was progressive in nature—that it took the form of evolution. Charles Darwin argued that the sole cause of evolution was competition among individual organisms for scarce resources. Modern thinkers generally, if often unconsciously, applied Darwin's theory of evolution to human society.

Before the modern age, Westerners lived in awe of antiquity. The ruins of Rome seemed so impressive that they were frequently attributed to a race of giants. In contrast, modern Westerners take it for granted that their societies are more highly evolved than those of our ancestors. It appears self-evident to communists and capitalists alike that the industrialized nation-state represents an advance on agrarian feudalism, which in turn represented progress from the primitive hunter-gather cultures of prehistory. From the postmodern standpoint of the twenty-first century, however, we can begin to recognize this assumption as a rationalization of Western imperialism. The West's domination of the world was justified as a process of modernization: often brutal, but nonetheless inevitable, in accordance with the amoral demands of progressive evolution.

In *The Dawn of Everything*, David Graeber and David Wengrow trace this linear conception of history to the earliest encounters between European colonists and native Americans. The book begins with an absorbing account of the “indigenous critique” to which imperialism’s American victims subjected its European perpetrators. The authors argue that the Western notion of history as progress developed in direct response to that critique. Several native American intellectuals recorded their impressions of European society. In 1699, for example, the Huron leader Kandiaronk engaged in a series of debates with the French Governor of Montreal, Hector de Calliere. Kandiaronk’s critique of European culture was disturbingly incisive:

I affirm that what you call “money” is the devil of devils, the tyrant of the French, the source of all evils, the bane of souls and slaughterhouse of the living. To imagine one can live in the country of money and preserve one’s soul is like imagining one can preserve one’s life at the bottom of a lake. Money is the father of luxury, lasciviousness, intrigues, trickery, lies, betrayal, insincerity—of all the world’s worst behavior.

It is impossible at this historical distance to know whether Kandiaronk’s wisdom was originally indigenous, or whether he had already absorbed Plato’s *Republic* or St. Paul’s Epistles. But seventeenth-century Frenchmen could not deny that class conflict, political hierarchy, patriarchy, crime, poverty and other deplorable features of their own society were conspicuous by their absence from native American cultures. Instead, the colonists claimed that Europe’s social problems were the unavoidable price of progress. This argument formed their conception of the non-European world as primitive and underdeveloped. For three centuries, Europeans believed that all “savages” lived in a “state of nature.” This condition might be conceived as good (as in Rousseau) or bad (as in Hobbes), but it was a truth universally acknowledged that it belonged to an earlier phase of human evolution than European civilization.

## **The West's domination of the world was justified as a process of modernization: often brutal, but nonetheless inevitable, in accordance with the amoral demands of progressive evolution.**

Imperialist ideology also determined Europeans' understanding of their own history. Advanced societies like France and England must once, they reasoned, have resembled the primitive cultures of the Mississippi, the Amazon and the Congo. Over the few decades, however, new research in archaeology and anthropology has revealed that the conception of history as a linear narrative is empirically untenable. Once assimilated by the public, this information will deal a severe blow to the West's self-image, and *The Dawn of Everything* is the first book seriously to explore its implications. The discovery of complex civilizations, such as Gobekli Tepe, that flourished tens of thousands of years ago; the revelation that large urban centers like Poverty Point and Teotihuacan are far older than previously assumed; the new insights into nutrition made available by advances in archaeobiology; the elaborate graves and other traces of ultra-ancient civilizations recently exposed by climate change, will force us to reconsider everything we thought we knew about human prehistory.

Earlier anthropologists assumed that until around ten thousand years ago, human beings lived in small, egalitarian, blood-related "bands" of foragers or hunter-gatherers. The evidence no longer supports that assumption: prehistoric societies were much larger, highly organized, wealthy, mobile, leisured and sophisticated, much earlier than we had imagined. We must take seriously the pronouncement of the structuralist guru Claude Levi-Strauss: "Man has always thought equally well." Since the human brain has undergone no significant physical changes in the last fifty thousand years, there is no biological reason to suppose that prehistoric cultures were less intricate or various than our own. This book's central thesis is that the imposition of the capitalist nation-state was not the inevitable culmination of a progressive narrative as Europeans have tended to assume, but a tragic wrong turn leading to a dead end. "The real question," as the Graeber and Wengrow put it, is "how did we get stuck?"

The evidence presented here discredits the idea that civilized history began with an "agricultural revolution," in which the discovery of farming suddenly rendered earlier, foraging cultures obsolete. It now appears that human beings farmed and foraged at the same time for millennia, and that many people experimented with farming only to abandon it. The idea that agriculture necessarily supersedes foraging is

unsustainable. So is the argument that political hierarchies and economic disparities are the ineluctable consequences of complex social structures. The recent information from prehistory shows conclusively that small groups can be hierarchical, and that mass cultures can be egalitarian. Indeed it now seems that ancient American societies were often hierarchical during the hunting season, and egalitarian over the winter.

The difference between Western and indigenous cultures was not that the former was hierarchical and the latter egalitarian. Native American, African, and Australian societies might contain significant disparities in wealth. Unlike European cultures, however, the mere possession of wealth did not allow the rich to rule. There was no systematic means of translating wealth into power. Europeans had such a means: they called it “usury.” Usury attributes independent agency to money. It provided both the motive and the means for imperialism, and thus for the systematic denigration of indigenous cultures that Graeber and Wengrow describe and deplore in this book.

Yet they declare: “This is not the place to outline a history of money and debt.” We are not told why. A footnote refers us to Graeber’s earlier book *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* (2011), which is the most important study of usury published this century. In fact, Graeber establishes usury’s importance so convincingly that it seems hard to justify its omission from this volume. Surely it is difficult to understand Europe’s relentless imperial expansion without acknowledging the driving motor of compound interest? Usury is teleological; it imposes a narrative on history by forcing humanity to pursue economic growth at all costs. This book would have been bolstered by a discussion of financial teleology, which is inseparable from the historical teleology the authors attack so eloquently.

As anarchists Graeber and Wengrow are opposed, above all, to the nation-state. They write as if the nation-state was the real, durable tragedy of imperialism: a political cage in which humanity has become “stuck.” But this claim is contradicted by their acknowledgment that:

... there are now planetary bureaucracies (public and private, ranging from the IMF and WTO to J.P. Morgan Chase and various credit-rating agencies) without anything that resembles a corresponding principle of global sovereignty or global field of competitive politics; and everything from cryptocurrencies to private security agencies, undermining the sovereignty of states.

That is not the only contradiction in this book. Its title alludes to the Romanian anthropologist Mircea Eliade, who claimed that “traditional” societies lack a linear conception of time. According

to Eliade, such cultures envisage quotidian life as mere repetition of the creative gestures made by the gods in the *illo tempore*: “the dawn of everything.” Eliade portrays the emergence of a linear conception of time as a primordial fall from grace, which left humanity a prey to its own tragic notion of history. We might have expected Graeber and Wengrow to agree. They too describe the idea that history is progress as a rationale for tyranny, and as an error that is in the process of being corrected—not least by works like this one.

Yet they go out of their way to distance themselves from Eliade. They find the “political implications” of his argument “unsettling,” and they note that he was “close to the fascist Iron Guard in his student days.” The “political” problem is Eliade’s claim that the teleological view of history was introduced to humanity by “Judaism and the Old Testament.” This elicits an arch response from Graeber and Wengrow:

Being Jewish, the authors of the present book don’t particularly appreciate the suggestion that we are somehow to blame for everything that went wrong in history.... What’s startling is that anyone ever took this sort of argument seriously.

This is an overt lapse into the irrational: lack of appreciation is not an argument but an expression of taste. It is fair to wonder why the authors choose to make their ethnicity an issue. They should not find it “startling” that Eliade’s critique of teleology has been found credible, for they find it credible themselves. Their entire book is based upon it.

So it seems that Graeber and Wengrow object specifically to Eliade’s identification of the “Old Testament” as the earliest emergence of narrative history. It would have been interesting to read their refutation of his argument, but they offer none. Instead, they call him a fascist. Perhaps they protest too much, and their work owes more to Eliade than they wish to admit. But the idea that it was the “Old Testament” that first introduced a narrative conception of history does not seem wildly implausible. To suggest that Jews should find it unpalatable is silly. To smear it by association with the Romanian Iron Guard is unfeasible. When authors are reduced to such tactics, readers may legitimately ask questions about their general approach to evidence and reason. This is an unabashedly polemical work, and that is the fundamental source of its appeal. But we must wait longer for a cool, objective appraisal of the startling information we are now receiving about human prehistory, and its implications for the present and the future.  A

# What a Nation Isn't

Steven Grosby

Samuel Goldman, *After Nationalism: Being American in an Age of Division*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 148pp., \$25 cloth.

**A** SURPRISING FACT, WORTH thinking about when considering what a nation and nationalism are, is that after more than forty years of Islamic rule, it is still not unusual for an educated Iranian to be familiar with the *Shahnameh*, the *Book of Kings*, written around 1000 CE by Abolqasem Ferdowsi. The continuing allure of the epic poem is surprising, because the *Shahnameh* presents an image of Iran that glorifies its pre-Islamic traditions including the Zoroastrian religion, even though it was composed more than three hundred and fifty years after the Muslim conquest of Iran.

It is impossible to read the *Shahnameh* and not conclude that Ferdowsi lamented the Arab conquest. The epic poem begins with a description of the evil monster Zahhak, in league with demonic Iblis, as an Arab, and concludes with the Iranian military hero Rostam's evaluation of the Islamic conquest as having ushered in a time when "strangers ruled Iranians," resulting in "justice and charity having disappeared." Thus, the work, with its

championing of native Iranian tradition, stood at the time of its composition and continues to stand today in tension with the vision of the Islamic *ummah*, the universal community of all believers. What is not surprising is that, shortly after its appearance and subsequently, the *Shahnameh* was, as Michael Cook noted in *Ancient Religions, Modern Politics*, denounced by Islamic scholars and poets as being pernicious, a book of lies, and a book of sins.

What might the continuing appreciation of the *Shahnameh* among some Iranians tell us about what a nation is? Clearly, there have been tensions or a co-mingling of divergent traditions within how "being Iranian" is understood. That there has been and continues to be the self-classificatory category "Iranian," although itself changing over time, for example, from those who were Zoroastrian to those who are Muslim, is beyond dispute; for Iranians have for approximately two thousand years distinguished themselves from those who were born in, or dwell within, different, neighboring territories. This self-classification and its persistence indicates the existence of some kind of national cultural unity, although that unity is, as has been observed, neither uniform nor unchanging. Different meanings and

divergent traditions, including regional loyalties, about what it means to be Iranian are components of that unity. The attempt to homogenize the population by eliminating those divergent traditions, such as the persecution of Baha'is because they are judged as not being able to be members of the Iranian nation, is an example of an intolerant, ideological nationalism.

This kind of tension or co-mingling of divergent traditions within the self-understanding shared by members of a nation is by no means unique to the Iranians. Despite the indifference of both the New Testament, where Christ is everything and he is in everything, and the ultimate jurisdiction of canon law to the national divisions of humanity, there have been national distinctions within Christendom and the church. This ecclesiastical distinctiveness is not simply a matter of administrative jurisdiction; the national distinctions within the church have never been a simple matter. Already at the Council of Constance (1414-1418), as Caspar Hirschi observed in *The Origins of Nationalism*, the word *natio* was used to refer to a cultural, linguistic, and political community with a territory thought to be its own. Thus, while one is surely justified to use the category of Christendom as referring to a cultural unity of all Christians, its universal orientation has, perhaps paradoxically, co-existed with particular territorial kinships, those different “we, the people” (or “the whole community of the land” as in the *Magna Carta*) of nations: where members of a nation, recognizing themselves as being related to one another by virtue of birth or long residence in a bounded area of land, distinguish themselves from other Christians of different nations.

A nation is a social relation of territorial kinship—a kinship where relation between its members is not traced from birth to a

mother or father, but from birth in a territory that is formed over time through the traditions of previous regimes exercising legal authority over it, war, the development of a common language, and religion. Those traditions, unavoidably changing and often contested, of the nation and its territory contribute to the present understanding of individuals as fellow nationals and its territory as a homeland. Thus, the social relation of a nation is formed around two axes: a horizontal, territorial axis; and a temporal axis. No doubt part of the allure of the *Shahnameh* today for some Iranian Shi'ites is that the epic poem allows them to entertain the idea of the persistence of Iran as a nation through time.

What is distinctive of the nation, so that the category is heuristically useful by distinguishing it from other social relations such as the personal relation of a friendship, the economic relation of a business firm competitively producing goods and services for its customers, or the sacred relation of the worshippers of the monotheistic deity of the world religions pursuing an other-worldly salvation, is the significance attributed to territory. To be sure, territorial relations may have an influence on these other social relations. Christianity, which is doctrinally indifferent to questions of territory, has nevertheless developed national saints, as well as, for example, the belief that Mary, Mother of God, saved the Polish nation from the Lutheran Swedes at the battle at the monastery of Czestochowa in 1655. But in these instances, that influence is an accommodation of universal Christianity to the territorial kinship of a nation. But for a nation, a territory is central to its existence; without a territory, or at least an image of a territory, thought to belong to a people, a nation will not exist. How that territory is understood, for example, as a land of liberty for Americans



or as a Buddhist holy land for Sinhalese or a land where Bengali (and not Urdu) is spoken for Bangladeshis, will differ over time and from one nation to another.

## "We're only a partially achieved nation."

Contrary to what is often asserted by many political scientists and historians who often have little or no interest beyond modern history, the national divisions of humanity long predate the Protestant Reformation, the Augsburg Confession, and the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia. As noted previously, the participants at the Council of Constance were organized by nation. Nations, their bounded territories, and national states are not exclusive to what is referred to as "modernity." After all, one already finds an understanding of the national divisions of humanity in the classifications employed in Genesis 10. Moreover, recognition of national distinctiveness is by no means European in origin. It was not exported to the other, putatively innocent parts of the world, as wrongly insisted upon by the overly facile idea of "orientalism." As I observed in *Nations and Nationalism in World History*, both the medieval Koreans and Vietnamese understood themselves and their lands to be different from the Chinese and China, even though they shared aspects of a neo-Confucian culture. And the Buddhist Sinhalese have for a thousand years, if not longer, understood the island of Sri Lanka to be a distinctive holy land. While it is appropriate to recognize trans-national neo-Confucian and Buddhist cultural unities or civilizations, within those cultural unities, as it is within Christendom, there have been

national divisions, the result of which has been a coming together of different, often divergent traditions within each of those nations.

In the history of medieval Christianity, the 1192 papal bull *Cum Universi* of Celestine III (more than one hundred years before Scotland's declaration of independence, the 1320 "Declaration of Arbroath") formally recognized a Scottish church independent from Canterbury and York. At times this co-existence within Christendom between national and civilizational traditions has been an uneasy one, for example, the 1682 "Declaration of Gallican liberties," the origin of which can certainly be traced back to the end of the thirteenth century during the reign of Philip the Fair. At other times, the tension between a universal Christian brotherhood and nationality has been doctrinally but not historically ameliorated, abetted by the architectonic of *exitus* and *reditus* of Aquinas's *Summa* and the idea of subsidiarity. Thus, the Church has long recognized the patriotic attachment to one's nation as natural, but at the same time subordinating the love of one's homeland to the greater love of all of humanity and God. Pope John Paul II was a Polish patriot. (For a discussion of patriotism as distinct from nationalism in the Catholic tradition, see my "National Identity, Nationalism, and the Catholic Church," accessible at Oxford Handbooks Online). Nevertheless, especially in the aftermath of the reforms of Pope Gregory VII at the end of the eleventh century, the tension has been acute, such as with Thomas Becket, memorialized for us by T.S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*. Becket was, as Chancellor, the loyal defender of the interests of the king, yet, as Archbishop, also defender of the interests of the church against the king. One doesn't need the spurious idea of postmodernism to account for the existence of multiple and conflicting loyalties.

A more realistic, although complicated, understanding of a nation is, to adapt a characterization of the historian of nations and nationalism John Hutchinson, as a cultural zone of both unity and conflict. There has to be a configuration of traditions—a cultural unity—that sustains the nation, yet that unity is not uniform. Most nations have a number of different religions, languages, and pronounced regionalism that may be sources of conflict. There are even some national states that exert rule over minority nations. Moreover, other orientations or interests create complications for the territorial kinship of the nation. The previously discussed universal community of all believers of the world religions is an obvious one, but economic relations may be another, for example, disputes over free trade and mercantilism.

These kinds of divergent traditions are not the only tensions found within the “we” of any nation. The temporal depth or temporal axis of a nation is another source of tension; for, while bringing the past into the present provides a source for stability, no tradition, however cherished, can be maintained over time without modification. While the Iranians and Armenians have existed for more than a thousand years, they are different from what they were in, say, the seventh century. The Koreans, Vietnamese, and Sinhalese of the eleventh century are different from what they are today; the French and English of the thirteenth century are different from the French and English of the twenty-first century. There are continuities, but there are also disruptions. Nations disappear from the historical record such as the Moabites and Babylonians, while new ones, such as the Americans, arise.

There are important continuities between being an American in 1789 and being an American today: fidelity to the Constitution and its Bill of Rights; a religious tradition; a common language;

and, while its territory has expanded across the continent, its core has remained. But within that continuity there obviously were different traditions, so much so that they led to a civil war. The Americans of today are in some ways different from those of 1789. Some of those differences are troubling, as one hopes to conserve our better traditions of what it means to be an American in light of always developing new challenges. Which traditions are worthy of being conserved and what their conservation might entail are important subjects, but for another time; what is relevant here is a realistic understanding of what a nation is and, just as important, what it isn't. Recognizing the distinction between unity and uniformity—between, on the one hand, a national unity made up of divergent traditions and, on the other, an unrealistic national uniformity that is rarely manifested except during brief, unsustainable periods of patriotic enthusiasm—is an elementary prerequisite for cultural history and analysis.

A realistic understanding of the American nation and its history is gratifyingly presented by Samuel Goldman in *After Nationalism: Being American in an Age of Division*. The title of Goldman's cultural interpretation of what has been meant to be an American—what is it that has bound us together as Americans at a particular time and over time—might be misleading. The intention of the book's title is not to suggest that an American nation does not exist. It is, instead, to emphasize that what being an American has meant has never been uniform, as the ideology of nationalism seeks. As Goldman correctly observes, “our public discourse has always been characterized by appeals to various and potentially incompatible conceptions of the nation.” This observation, as has been noted above, provides a more realistic framework for understanding any nation, including the American.

Goldman is right in this sensible and well written extended essay to reject an understanding of the American nation and its history “as if it were a preexisting reality of fixed character.” He is by no means the first to recognize the open character of America and its democracy. More than fifty years ago, Ralph Ellison, arguably the twentieth century’s greatest African American writer, observed in his essay “The Novel as a Function of American Democracy” that “even today America remains an undiscovered country . . . We’re only a partially achieved nation.” The further development of the American nation, its culture, and its democracy was, according to Ellison, dependent upon the continuing realization of its foundational democratic ideals which, in turn, requires a civility that tolerates the actual diversity of the American people. In fact, that diversity—regional, ethnic, and racial—contributes to the vitality of its culture, an example of which, especially dear to Ellison, is how African American jazz has become a valuable part of American music. Thus, in a crucially important way, Ellison thought, rightly it seems to me, that the future of the American nation was and remains inseparable from the fate of African Americans as citizens. That further development of the American democratic ideal is clearly one of the themes of Ellison’s magnificent, but unfinished novel *Three Days Before the Shooting*, as portrayed in the relation between the white southern Senator Sunraider (as a youth, Bliss) and the African American Reverend Hickman.

Goldman identifies three different traditions that have co-existed, with varying degrees of tension, within the cultural unity of the American nation: covenant, crucible, and creed, each of which has a chapter devoted to its description. The covenantal tradition was, of course, represented by the New England Puritans and their Hebraic

understanding of America as the “new Israel,” itself a symbol containing within it divergent meanings. However, to equate that Hebraic tradition with the developing self-understanding of the American nation of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is to ignore other contemporaneous traditions represented by the Quakers, the Anglicans, the Catholics, and the Scots-Irish. Even among the New England Protestants, there were significant differences, as can be seen in the separation of Rhode Island under the direction of Roger Williams. And obviously there were differences over slavery. While the influence of covenantal theology on the formation of the American nation has receded over time, it is nonetheless a mistake to segregate that influence historically by confining it to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It continues to have a bearing on how Americans understand themselves, for example, Sabbath observance and the belief in America as a promised land with its providential, salvific mission to the world.

Goldman’s characterization of the tradition of the crucible refers to the late nineteenth and early twentieth century understanding of America as a land of immigrants, the so-called melting pot out of which a new people emerged. This new people fulfilled its manifest destiny by extending the territory of the nation from the Atlantic to the Pacific. The third tradition is creedal, the twentieth century adherence to the idea of equal rights, racial equality, and a defense of democracy. Of course, this creedal tradition is not exclusively a twentieth century creation; it is found in the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and English common law; it is one source of the changing, developing unity of the American nation through time. But with both the crucible and creedal traditions, it is a mistake to think of the American nation as if it were the uniform creation of either. As Goldman notes, in tension with both of these

traditions, there were the anti-immigrant, anti-Catholic Know Nothing movement, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924 which implemented immigration quotas, the discrimination and internment of Americans of Japanese descent during World War II, and the obvious challenge to the crucible and creedal traditions: continuing racial discrimination.

Irrespective of the merit of distinguishing these three different traditions in the formation and continuation of the American nation, their differentiation is rather schematic. The crucible idea of the manifest destiny of the American nation certainly has a covenantal biblical origin, albeit Old Testament, both as conveying a providential mission and a land theology. Furthermore, while the creedal ideas of equality and the rule of law have multiple sources, one of the sources is also biblical. And finally, the creedal tradition of equal rights runs throughout American history, although, of course, further realized with the adoption in 1918 of the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution that granted the vote to women and the civil rights legislation of the last half of the twentieth century. The contour of the continuing development of, and the relation between, these three and other traditions remains to be determined; for, as Ellison rightly noted, America remains a partially achieved nation. But all nations are partially achieved; there is no such thing as a fully formed nation, nor could there be. It is, however, the unavoidable gap between the ideals of American democracy and reality, and the taxing requirement of discussion and compromise of a democratic form of government that has made the America nation so fractious; but both may also be its saving grace.

## **All nations are partially achieved; there is no such thing as a fully formed nation, nor could there be.**

While there is an American nation or people that has existed over time, past and current political differences are expressions of the different ways the nation has been and continues to be understood. Perhaps Goldman's book is best understood as a warning to those who wish America well. It is a mistake, an ideologically dangerous one, to think that Americans have ever all been the same or, out of an unrestrained desire for cohesiveness and stability, to think that they should be. As a way to adjudicate between the different ways being an American has been and continues to be understood, Goldman, as had Ellison and others before him, is right to turn to the important American tradition of the ideals of the Declaration of Independence and fidelity to the Constitution. But the Declaration's ideals and the Constitution's principles, laws, and institutional arrangement have never exclusively defined what America is. Other aspects of what it has meant to be an American, above all its territory distinguishing it and its inhabitants from the lands and members of other nations, have required other traditions. That this has been so and remains so is the merit of Goldman's book. **A**

# Climate of Violence

## Are we Killing Future Generations?

Adam Briggie

Kim Stanley Robinson, *The Ministry for the Future*.  
Orbit Books, 576pp., \$18 paperback, \$28 cloth.

**E**very second, the global economy burns through 1,100 barrels of oil, 270 tons of coal, and 4,000,000 cubic feet of natural gas. That combustion dumps enormous amounts of heat energy into the climate system. Some estimates put it at the equivalent of five nuclear bomb explosions. Every. Second. Human civilization is a super volcano.

It has long been known that this needs to change. The international community has committed to limiting global warming to 1.5°C above pre-industrial temperatures (we are already at 1.1°C). We have treaties and targets and conferences and pledges. And yet we are not doing nearly enough. Despite knowing for decades that greenhouse gas emissions must sharply turn downward, we have gone the other direction. 2019 set a record for CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. 2020 was down, but only because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Emissions rose by 6% in 2021 as the global economy rebounded. To meet the 1.5°C target, emissions have to be slashed by over 7% annually for the next thirty years. Current policies put us on track for 3.2°C of warming, a future that would be grim if not catastrophic.

Climate change is a cosmic test of our status as a so-called intelligent species. It would be one thing if a runaway bacterial colony were altering Earth's climate chemistry. They could be forgiven for not seeing and reacting to the consequences of their own behavior. But us? How can we know—or claim to know—but fail to act?

There are many theories about this, each with some truth. On a grand level, the climate system is so unfathomably complex that reading the millions of scientific articles and trillions of data points is a bit like reading the tea leaves. There are tons of legitimate interpretations that can be made. In that plurality—the *sine qua non* of the human condition—we debate what ought to be done. So, according to this theory, it's not self-evident just how we should act and what we should do. Trying to figure that out is not a failure; indeed, quite the opposite. It's not like we are a collective mind in harmony with itself. Our intelligence is multiple, fractured, and spread across billions of people and thousands of institutions.

Of course, not all readings of the evidence are done in good faith. Exxon and others in the powerful “carbon industrial complex”

have long been playing the role of Merchants of Doubt—magnifying uncertainties about climate change to justify delaying action. It's the old tobacco strategy: are we really sure cigarettes cause lung cancer? We can call these actors the “active denialists.” They certainly bear some of the responsibility for our meager response to climate change.

Yet there is also lots of “passive denial” going on. Note my passive voice in the phrase above “it has long been known.” But who really is doing the knowing? Socrates said that knowledge is virtue. Once a wise person knows what is good, they will do what is good, because that is their aim. Of course, people often fail to do good even when they know the right thing to do. Aristotle chalked this up to *akrasia* or weakness of will. Socrates said in such cases, the person is like a drunkard who is not in their right mind and has momentarily forgotten the good and so does not really know the right thing to do. What some call weakness of will, he called forgetfulness.

For climate change, Socrates would argue that our problem is the oldest one in politics: the wise do not rule. We are governed by the masses and by oligarchs who are guided by passion rather than knowledge. And climate change, though undoubtedly real, is just not real enough to excite our passions and hold our attention.

It's a metaphysical dilemma. Climate change is so massive that it disappears. It's everywhere and nowhere. Sure, there are droughts, fires, and floods, but those have always happened. We experience the weather, not the climate. There is no actual heat bomb exploding every second. All that combustion is spread across millions of tailpipes. It keeps slipping from our consciousness. And although it is rapid on a geologic timescale, our impacts are relatively slow on a human timescale. We might know in some arid sense what is going on. But, like the drunkard, we keep forgetting.

Are we harming future generations as a result? We know—abstractly—that they will exist. And yet they are not real. It's easy to forget about them, and that's what we do. In economics, we apply a high discount rate to the future, such that any decision we make weighs the interests of our generation far more heavily than the interests of future generations. In day-to-day life, this means that we all “get ours” while the getting is good. We take our vacations to Alaska to see the glaciers before they are gone, even though the vacation itself contributes to their disappearance. It's long been a philosophical conundrum: why should we care about posterity? Principles of rational self-interest are mute, and the stirrings of empathy are weak when it comes to those who-do-not-yet-exist-and-maybe-never-will.

Kim Stanley Robinson's climate fiction novel, *The Ministry for the Future*, centers on the imaginary international organization of the title, created in 2024. The Ministry is run out of Zurich by a hard-headed, soft-hearted Irish woman named Mary Murphy and her ace team of economists, lawyers, scientists, and policy wonks. Their job is to represent the interests of future generations, as well as to speak for other species and ecosystems that do not have a voice in climate politics. They are supposed to make the future real—to make it present. It is a mission impossible for legal, economic, psychological, and metaphysical reasons.

So, for many years, they fail. Emissions climb and the impacts of climate change hit harder and harder. In other words, this isn't really climate *fiction* at all. Robinson's book grapples with our actual situation: a world that knows but doesn't act. *The Ministry for the Future* starts more or less with our current social and technological structures, and traces one possible path toward a future where greenhouse gas emissions are mitigated, and the current mass extinction of species is halted. How do we get from here to there?

What is it going to take to start doing enough?

Robinson's answer: violence. For us to start taking climate change seriously, things will have to get dark, ugly, and deadly. In other words, they will have to get real, especially for the wealthy.

The violence comes in two forms. First, it is the murderous wrath of Mother Earth. The book opens with a heat wave in India that kills 20 million people. One of our protagonists, Frank May, had been an aid worker in a town besieged by the heat wave. He was a *firangi* (foreigner) trying to help the poor in India. The elderly and the very young started dying first. Then people crowded in his clinic for the last remaining air conditioners.

When the last generators went quiet, those who could still walk went to the lake, which was already reeking with the smell of dead bodies. Frank and the others waded into the warm waters and sat motionless, trying to conserve every ounce of energy. Frank took the last sip of the last clean water from a bottle he had been hiding. He fell asleep with his head resting against the pole of a pier. When he awoke, everyone was dead. He managed to pull his boiled, emaciated frame out of the water. The surrounding brush was on fire. A team of firefighters arrived, spotted Frank, and gave him spoonfuls of water. “His eyes were just slits, and so red. He looked completely mad. Like a different kind of being entirely.”

Climate change was suddenly real enough for India to take drastic action. In the wake of the heat wave, the people swept a new political order into power. They shut down their coal-fired power plants and did much more. Yet the global impact of these measures was limited, as the rest of the world found reasons to ignore them. India accounts for only 7% of global greenhouse gas emissions (despite being home to 18% of the world's population). It is a hot, crowded, and poor place. Tourists can avoid it. There are many places like it in the middle latitudes of the

planet. They will have heat waves. That's a regional problem. "So, when the funerals and the gestures of deep sympathy were done with, many people around the world... went back to business as usual. All around the world, the CO<sub>2</sub> emissions continued."

Thus, the second kind of violence.

The heat wave radicalized many Indians, some of whom formed a group called the Children of Kali (from the Hindu goddess of time, doomsday, and death). They issued an ultimatum to the world: start honoring your pledges to solve climate change, or else. "And so," Robinson writes, "came a time of troubles." It was the beginning of the War for the Earth.

Sometime in the 2030s, Crash Day happened. Within a matter of hours, sixty passenger jets fell out of the sky—a coordinated drone attack that killed over 7,000 people. Airline travel practically ceased overnight. Then, hundreds of diesel-powered container ships were scuttled by submarine drones. The global economy spiraled into a depression. The Children of Kali issued a manifesto over the internet: no more fossil-fuel-burning transportation (25% of total emissions). Then, they went after cows, announcing that they had introduced mad cow disease into global cattle stocks via darts from drones. Power plants and pipelines around the world were destroyed, triggering blackouts and further pain and panic.

**T**he political thinker Hannah Arendt argued that violence is pre-political behavior characteristic of animals deprived of a life governed by words and persuasion. Similarly, Plato sets up the *Republic* with the question of the conditions necessary for speech and reason—no discussion of justice is possible where force reigns. Arendt was reacting to the fascist nightmares of mid-20th century Europe, which were partly inspired by the writings of French revolutionary syndicalist Georges Sorel. His 1908

*Reflections on Violence*, however, argued that violence could in fact salvage politics from the pits of barbarism. He tried to carefully parse the right conditions for violence to be an effective tool in the pursuit of justice.

So, could climate violence really work? In *How to Blow up a Pipeline*, the climate scholar Andreas Malm makes a plea for eco-sabotage as the only way now to leverage the massive action required. In a review of that book, Ezra Klein points out the pragmatic problems with this strategy. First, it would likely result in a few radicals being tossed in jail and a social backlash that would set the climate movement backward and further entrench carbon-friendly politicians.

Second, sabotage would have all sorts of collateral damage for the poor and working class who are the most vulnerable to soaring energy prices and a crumbling economy.

The Children of Kali have replies to these objections. First, they argue, to prevent the entrenchment of the carbon empire, pursue targeted assassinations. Kill enough of the royals running petrostates and executives running fossil fuel corporations, they say, and the tune will change. Make it clear that it is their lives or decarbonization. In other words, put them in the same existential situation as future generations. Second, collateral damage is unavoidable. Everyone is tangled up in the carbon complex, so there is no bloodless way to disentangle things. You try to target the wealthy (i.e., biggest polluters) as much as possible, because they are the guiltiest. But we are all complicit.

It is just a utilitarian moral calculation: kill some thousands of people now to prevent the deaths of millions in the future. Cause suffering to millions (more-or-less guilty) now to prevent the suffering of billions (wholly innocent) in the future. The most brutal utilitarian logic of short-term violence can be justified, according to the Children of Kali, if the time horizon is long enough and the avoided catastrophe is large enough.



**B**ut can such violence really be morally justified? That gets us tangled up in the metaphysics of that avoided catastrophe. If we act to avoid it, then it will never exist. So, the very thing that would justify our action is negated by the action itself. If we don't act—and the catastrophe happens—it will be too late.

Frank wanted to join the Children of Kali, but they wouldn't let him, because he was a *firangi*, and thus, not to be trusted. But he had to do something. As far as he was concerned, he was a ghost. He had already died in the lake. He was a “different kind of being.” Robinson uses Frank as a metaphysical hack: he is the future superimposed on the present. That heat death in India was the future of humanity, and Frank was its incarnation as a prophet here and now. And yet he was just a crazy nobody addled by PTSD. Mary Murphy was somebody. She was the head of the Ministry for the Future. So, he kidnapped her.

Robinson's book spills out in 106 rapid-fire chapters that mirror the cadence and chaos of a world falling apart and rebuilding. In chapter 25, the heat wave is a couple of years in the past and the LA flood is yet to come. Mary has had a couple of margaritas with her team at an over-priced Zurich pub. On her walk home, Frank strides up next to her, slides a handcuff on her wrist, shoves a pistol in her side, and says “Keep going. I'm taking you into custody.... I want to talk with you.” They march to her apartment where they sit down for tea and a talk at gunpoint.

“What do you and your ministry know about the future?” Frank asks.

“We can only model scenarios,” Mary replies.

Frank asks, “Is there any scenario...in which there won't be more heat waves that kill millions of people?”

“Yes,” Mary says, but then she pauses.

It's possible that the future will be free from carnage. Heck, anything is possible. But it's not likely. Frank can see this on her face.

“Ha!” he cries, “You know. You know the

future... But you're not trying to know! You're trying not to know!” It's the perennial philosophical problem: knowing and willing.

The French philosopher Jean-Pierre Dupuy put this age-old problem into modern terms. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the real body that created Robinson's fictional ministry, operates by the precautionary principle. Here is the formulation of the principle that Dupuy uses: “The absence of certainties, given the current state of scientific and technological knowledge, must not delay the adoption of effective and proportionate preventative measures aimed at forestalling a risk of grave and irreversible damage to the environment at an economically acceptable cost.” Basically: not being sure is not a good reason to not act to prevent a catastrophe.

If this is our guiding international principle, why are we not doing enough? It's not that we are failing to apply the principle, Dupuy argues. Rather, the principle is bunk. If uncertainty prevails, then who is to say what the risk of the damage really is, what it will cost, or what a proportionate preventative measure would be? It *might be* that millions of people will die horrible, preventable deaths in the future. If we knew that for sure, then blowing up pipelines would seem proportional. But we don't know. Mary kept saying this phrase to Frank: “I don't know.” The future is not ours to see. *Que sera sera*.

Further, if the uncertainty is itself uncertain (if we don't even know what we don't know), then we can't say whether the conditions for the precautionary principle have been met. The principle, then, is biased toward endless scientific investigation. If the problem is our “current state of knowledge,” the policy will always be “more research” so that we can close the gap between what is known and what needs to be known. Yet, we've been trying to close that gap for decades only to discover how much more there is that we don't know!

Others have made a similar argument that climate scientists are biased toward avoiding type I errors—that is, they try too hard to avoid falsely attributing causation, out of a misplaced attachment to scientific rigor. They set the bar of proof too high, allowing actors in bad faith and in good faith to conclude that we just don't know enough to act. We need more research! We learn all sorts of things about, say, the complexity of clouds. Meanwhile the planet burns.

Yet this is not the heart of the problem for Frank as he tries to control his anger with Mary. Uncertainty is not the obstacle to action. Rather, as Dupuy writes, “the obstacle is the *impossibility of believing that the worst is going to occur.*” After all, Mary was just having a pleasant evening of drinks with her friends. Despite what she may or may not know, she does not believe that catastrophes are coming. For Frank, a time-traveler from our future climate hell, this is what makes her a poor representative of future generations. How can you advocate for someone if you don't really believe them?

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic illustrates this bizarre temporality of catastrophes. We all knew, say, about the 1918 flu pandemic. We knew such things could happen and yet, right up to the moment it hit us, it seemed impossible. I remember telling my wife that we should probably buy some extra pasta. That was the extent of my imaginative capacities. Dupuy quotes the philosopher Henri Bergson's reaction to the onset of World War I: “I felt... a kind of admiration for the ease with which the shift from the abstract to the concrete had taken place: who would have thought that so awe-inspiring an eventuality could make its entrance into the real with so little fuss?” Once the catastrophic has happened, we adjust to a routine built around the once-impossible but now-familiar new reality. In the parlance of climate policy, we might cheerfully call this ‘adaptation.’

## Climate change is a cosmic test of our status as a so-called intelligent species.

This is the source of Frank's frustration—even a society premised on the precautionary principle behaves the same way as, say, a bacterial colony that doesn't implement preventative policies. We wait for the catastrophe to occur before acting, as if its coming-to-be was the only sufficiently strong and credible evidence for its prediction. As if it could only be possible in our minds by ‘possibilizing’ itself in reality. Of course, it's too late by then.

As Frank paced around Mary's apartment like a caged animal, he wrestled with the question of how to get people to believe in a catastrophe before it occurs. The Children of Kali had already figured out the answer: you have to visit catastrophe upon them. Bring the future into the present.

This is one reading of climate justice. Indigenous peoples and the global poor are already living through the climate destabilization and dystopia that wealthy folks like Mary fret about over a margarita. So, it's not necessarily about making the future present—it's about equitably distributing the nightmare that is already here. The rich who have caused this mess should get their fair share.

Mary sips her cold tea, “We're doing all we can with what we've got.”

“No you're not,” Frank snaps at her. He tells her about how he tried to join the Children of Kali.

“But they are a terrorist group,” Mary recoils. “I'm trying to avoid violence.” As if that was an option in our super volcano

civilization! Why is it considered ‘violence’ to destroy a pipeline, but it is considered ‘business’ when a bulldozer destroys a patch of rainforest?

Frank shakes his head. “No. You have to stop thinking with your old bourgeois values.” The real terrorists are the ones running the carbon industrial complex. Imagine you were one of the dead back there in the lake. Imagine you had watched your children die. What if you could go back in time? You would do anything to prevent the coming heat. Yes, you would kill. And you would be justified because it is self-defense. “If you were serious,” Frank tells Mary, “you’d have a black wing, doing things outside the law to accelerate changes.” The legal order is permitting mass murder via the climate violence of carbon-industrialists. When the law is unjust, break it, even (especially!) if you are a bureaucrat. Mary listens. Frank, her abductor, just gave her the job training she needed.

**T**he violence perpetuated by Mother Nature and other ecoterrorists gets the ball rolling. Or, you could say it causes an ontological rupture where ideas that once seemed crazy can now be taken seriously. This is where *The Ministry for the Future* gets creative: Herculean geoengineering efforts to arrest the slide of glaciers into the sea, the deep decarbonization of air travel via airships, and new communal modes of organizing capital, labor, consumption, and production. Robinson helps us to imagine what a post-carbon world might look like. Yes, it is born bloody, but it is full of restorative potential. We might slow down, share more, work less, and cede some territory for the rewilding of Earth.

Robinson rightly puts finance at the heart of the transition to a post-carbon society. The fear of violent death may be the number one human motivator, but

money is in second place. Prices are like strings pulling on human limbs—they determine so much about how we behave. The climate problem can be reduced to a market failure: people get rich extracting and burning fossil fuels, but no one pays to dump the emissions in the atmosphere. Costs not reflected in prices are called externalities or, in this case, “the social cost of carbon.” They are paid for with the lives and livelihoods of future generations. That’s the intergenerational injustice: we party, they pay.

By the middle of the book, the economy is in ruins: mass unemployment, depression, inflation, and unrest. Then Los Angeles gets wiped off the map. Desperate times call for desperate measures. Mary and her team convince the heads of the world’s central banks to issue a new form of currency, the carbon coin or the carboni as it later becomes known. People could earn “one coin per ton of carbon-dioxide-equivalent sequestered from the atmosphere, either by not burning what would have been burned in the ordinary course of things, or by pulling it back out of the air.” The challenge was figuring out how to verify carbon sequestration for anyone from Saudi princes leaving millions of barrels of oil in the ground, to small farmers altering their tilling methods to restore soil carbon.

Three wildly divergent macroeconomic readings of the situation are possible. It could be that petrodollars and carbon coins are both equally fictitious constructs, so switching from one to the other is a neutral move. Or it could be that petrodollars represent real capital that does real economic work to generate real wealth, whereas carbon coins *remove* all this potential work and wealth from the economy. So, the new currency could be suicide. Or it could be that the true ecological costs of carbon were so buried

in a petrodollar regime, that switching to carboni will create wealth by allowing the biosphere (the source of capital) to regenerate and by preventing future pay-outs to clean-up the increasing damages of carbon burn and insure assets in an ever-hotter world. So: a wash, a bust, or a boon?

It's a gamble. But that is an unavoidable fact about human action, which is a boundless, unpredictable cascade of branching, maddening cause-effect relationships. As Arendt noted, this is why moderation was the political virtue par excellence until the modern age. And hubris was the worst temptation. We are frail creatures in an unfathomable cosmos. It is best not to do too much, lest we trigger a chain reaction we cannot control.

In the modern age, we have embraced a dynamic of progress rather than moderation. Our current moral relationship with future generations is premised on this dynamic. Unlike the ancients, we are not trying to preserve or steward a stable cosmos for the next generations to inherit. Rather, we are trying to build the machines that will allow us to control fate. We apply our intelligence and energy toward solving the elemental problems of water, food, shelter, and security. Along this path of innovation, true, we create new problems as unintended consequences. But these problems are generally better ones to have (we call them first-world problems for a reason). Future generations are smarter, wealthier, and more secure because of the work we do in the present to push progress forward. So, future generations can handle themselves. It's not that we are being callous, selfish, or thoughtless—we are giving them the tools they need to keep progress going.

This is the story we tell ourselves. It is why people like Mary can sleep at night, assured that they are doing all they can. According to this story, climate change is the ultimate first-world problem. It is much preferable to live in Zurich in 2021 facing global temperature rises than to live in Zurich in 1021 facing chronic exposure to the elements, malnutrition, pestilence, and insecurity. Deaths from natural disasters have dramatically decreased as we build modern infrastructure, and damages from extreme weather have decreased when viewed as a percentage of GDP. In other words, our wealth is growing faster than climate risks, which means we are winning in the war against fate. All the dire headlines are skewing our perception: we have never lived in a safer climate.

The problem with this story is not that it's false. Worse than that; it's half true. It's just true enough to soothe our conscience. And, as Mary's models showed, there's always a possibility that things will work out just fine if we follow the same logic. The other half of the truth was captured succinctly by the scientist Wallace Smith Broecker: "the climate system is an angry beast and we are poking it with sticks." The last time CO<sub>2</sub> concentrations in the atmosphere were this high, there were palm trees in the arctic. To repeat our basic situation: we have unleashed enormous energies extremely rapidly from a geologic perspective. We are watching the Earth adjust to a new climatic regime, one of our own doing. This is not a rollercoaster we are prepared to ride. That super volcano of emissions might be like a self-inflicted gunshot to the gut. Like Frank, we might already be dead.

Then again, who knows? And would you believe it even if you did know it? A

# Philokleon Goes Viral

## Re-Reading Aristophanes' *Wasps* Through a COVID-19 Lens

Daniel B. Levine

**T**HE COVID-19 PANDEMIC HAS brought new scrutiny of ancient plagues. In the past two years, scholars of the ancient world, and others, have produced numerous articles and blogs, in both academic and public venues, about how the current worldwide disease outbreak can give us new perspectives on the writings of the past, and vice versa. These recent assessments have been insightful, personal, clever, cathartic, and enlightening; they examine COVID-19 and its ancient parallels in light of modern ideas of religion, race, politics, and personal relationships. These studies have dealt with past historical and mythical accounts, both medieval and ancient, including the “Big Three” Greek plague narratives: Apollo’s infliction of the plague on the Achaians in *Iliad* 1, Sophocles’ portrayal of the Theban pestilence in *Oedipus Tyrannus*, and especially Thucydides’ description of the plague at Athens.<sup>1</sup>

This paper differs from the current trend of nosography (“plague writing”), in that it

shows that we may re-tell Aristophanes's ancient play *Wasps* from a contemporary perspective, thus showing how our experiences during the COVID-19 crisis can use new terms to describe old stories. The significance of ancient literature changes with new experiences, because our perspectives are constantly changing. Experiencing the COVID-19 pandemic as both a professor and a patient has given me the opportunity to see this classic comedy in a new light. In this essay, after a summary of the play’s plot and background, I share some modern connections with the ancient work that have occurred to me—most of which would not have crossed my mind without the COVID-19 experience. These include new perspectives on how Aristophanes’ *Wasps* may relate to the following current issues: Incurable Disease, Demagoguery, Social Security, Stimulus Payments, Supreme Court Appointments, “Make America Great Again,” Social Distancing, Quarantine, Working from Home, Conspiracy Theory, Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), Second Wave with Dangerous New Variant, Attacks on Airline Flight Attendants, Third Wave, and Vaccination.

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<sup>1</sup> See Further Reading for some recent articles on the subject. The bibliography continues to grow.

## The Plot

**P**roduced in the Athenian month of Gamelion (January/February) of 422 BCE, *Wasps* was Aristophanes' entry in the comic competition at the Lenaea, a festival celebrating the god Dionysos; it won second prize. The plot is a madcap combination of outrageous slapstick, political satire, and generation-gap humor.

In the prologue, two slaves explain that they have been charged by the young man Bdelykleon ("Kleon-Loather") with keeping his elderly father Philokleon ("Kleon-Lover") inside the house, in order to prevent him from going out with the other old men to serve as jurors in the Athenian courts. Philokleon was addicted to jury service, thrilled at the feeling of power that it gave him, and with the income that he got from the state's payment for jury duty. After his son shows him and his fellow elders (the Wasps of the Chorus) that they are the pawns of rich corrupt politicians, including the manipulative demagogue Kleon,

Bdelykleon convinces Philokleon to indulge his obsession to guilty verdicts by setting up a courtroom in their house, and to pay his father to conduct his juror's work at home. There follows a hilarious trial involving two dogs—prosecutor and defendant—who are thinly veiled caricatures of the public figures Kleon and the general Laches.

After Philokleon is tricked into voting for acquittal, his son instructs him on how to dress to attend dinner parties (*symposia*) and to how act with decorum in polite society. These instructions are lost on the old man, whose outrageous behavior at a party, including stealing a female enslaved person and subsequent violent acts against all in his path show that it was a mistake to let him out of the house at all. Although forced back into the house, the unrepentant Philokleon subsequently re-emerges, wilder than ever. He issues a challenge for a dance contest, and ends the play triumphantly prancing off stage.

## Nosos. The Incurable Disease

**T**he play portrays Philokleon's addiction to jury duty as a disease, *nosos*, the word that occurs in *Iliad* I to describe the disease that Apollo sent upon the Achaians, and that Aristophanes' Athenian contemporary Thucydides used to describe the plague at Athens in 429-428 BCE. It is the same word that their fellow citizen Sophocles used in *Oedipus the King* to describe the mythical plague at Thebes. As the enslaved character Xanthias announces in the prologue to *Wasps*:

*That man up there is our master [Bdelykleon], sound asleep. The big guy, the one up on the roof tiles. This man gave the two of us*

*the order to guard his father, wanting to keep him shut up inside, and make sure that he doesn't go outside. Why? Because his father is sick with a strange sickness (noson allokoton nosei) which nobody could ever know or diagnose unless we explain it.*

Xanthias then explains the diagnosis and symptoms of his disease. Philokleon is a *philēliastēs*, a jury service addict. His symptoms are related to his experiences as a juror, and include (to use pseudo-scientific jargon based on the text): insomnia (from thinking about jury service), hand dystonia (finger cramps,

from clinging to the ballots), ballot box fetish (graffiti obsession about voting), cock-call agnosia (anger at roosters who had been bribed to wake him up too late to get to court on time), pathological columnar attachment (clinging to the railing at the court), hyperactive penalty obsession (always proposing the maximum penalties), and pebble hoarding syndrome (amassing a massive supply of ballots).

His fellow slave Sosias uses the word *nosos* twice again for the sickness, followed by Xanthias repeating the word twice again, before listing the therapies that Bdelykleon had forced his father to undergo in the hopes of a cure. These attempted cures included in-house counseling, hydrotherapy and purges, divine exorcism, and healing-shrine incubation. But the old man's stubborn disease resisted all standard therapies. Like COVID-19, Philokleon's disease seemed to be incurable. Like the old man himself, it was incorrigible.

The common words for widespread disease (the verb *noseo* and the noun *nosos*) also characterize the mythical plagues in *Iliad* 1 and in Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*.<sup>2</sup> We should also point out that the Athenian citizens who attended Sophocles' tragedy *Oedipus*, and Aristophanes' comedy *Wasps* were themselves survivors of the plague at Athens. In addition, Aristophanes' contemporary, the Athenian writer Thucydides, in his *History of the Peloponnesian War* consistently uses the word *nosos* and the verb *noseo* to describe the plague at Athens, the symptoms of which he describes, while making the point that none of the standard cures were effective. When he first mentions it, he calls

2 *Iliad* 1.10: "plague" *nousos*. Sophocles OT 28: "most hateful pestilence" *loimos ekthistos*, OT 60: "You all also are plague-ridden, and being plague-ridden, / it is not possible that any one of you is equally as plague-ridden as I" *noseite pantes kai nosountes, hōs egō / ouk estin humōn hostis eks isou nosei*. Thucydides 2.31.2.

it "the pestilential plague" (*he loimōdēs nosos*), and describes the plague as *nosos* in six other passages.<sup>3</sup> According to Thucydides, the standard treatments for disease were ineffective against this new disease: doctors (*iatroi*), healing sanctuaries (*hiera*), prophecies (*manteia*), and the like. Since all attempts at curing it were useless, people finally gave up trying, since they were overcome by its enormity.<sup>4</sup>

Whereas in *Wasps* the enslaved Xanthias describes the disease's effects in comic fashion, the sober historian Thucydides (who himself had the plague) seriously describes the physical symptoms, including fever, bloody throat and tongue, halitosis, violent coughing, loss of digits and genitalia, blisters, sores, unquenchable thirst, ulcers, diarrhea, and amnesia. But the greatest evil was the universal dejection it induced (*athumia*) because of its uncontrolled spread. Thucydides says that social distancing was impossible, owing to homelessness and the overcrowded conditions inside the city walls, where the entire population of Attica had moved for protection from the annual Spartan invasions.

The point of both the dramatic and historical accounts of these (comic and real) diseases is that they are harmful, troublesome, insusceptible to therapy, and that they pose a danger to society... as does COVID-19.<sup>5</sup>

3 Thucydides 2.31.2 (*nenosēkuias*); see also 2.47.3; 3.3.1; 3.13.3; 3.87.1; 6.26.2.

4 Thucydides 2.47.4: "Everything was useless, and finally, overcome by the evil, they abstained altogether from coming close to them" *panta anōphelē ēn, teleuōntes te autōn apestēsan hupo tou kakou nikōmenoi*. Thucydides later repeats the sad fact that no healing regimen was effective against the disease (2.51.2) "Nor was there any single cure that they could apply to help them" *hen te oude hen katestē iama ōs eipein hoti khrēn prosperontas ōphelēin*.

5 I cannot account for the fact that Aristophanes, who, like Thucydides, lived through the plague in Athens (and presented all of his comedies in the following decades), never directly alludes to that disease in his plays.

## Background and Modern Parallels

For modern observers, the cultural context of ancient Attic comedy requires much explanation. In what follows, I try to give information to provide a

framework for understanding each scene, with observations on some new perspectives I have gained, suggested by contemporary COVID-19 experiences.

**Aristophanes scholar Matthew C. Farmer has suggested that the Trump campaign slogan “Make American Great Again” finds parallels in several passages in *Wasps* in which supporters of Kleon express a nostalgic longing for the “good old days” of the Athenian past.**

### Insufficient Social Security and Demagoguery

In the ancient Mediterranean world, retirees had no government support such as social security; nor were there retirement accounts such as IRAs. One worked until one died, or relied on family help, and so when the Athenian general/politician Pericles introduced pay for jury duty, probably in the 450s, it was an economic boon for the old men of Athens. Sometime between 429 and 422, the populist leader Kleon, whom Thucydides describes as “the most violent and most persuasive of the citizens (*biaiotatos tōn politōn... pithanōtatos*) and as a populist leader—using the word “demagogue” for the first time (*anēr dēmagōgos*)<sup>6</sup>—supported an increase in payment for jurors by 50% (from two obols to three; see 1121 *triōbolon*),

implicitly making it clear that in return for this “gift,” he expected that those who served in the courts would vote in favor of his policies and cronies, and against his enemies. As NYU classicist Peter Meineck puts it, “Politicians in the 420s would use the law courts as part of political tactics, taking opponents to court and making their careers by prosecuting major public figures.”<sup>7</sup>

Aristophanes makes this clear in the *Wasps*, both when Philokleon is being locked in the house while calling for help to Kleon and his fellow jurymen, and when the senior citizen Chorus of jurymen claim that they are hurrying to court in order to vote in a lawsuit against Laches, one of the enemies of Kleon; they describe the latter as their *kēdemōn* (patron).<sup>8</sup>

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6 Prior to Thucydides’ use of “demagogue,” Aristophanes in *Knights* (424 BCE) had used the word “demagoguery” (*dēmagōgia*), in a most derogatory way: The character Demosthenes tells the Sausage Seller, “A demagogue must be neither an educated nor an honest man; he has to be an ignoramus and a rogue” (tr. Eugene O’Neill Jr.). Isocrates would later use the word to describe Pericles, as a leader of the people (8.126).

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7 Aristophanes I, Peter Meineck (Hackett, 1998) 129.

8 Demosthenes 24.151 (*Against Timocrates*) preserves the actual oath that the jurymen took, invoking the gods Zeus, Poseidon and Demeter, which includes the promise to hear cases with partiality neither for the prosecution nor the defense: “I shall listen to both the prosecutor and defendant both alike” *akroasomai tou te katēgorou kai tou apologoumenou homoiōs amphoin*.



## Stimulus Checks and Supreme Court Appointments

Such monetary and political policies remind us of the economic stimulus checks issued under U.S. Presidents Trump and Biden, to help during the COVID-19 economic difficulties, each accompanied by signed letters from the White House. And President Trump's appointments of Supreme Court judges have been widely seen as advancing his own political agenda, with support from a

Republican-dominated legislative branch. In fairness, though, all U.S. presidential court appointments naturally reflect the political and social agendas of the executive branch. But lately the increased political polarization in the U.S. has made me more prone to relate such partisan actions to Kleon's persuasive (and pernicious) influence over the law courts and assemblies of fifth century BCE Athens.

### MAGA before MAGA?

Aristophanes scholar Matthew C. Farmer has suggested that the Trump campaign slogan "Make American Great Again" finds parallels in several passages in *Wasps* in which supporters of Kleon express a nostalgic longing for the "good old days" of the Athenian past, and decry the morality, politics, and tastes of the younger generation, which they consider to be taking society in the wrong direction.<sup>9</sup>

Philokleon and the chorus of wasps make it clear that they prefer the old ways, and would like to "Make Athens Great Again." Before the chorus first enters, Bledykleon tells the slaves that the old men of the wasp chorus habitually summon his father to join them by singing the out-of-date (*arkhaia*) verses by Phrynichus, a popular tragic poet of the earlier generation. At their first appearance, the chorus of aged military veterans fondly recall some of their youthful hijinks at Byzantium, and recall how their friend and comrade Philokleon used to delight in singing Phrynichus' songs as he led them in procession. They recall his youthful but mischievous military prowess in the siege of Naxos.

In the first parabasis, the Chorus claims that they, the older generation, were best at both dancing and fighting, and that the current generation, with its curly hair, fancy

clothes, and sexual indecency (*euruprōktia*) is no match for them. They then brag that their prowess in land and sea battles against the Persians had made Athens the great power that had amassed the tribute money that the current generation is now stealing.

In the play's last episode, Xanthias announces that Philokleon has drunkenly been executing the archaic dances (*arkhaia*) of Thespis, the founder of Athenian tragic poetry and is wildly challenging the modern (*tous nun*) tragic dancers, whom he considers his inferiors, to match his prowess.<sup>10</sup>

In Aristophanes' plays, the desire to go back to the old days is not unique to *Wasps*. The characters Strepsiades and Just Argument in *Clouds* (423 BCE), and the chorus of old men in *Lysistrata* (411 BCE) espouse similar sentiments: their grandfathers were the Greatest Generation, and current Athenians fall short of them in character and manliness. The idea that the present generation is a degenerated version of a glorious past, and the concomitant desire for a return to former greatness finds resonance in both ancient Athenian and modern American imagination.

<sup>9</sup> Email correspondence from Matthew C. Farmer: June 23, 2021.

<sup>10</sup> The Phrynichus that Philokleon mentions at 1490 and 1524 is not the tragic poet of an earlier generation, but a contemporary Athenian known for his dancing. See Michael V. Melitor "Phrynichos, a Note on Aristophanes *Vespae* 1490-3." *Hermes* 112.2 (1984) 252-254.

## Social Distancing and Reluctant Quarantine

Like the first modern social distancing anti-COVID-19 measures, Bdelykleon's solution to his father Philokleon's pathological addiction to jury service is to keep him out of public life by imposing a home quarantine, to keep him and his community safe.

Aristophanes creates a lot of comic capital describing how the son had sealed off the windows, doors, and chimney to prevent his father's escape. Philokleon even tried to sneak out by clinging to the underside of a donkey, and calling himself "Nobody, from Ithaca" in a parodic allusion to the *Odyssey's*

Cyclops scene, where Odysseus escapes from the monster's cave under a large ram.

People in the U.S. were encouraged to stay home as much as possible during the first wave of COVID-19, but in Greece, for example, it became illegal for people to leave their homes without permission, and citizens who left the house had to show proof that they had gotten approval to be out. In Greece in 2020, the phrase *ménoume spíti* ("We are staying at home") became a national byword for domestic sequestration.

## Working from Home

Worldwide, many workers had to quarantine and work remotely when the COVID-19 pandemic hit, using whatever equipment in their homes that could serve that end. To some this has been a hardship, but others have found home-based work to have some advantages, or even to be comfortable. Likewise, Bdelykleon figures out how to let his incorrigible father work from home by letting him judge cases there, and highlights some of the advantages of doing so. Philokleon, concerned about his loss of income, asks who will pay his salary (*misthos*), and Bdelykleon replies that he will supply it for him. He also points out to the old man the flexibility he would have by staying at home: in good weather he can work in the courtyard, and inside by the fire if it snows or rains. If he is hungry, he can eat while doing home jury duty. Bdelykleon helps as much as possible to replicate the physical environment of the courtroom, with a chamber pot that can also function as a water clock (*clepsydra*) to

time the speeches, a shrine of Lycus, just as at the real court, and makeshift voting urns. Instead of real-life witnesses, Philokleon calls on household utensils to testify on behalf of the defendant, including a bowl, pestle, cheese grater, brazier, pot, and other paraphernalia. Finally, the accused dog's puppies are brought in, in imitation of the actual courtroom practice of introducing defendants' young children in order to provoke pity among the jurymen and thereby secure an acquittal.<sup>11</sup> The squealing pups cause even the hardened Philokleon to tear up with emotion even as he practices his jurymen's trade at his own home. Like modern employees who have had to work remotely to ameliorate quarantine conditions, Bdelykleon found ways to "make do" with implements found in the home.

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<sup>11</sup> Socrates' reference to this practice in Plato's *Apology* (34c-d) is proof that Athenians actually engaged in these melodramatic exhibits in court.

## Conspiracy theorists often charge those who oppose them with hating their country, which is exactly what the Chorus does when they call upon Kleon to help rescue Philokleon from his quarantine.

### Conspiracy Theory

Numerous opponents of vaccination, social distancing, and mask mandates have recourse to unfounded ideas that such measures are simply machinations meant to undermine freedom and to exercise control over the populace, under the guise of helping improve public health. Such conspiracy theories are difficult to counter, and are cherished by those who hold them. It is therefore of interest that the chorus of wasps in this play, in condemning Bdelykleon for keeping his father in quarantine, repeatedly accuses him of being part of a conspiracy against the state, when he is in fact looking out for his father's own good.

When Philokleon tells the chorus that his son is keeping him inside against his will, they reply that Bdelykleon must be some sort of conspirator (*xsynōmotēs*). This was a charge that Kleon and his coterie seemed habitually to have leveled against their political opponents, as apparent in its frequent use in reference to Kleon, both in this play and by the Kleon character Paphlagon in Aristophanes' *Knights*.

Conspiracy theorists often charge those who oppose them with hating their country, which is exactly what the chorus does when they call upon Kleon to help rescue Philokleon from his quarantine: "Boys, run and shout and announce these things to Kleon, and tell him to come out against a man who hates his country!" (*ep' andra misopolin*). In response to Bdelykleon's refusal to let his father out, they cry that he is presenting them with "out-and-out tyranny" (*turannis estin emphanēs*).

Before the play's main debate (*agōn*), the Chorus sound more and more like conspiracy theorists when they say to Bdelykleon that the poor people do not see the clear signs that tyranny is stealthily sneaking up from behind, and that by keeping Philokleon locked up at home he is depriving them of their legal rights. They call him an "enemy of the people" and a "lover of monarchy," and a friend of the Spartan general Brasidas (*misodēme kai monarkhias erasta xsynōn Brasidai*). They repeat the charges of conspiracy and tyranny before an exasperated Bdelykleon has had enough:

*How you see tyranny and conspirators everywhere as soon as anyone voices a criticism large or small! I hadn't even heard the word being used for at least fifty years, but nowadays it's cheaper than sardines.*

He goes on to say that even minor disputes about fish result in charges of conspiring to tyranny, and pointedly asserts that his care for his father has resulted in his being called a conspirator with a mind set on tyranny.

Just as modern anti-vaccine proponents and opponents of mask mandates have insisted that government efforts for public health are really a nefarious plot to deprive them of their rights, and have spread the lie that anti-COVID-19 inoculation is a scheme to track their movements, so also the chorus of wasps, as supporters of Kleon, considers the benevolent actions of Bdelykleon as a treacherous conspiracy to undermine the state.

## Ineffective Personal Protection Equipment (PPE)

The big question for many during the time of COVID-19 is, “When is it safe to go out again, and what precautions must we take?” In *Wasps*, the question about Philokleon’s situation is similar. When to let him out? After his domestic “jury service” reaches its comic completion, Bdelykleon thinks that it is safe to allow him to leave quarantine and enter into society again—with certain precautions and safeguards.

Instead of modern personal protection equipment like facemasks, facepiece respirators, gloves, isolation gowns, hand sanitizers, and face shields, the son has his own ideas about PPE to protect his irascible father. Bdelykleon thinks that if his father is well dressed, he can leave quarantine and safely interact with his peers, so he takes away the old man’s ratty jacket (*tribōn*), and replaces it with a fine new cloak (*chlaina*). But Philokleon fights to keep his beloved old clothing, and also balks when Bdelykleon tries to force him to don fine new Laconian shoes and give up his “accursed sandals” (*kataratous embadas*).

Next, with his new wardrobe the old man suffers through some lessons from his son

on proper public behavior. In order to survive in the world, Philokleon must learn how to conduct himself in polite company. The son tries to teach his father how to walk with a seemingly gait, how to converse in a polite and impressive manner, how to recline gracefully on the couch at a symposium, how to join in with the symposium’s traditional drinking songs (*skolia*), how to drink properly, and how to fend off criticism by telling witty anecdotes, like stories from Aesop or about the Sybarites. Such strategies are meant to shield the old man from embarrassment arising from his ignorance when he goes out.

Of course, Philokleon objects to each and every one of these well-intentioned restrictions on his freedom, and mocks them all. He refuses to use the PPE his son suggests. Subsequent scenes show that he misuses his son’s advice, resulting in a second wave of disaster, with more casualties. Philokleon simply cannot stay socially healthy when he leaves home. In his interaction with others, he gets disorderly, commits assault and theft, and provokes general mayhem.

## Second Wave with Dangerous New Variant (*Hubris*), and Second Lockdown

After the symposium, Xanthias reports that when Philokleon had gotten drunk and had had his fill of good food, the old man began to dance inappropriately, to fart, and to deride his fellow partygoers. He beat his own slave, insulted and mocked the guests, and left the party, taking with him an enslaved woman; he struck anyone he came across, and threatened people with a torch. He drove off a man who summoned him to court for his hubristic acts, treated the slave woman in a most vulgar manner, beat a woman selling bread, ruined her

wares, and cruelly insulted her. He treated another accuser with violence before his son Bdelykleon managed to pick him up and carry him inside, returning him to lockdown.

Modern frustration with COVID-19 mandates and restrictions has coincided with an uptick in customer violence against service-industry workers, most notably airline flight attendants. Some of these attackers, acting under the influence of alcohol, have faced legal repercussions for their misbehavior. Similarly, Philokleon,

fueled by the symposium's wine (in addition to his own addiction to mayhem), abuses Athenian service workers who were simply trying to do their jobs, and (ironically) scorns threats of lawsuits that would have held him accountable for his aggression. Intolerant of public order and decency, our diseased protagonist, having been in and out of quarantine, lashes out at those around him as he spreads his contagion.

In *Wasps*, any breaking of quarantine is a mistake. Philokleon's first disease of jury addiction was harmful, in that he had always favored the guilty verdict, thus harming many innocent people. In this

second wave, however, he displays a new variant, a dangerous mutation that results in Philokleon physically harming innocent victims. The comic lesson here is: "You can dress him up, but you can't take him out." Aristophanes shows that the old man is both too irrepressible to be kept in the house, and that his public presence is a danger to society, in a new way. Aristophanes repeatedly describes these physical assaults as "pride/arrogance/violence" (*hubris*). His character simply is not compatible with staying home. This second wave, as we might call it, containing a new variant of Philokleon's illness, was a catastrophe.

### The Third Wave: Manic Transcendence

In the play's last scene, Philokleon escapes from the house again, in a frenzy of dancing, emerging in order to challenge tragic dancers to a dance contest. This time Xanthias diagnoses his condition as "madness" (*mania*), and prescribes its traditional cure: a dose of hellebore. This antidote, however, is ignored, and, like the attempts to cure the original *nosos*, would have been ineffective against Philokleon's strong character.

The old man challenges the tragic poet Carcinus' sons (dressed as crabs) to a dance competition which continues wildly to the end of the play. As we have seen, when the

second wave of Philokleon's *hubris* contagion broke out, disaster followed. The frenetic antics of Philokleon's third wave resulted from the old man's innate mania, another variant of his basic irrepressibility, and in accordance with the normal practice of the genre, they bring an upbeat ending to the play, consisting of harmless comic musical and terpsichorean chaos. Unlike the toll that COVID-19 has taken on its myriad victims, often as the result of new mutations of the virus and the failure of social distancing, *Wasps* must have a happy ending—in spite of the repeated outbreaks of its "diseased" main character.

### Vaccination? No Thank You

Modern widespread vaccination against COVID-19 has begun to cause the virus to retreat, but there was no such immunization to shield Philokleon from his mischief-making disease(s). The suggestion of hellebore is as close to a mention of vaccination as there could be, but the context makes it clear that such an

inoculation would not work, even if he were to accept it, for he was naturally irrepressible. Philokleon's problem was his own powerful personality. I imagine that if he were asked why he would refuse something that would keep his malady from re-surfacing, he would say, like contemporary anti-vaxxers, that such

solutions infringe on his personal freedom, or are part of a conspiracy. He might indeed have paraphrased the well-known retort from Herodotus (in which Hippokleides' reply to Cleisthenes after his drunken crudeness and wild dancing had cost him an advantageous marriage to Cleisthenes' daughter Agariste), and say, "Ou phrontis Philokleoni!" (Philokleon doesn't care!).<sup>12</sup>

It is unfortunate that Philokleon's selfish attitude is prevalent among people who practice vaccine hesitancy today. Our world is not a comic stage; the consequences of irresponsible actions during the pandemic are more severe than those which any character in a Greek comedy ever faced. Unlike Philokleon, we are obliged to care.

## Conclusion. The Moral of the Story.

In the prologue, the enslaved character Xanthias describes to the audience the play's plot (*logos*):

*No, what we've got here is just a little story (logidion), but with a moral (gnōmē), something we can all understand. Don't worry, it won't go over your heads, but it will be on a higher level than those other disgusting, obscene farces.*<sup>13</sup>

Unfortunately, nowhere does Aristophanes clearly state the play's actual moral. We, however, having examined *Wasps* through the public health lens of COVID-19, may conclude that Aristophanes, like an ancient Dr. Anthony Fauci, makes one main point in *Wasps*: "This is how Philokleon behaves. Don't be like Philokleon." ◻

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<sup>12</sup> Philokleon shows just such an attitude in his retort to the baker woman whom he had just assaulted, when he says, "Lasus and Simonides were contesting against each other for the singing prize. Lasus said, 'Damned if I care'" (Eugene O'Neil Jr, tr.).

In Book 6 of his *Histories*, Herodotus had recorded Hippokleides' reply to Cleisthenes as "Ou phrontis Hippokleidei!" ("Hippokleides doesn't care!").

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2

**LITERARY  
LIVES**



# Gambling, Debt, and Literary Fortune

Benjamin Shull

Andrew D. Kaufman, *The Gambler Wife: A True Story of Love, Risk, and the Woman Who Saved Dostoyevsky*. Riverhead Books, 400pp., \$30 cloth, \$18 paper.

Alex Christofi, *Dostoevsky in Love: An Intimate Life*. Bloomsbury Continuum, 256pp., \$35 cloth, \$15 paper.

**I**N JULY 1865, FYODOR DOSTOYEVSKY SIGNED A CONTRACT with the publisher Fyodor Stellovsky that obligated him to produce a new novel by November of the following year. If Dostoyevsky were to miss the deadline, the contract stipulated, he would forfeit the rights to and income from everything he wrote over the next nine years.

In the months that followed, Dostoyevsky concerned himself not with the novel he owed Stellovsky but with writing *Crime and Punishment*, the story of a poor student in Petersburg who, convinced he has the right to transcend the staid morality of his time and place, murders an old pawnbroker and her sister. *Crime* was serialized over the course of 1866 to wide acclaim, and it brought its cash-strapped author a regular income. But Dostoyevsky was still contractually bound to produce a separate novel for Stellovsky; a month out from the deadline, he hadn't written a single line.

Enter Anna Grigoryevna Snitkina, a 20-year-old stenography student whom Dostoyevsky hired to help him finish the manuscript for *The Gambler*, as the novel would be known. Anna's heroic efforts allowed Fyodor to finish the book in time, and soon after it was published, the two were married.

Andrew D. Kaufman begins *The Gambler Wife: A True Story of Love, Risk, and the Woman Who Saved Dostoyevsky* by narrating the initial encounter between Anna and the famous author. On the morning of October 4, 1866, Anna arrived at Fyodor's Petersburg apartment, where she was let in by the maid. "Two minutes later,"

Kaufman writes, “Dostoyevsky appeared. Without so much as a greeting, he commanded Anna to go to his study while he fetched tea. And then he was gone again.” When “the enigmatic fellow she’d encountered earlier reappeared,” Anna strived to project confidence. “This was a moment she had been anticipating longer than she might have cared to admit.”

The first meeting between employee and employer was a strained affair. Fyodor acted irritably and condescendingly toward Anna, criticizing her dictation skills and offering up misogynistic platitudes about women’s lack of fitness for work. Over the course of the month, however, Fyodor became gradually more impressed with Anna’s abilities as a stenographer, and work on the novel proceeded swiftly. The manuscript of *The Gambler*, the story of a young man who, like the author, was hopelessly addicted to roulette, was finished on October 29th and submitted the next day. Though not one of the author’s best-loved novels, its publication saw him through a time of professional crisis, and it most certainly would not have been finished if not for Anna.

Fyodor and Anna’s collaboration on *The Gambler* is also retold in Alex Christofi’s *Dostoyevsky in Love: An Intimate Life*. This short, unorthodox biography, despite its title, is not merely a chronicle of Dostoyevsky’s romantic history. (He’d been married and widowed before he wed Anna.) Christofi, a London-based writer and editor, intersperses Dostoyevsky’s correspondence, fictions and other written work to create a real-time psychological portrait of his subject.

The beginning of Christofi’s chapter on *The Gambler*, for instance, begins with a snippet from a letter Dostoyevsky wrote to a friend in July 1866: “I’m exceedingly anxious about Stellovsky, and I even see him in my dreams.” Christofi later reproduces a conversation in which Fyodor, elliptically, tries to gauge whether Anna could love a man like him, and inserts the following quote from *Crime and Punishment* as an aside: “Nothing in the world is harder than candor.”

The author puts this technique to use while recounting the great dramas of Dostoyevsky’s life: birth and upbringing in Moscow; membership in the radical Petrashevsky Circle; death sentence, last-minute commutation and exile to hard labor in Siberia; return from exile and repeated gambling binges abroad; battles against epilepsy and creditors; the literary successes. And, yes, his romantic history, including his marriage (and professional collaboration) with Anna. While Joseph Frank’s multi-volume biography remains the definitive life of Dostoyevsky, Christofi’s book is a well-crafted distillation of his life and work.

Kaufman, a lecturer in Slavic Languages and Literatures at the University of Virginia, does an admirable job in *The Gambler Wife* placing his subject in her milieu. Born in Petersburg in 1846, Anna came of age during a period of social awakening in Russia. She considered herself a

“girl of the sixties,” as feminists of her generation styled themselves in the wake of Emperor Alexander II’s campaign of social reform, which included the abolition of serfdom in 1861.

To establish context for Anna’s life and thought, Kaufman points to Nikolai Chernyshevsky’s 1863 novel *What Is To Be Done?*, which Kaufman calls a “bible” for Russian feminists in the 1860s. Chernyshevsky’s heroine is Vera Pavlova, a woman who flouts conservative Russia’s narrow expectations of her. Vera Pavlova, Kaufman writes, was “one of the earliest agents of women’s liberation in Russian fiction, exhibiting willpower, social consciousness, and the capacity for pragmatic action—the very model of a modern, emancipated woman.” Though Anna left no thoughts about the novel, published when she was 16, Kaufman writes that she “would almost certainly” have read it or at least been familiar with its ideals.

Anna and Fyodor were wed on February 15, 1867, in Petersburg’s Troitse-Izmailovsky Cathedral. From the start, Dostoyevsky proved a difficult man to be married to. At a family dinner a few nights after their wedding, he suffered a series of epileptic attacks. “What a dreadful night I spent,” Anna wrote of that evening. “It was then that I realized . . . the full horror of Fyodor Mikhailovich’s disease.” (Her memoirs are quoted to good effect in Kaufman’s chronicle.) Fyodor’s seizures, and Anna’s efforts to nurse him back to health, were a constant of their marriage—as were money troubles, exacerbated by Fyodor’s pathological gambling addiction. Yet so too was their fruitful literary collaboration, which also resulted in Dostoyevsky’s *The Idiot* (1869), *Demons* (1872), *The Adolescent* (1875) and his masterpiece, *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880).

In April, the newlyweds embarked on a honeymoon that was meant to last three months, but due to Dostoyevsky’s inability to pay back creditors, they wouldn’t return to Russia for four years. It was a period of financial desperation, as Dostoyevsky gambled away all their money in German spa towns. The couple’s despair was compounded by the death of their infant daughter, Sonya, in 1868. To say the marriage was tested would be an understatement; Anna would repeatedly pawn her clothing and jewelry to feed her husband’s habit and keep them financially afloat, even as Fyodor was sending overtures to his old flame Polina Suslova, who inspired *femme fatale* figures in a number of his novels. (Anna, in an effort to stave off an affair, began her own illicit correspondence with Polina.)

At one point during this long exile, Anna, who several times considered leaving her profligate husband before thinking better of it, took matters into her own hands. The title of Kaufman’s book takes on an additional meaning as he recounts a gambling play of Anna’s own. In Baden-Baden, after Dostoyevsky blew through a sum that had been set aside to pay the rent, she rushed to the casino to try her hand recouping the money her husband lost. Kaufman writes:

She staked a thaler on the first twelve numbers and won two. Then she bet on the last twelve, and won another two. That put her up by four thalers. Then she lost three times in a row, only to win back two thalers, then another four, then lose two, then win five. She was up by seven, now eight, or one hundred ten dollars in today's money. It was a terrific roll, she knew—just the time for her to quit the table, as she'd so often advised Dostoyevsky to do after a winning streak.

But then she started losing, after which her husband appeared, reprimanding her for being in the casino and bidding her to leave. Unlike Dostoyevsky, Kaufman points out, “she had managed to leave the tables with only one thaler less than she'd come with.”

In 1871, while the couple was living in Dresden, Dostoyevsky was struggling mightily to complete *Demons*, his response to the nihilist fervor he saw overcoming Russia's intelligentsia. The couple was in the familiar position of staking their livelihood, nay, their survival, on the success of a new novel. Anna, discerning how intertwined her husband's creative fire had become with his gambling addiction, took the audacious step of recommending he take a trip to the casino in Wiesbaden. “It was an enormous gamble,” Kaufman writes, “but the sacrifice was, Anna knew, essential.”

Of course he lost everything, but the episode seemed to finally reveal to him the true depth of his habit, that it threatened not only his marriage but the life of his wife. Before returning to Dresden, he wrote to Anna: “I'll remember this my whole life and bless you every time, my angel. No, now I'm yours, yours inseparably, entirely yours.”

Kaufman's book, ostensibly focused on Anna, reads for stretches at a time like a biography of the more famous husband, though given the comparative volume of available material about each, that's rather understandable. Anna truly comes into her own in the book's latter pages, which discuss her prowess as a publisher and businesswoman. The couple finally returned to Russia in the summer of 1871, and *Demons* was serialized over the following year. But money was still a concern, bidding Anna to research the financial prospects of starting a publishing business to bring out her husband's works. On January 22, 1873—“a day that Anna would proudly remember as the start of her career as a publisher”—a Petersburg newspaper ran an advertisement for a stand-alone volume of *Demons*. Bookstores began clamoring to carry it. Before the end of the year, Anna sold 3,000 copies; over the next couple of years, the solo edition of *Demons* netted a profit of 4,000 rubles—around \$55,000 in today's money.

In 1874, Anna brought out the first stand-alone edition of *The Idiot*, which had flopped when first serialized in 1868-1869 but now found commercial success. With Fyodor's gambling under control, and Anna's competence selling his works, the couple's money problems gradually began to dissipate. A new edition of

*Notes From the House of the Dead*, Dostoyevsky's autobiographical account of life in the gulag, published a decade before, soon appeared. "They were full partners now," Kaufman writes of husband and wife. "Beyond participating in his creative work as his stenographer, first reader, and editor, [Anna] also controlled all other aspects of their publishing enterprise: negotiating with paper suppliers, typesetters, printers, and booksellers, and handling almost all of their business correspondence." This fruitful arrangement continued until Dostoyevsky's death in 1881, a year after the publication of *The Brothers Karamazov*, one of the towering artistic achievements of world history.

Anna outlived her husband by 37 years, dying at the age of 71 in 1918. She spent her widowhood championing her husband's literary legacy. She brought out a volume of his collected works and successfully lobbied the government to amend a 1910 law stipulating that an artist's family would lose the copyrights on their forebear's works after thirty years. She would ultimately sell these copyrights to a publisher for the sum of 150,000 rubles.

Dostoyevsky worried about the direction Russia's radical movement was headed. Emperor Alexander II was assassinated by revolutionaries a month after Dostoyevsky's death. In 1917, the penultimate year of Anna's life, the Bolsheviks took power in Russia. Five days after the February Revolution commenced, Kaufman writes, the Bolsheviks broke into a sanitarium on the outskirts of Petersburg where Anna was staying. They were searching for a government official who they believed was hiding there. Anna had ample reason to be scared, seeing that she was the widow of "nineteenth-century Russia's most passionate voice for conservatism, a man who had spent the last decade of his life warning Russians against these very revolutionaries."

She pleaded with them not to hurt her. "Don't be afraid," the group leader responded. "We're not here for you. We know who you are and won't do anything bad to you." As he explained to another sanitarium guest: "We won't bother her. We respect Dostoyevsky." If not for Anna Snitkina, her famous husband's literary collaborator, who saw him through the throes of ill-health and a gambling addiction, and brought out his works to a wide readership, they likely would have felt different. 1

# The Power of Place and Time

Lydia Pyne

Cynthia Haven, *Czesław Miłosz: A California Life*. Heyday Books, 256pp., \$26 cloth.

**I**T IS HARD TO IMAGINE A BIT OF Americana that is more steeped in its own mythos than California and its writers.

Geologically speaking, California formed gradually over tens of millions of years as one tectonic plate was subducted under another. Its mountain ranges separate the state into a series of distinct geographies, each with their own ecologies and environments. California's hundreds of fault lines mean that earthquakes and tremors are far from rare as plates slip and slide past each other in near-constant tectonic movement. The deep time conditions for what we've come to know as "California" were set, literally, eons before writers, poets, and thinkers explored California's basins and ranges, its gray bay mists, its redwoods, its deserts, its histories, its cultures, its California-ness—its *esse* or 'being.'

In the cadre of quintessential California writers, one would be hard-pressed to find mention of the Polish poet Czesław Miłosz. However, in her new book, *Czesław Miłosz: A California Life*, Cynthia Haven explores Miłosz's four decades living in Berkeley, California, arguing that California was foundational to Miłosz's writing

career—that Miłosz ought not to be "only" considered a Polish poet, but ought to be thought of and written about as a writer and poet shaped by the Golden State.

*Czesław Miłosz: A California Life* is one of a publishing initiative from Heyday called "California lives." These biographical essays center on women and men who have built California to be the entity that we think it is today—those Californians who made and spoke for the place that they live. How does Miłosz fit into that? What could be more of a California archetype, a California life, perhaps even a California cliché, Haven argues, than a mid-century émigré coming to a place that is held up as a place, a state of mind, of constant reinvention?

California for Miłosz was anything but inevitable. (Indeed, Haven lets Miłosz's words carry this sentiment with his quote, "I did not choose California. It was given to me. / What can the wet north say to this scorched emptiness?") Miłosz emigrated to America after living stateless in France for over ten years, when Berkeley's Slavonic Studies program reiterated an invitation for him to join the faculty in 1960, once the braying McCarthyism of the 1950s that had kept his U.S. visa out of reach for so long had died down.

Although Miłosz had a somewhat cantankerous relationship with the state during his time there, the state's *natura* offered an aesthetic sanctuary for the poet in exile. Miłosz's writing "raised the stakes" for American poetry, as Haven quotes Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Robert Hass saying. "Eventually, he considered himself one of us, and he wrote some of his most arresting poems about our landscape and history," Haven tells us. He also wrote deeply ambivalent poems about some of California's denizens (such as Allen

Ginsberg); he championed Robinson Jeffers when the poet had been critically rejected, although Haven describes Miłosz’s reaction to Jeffers’s work as “horror and fascination.”

Czesław Miłosz was born in 1911 to a Polish-speaking family in Lithuanian territory—what was then part of Imperial Russia. The Miłosz family set down roots in Wilno (now Vilnius), only to be displaced by the Russian Revolution, eventually settling in Szetejnie, Lithuania. Prior to World War II, he traveled to Paris, published poetry upon his return to Wilno, and began working on translating T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*. He stayed in Warsaw through its destruction, eventually captured and held as in a prisoner transport camp in 1944, rescued only by chance. From 1945 to 1951, Miłosz served as a cultural attaché for Poland; he and his family moved between New York City, Washington D.C., and Paris. In 1951, Miłosz traveled to Paris and defected from Poland leaving his wife and two sons in New York City. (In 1950, his wife Janka had been pregnant and unable to return with Miłosz to Paris from the United States.) It wasn’t until 1960 that political circumstances changed enough for him to be granted a visa to the U.S.

that Miłosz’s early California writing reflects a loneliness: the solitude of being physically removed from, and unread in, his native Poland. In the subsequent decades, Miłosz’s Grizzly Peak residence became a pilgrimage of sorts for poets, writers, and translators like Robert Hass, Robert Pinsky, Lillian Vallee, and many, many others.

One of the most poignant parts of *Czesław Miłosz: A California Life* comes through the author’s own connections to Miłosz; as a Californian herself, Haven neatly inserts herself into Miłosz’s California story. (“Well, we’re all from somewhere, aren’t we?” she points out about California’s demographics when the series editor asks if Miłosz can really be considered a Californian.) While working for the *Los Angeles Times*, she was one of the first to interview Miłosz after he won the 1980 Nobel prize. In early 2000, Haven again met with Miłosz at his home (“our first meeting had to be organized with a precision and forethought that is routinely required for a space launch”) and again a few weeks later. (“It was a lucky coin in my life; they were the last media interviews he gave in America.”)

## **What could be more of a California archetype, a California life, perhaps even a California cliché, Haven argues, than a mid-century émigré coming to a place that is held up as a place, a state of mind, of constant reinvention?**

The bulk of his literary career in California took place during his career as a tenured professor at the University of California, Berkeley, beginning with his move there in 1960. Although grateful to be reunited with his family, Haven suggests

As Haven recounts her interviews with Miłosz, she tells of asking him to expand upon the themes of *être* (“to be”) and *devenir* (“to become”) that recur in his work. (She notes that Miłosz dodges the question a bit.) What Miłosz does talk about is the

ever-revolving, the pushing and pulling of being pulled between the past and the present—a form of nostalgia. It would be easy for an author to take their Miłosz-adjacent experiences and to write it as its own bit of mawkishness, a brush with celebrity. (And what could be more California than a trope about celebrity?) In Haven's telling, however, her connections to Miłosz and his California intelligentsia are introduced in order to illustrate the social network of people and ideas built up at his Grizzly Peak residence in Berkeley, to frame how widely and deeply Miłosz's influence was—and is—felt, almost two decades after his death.

It's impossible to talk about Miłosz without talking about the Nobel, and Haven uses Miłosz's 1980 award as a fulcrum point to guide the narrative arc for Miłosz's time at Berkeley—offering readers a “before” and an “after” to Miłosz's career and writings. To contemporary readers, Miłosz's Nobel prize reads almost as a historical inevitability. (Indeed, in the Miłosz mythos that Haven recounts, there is a famous exchange between Czesław's first wife, Janka, and an official when Czesław's U.S. visa was yet again blocked in the 1950s. “You'll regret it, because he's going to win the Nobel Prize!” Janka yells.) But it's easy to forget that Miłosz saw himself in those pre-Nobel years as wandering in exile, lonely—writing, writing, wondering if anyone would read what he had written. In *A California Life*, Haven's readers come to understand just how much it cut Miłosz to not be read widely, especially in Poland.

Fundamentally, however, Miłosz had an unsettled relationship with California. Haven is quick to point out Miłosz's longstanding ambivalence to the state, even as it was his refuge from the mad calamities

of the twentieth century. (In *Visions from San Francisco Bay*, Miłosz himself wrote “Our species is now on a mad adventure. We are flung into a world which appears to be a nothing, or, at best, a chaos of disjointed masses we must arrange in some order.”) Haven builds each chapter as a bibliographic essay, complex and dense with names, stories, and connections—so much so that it's hard to imagine someone unfamiliar with Miłosz's life picking this up as their first foray into Miłosz's work.

“California shaped Miłosz's thinking, and in ways that we haven't fully recognized or acknowledged,” Haven argues. “Perhaps the reason is that California itself is not understood.” At first glance, the two geographic threads in Miłosz's life—California and Eastern Europe—appear to be at odds with each other in everything from history, to language, to time, to nature. The underlying bedrock of each, so to speak, is so incomparable and so removed from each other that these two worlds might seem to be two tectonic plates slipping, sliding, and subducting against each other. These two worlds “transfigured him from a poet writing from one corner of the world to a poet who could speak for all of it,” Haven notes, “from a poet focused on history to a poetry concerned with modernity and who, always, had his eyes fixed on forever.”

After the fall of communism in Poland, Miłosz began to divide his time between Berkeley and Kraków. When Miłosz died in Kraków in 2004, California became a middle ground in the geography of his life and writing, representing the possibilities of a new home and the power of place to shape and inform aesthetic sensibilities. *Czesław Miłosz: A California Life* reminds us of the power of place and time.



# Revelation Without Resolution

Jason Walker

*Flannery*, directed by Elizabeth Coffman and Mark Bosco.  
Long Distance Productions, 2019. 1 hr., 36 min.

**I** CAN'T TELL YOU HOW OLD I WAS WHEN I READ FLANNERY O'CONNOR for the first time—I suspect somewhere around eleven or twelve. My great aunt, who taught school for almost sixty years, had a large collection of books—she heard O'Connor speak at East Texas State University (now Texas A&M-Commerce) in 1962—and my guess is that whatever story it was came from her library. In Mrs. Landers' eleventh-grade English class and twice again as an undergrad, I read "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," and in graduate school I read her novels, *Wise Blood* and *The Violent Bear It Away*. In short, Flannery O'Connor has been part of my life for most of my life.

It was in graduate school that what has now become something of a love affair began. I had the very good fortune of taking a course titled "Masters of American Literature: Gothic Fiction." It was taught by a professor whose passion for Southern Gothic literature was palpable. That was the semester that I read both of O'Connor's novels as well as William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*, *Light in August*, and other non-Southern American gothic fiction. All of the work we studied that semester was good, but Flannery... Flannery stuck with me. Although I don't remember when I first read her work, I know that is when I fell in love. So, I was thrilled when I learned in late 2019 of a new documentary film of her life, *Flannery: The Storied Life of the Writer from Georgia*. And I was even more thrilled when The UT Dallas Arts & Humanities Association of Graduate Students welcomed its creators to our 2021 Research, Art, and Writing Graduate Conference as keynote speakers.

Produced by Elizabeth Coffman, scholar and documentary filmmaker, and noted O'Connor scholar Mark Bosco, SJ, *Flannery* is a broad retrospective on the life of one of America's most enigmatic and arguably misunderstood authors. Mary Steenburgen provides narration in a folksy, down-home Georgian accent and tone eerily

similar to O'Connor's own. Her readings are voiced over animations suitably grotesque for the stories they illustrate, and an original music score by Miriam Cutler. *Flannery* features interviews with celebrity fans such as Conan O'Brien, Tommy Lee Jones, and Bruce Springsteen. Alice Walker, author of *The Color Purple*, who grew up across the road from O'Connor's home, literary critic Hilton Als, and other authors, critics, biographers, and scholars round out the roster of contributors. The film is also sprinkled with archival footage of O'Connor's friend and editor Sally Fitzgerald, her publisher Robert Giroux, and other notable figures from her life, as well as rarely seen television footage of the author herself.

*Flannery* is written as a rather encyclopedic entry of O'Connor's life—from her birth in Savannah into a family with a long and deeply rooted history in Georgia, to her untimely death at the age of thirty-nine, a victim of lupus, the same disease that had killed her father more than twenty years earlier. But this film is far from simply being the sort of reference a high school student might use for biographical information in a book report. Instead of fading into the long list of monotone biopics, its creative and imaginative production qualities invite viewers to be participants in O'Connor's life, rather than mere observers. The evocations of her childhood and adolescence are both nostalgic and melancholic. In her early years in Savannah and then in Milledgeville after her father's fortunes turned as a result of the Great Depression, O'Connor's family was a constant presence. Her parents are portrayed as heavily influential in O'Connor's youth. Her father, Edward, doted on young Mary Flannery and worked to provide so that she wanted for nothing. Her mother Regina on the other hand, no less loving, made sure that while Flannery's head dreamed her feet stayed firmly planted on the ground—a role she never gave up.

Coffman and Bosco avoid deep dives into O'Connor's work, focusing instead on how events in her life and in the post-ww11 American landscape influenced it. Her staunch Roman Catholic faith is present in all of her work. Each of her characters meets with a moment of redemption, however obscure it might be and often whether they want it or not. O'Connor's time at the Iowa Writers Workshop—her first experience away from her rather sheltered if not secluded upbringing—did nothing to diminish her faith. Biographer Brad Gooch describes how O'Connor “sweetly and innocently” worked out with help from a priest how her Catholic faith and her writing could coexist. In her prayer journal she prayed to God about her desire to “write a good novel.” After three years in Iowa, she was invited to come to Yaddo, a retreat for artists located outside Saratoga Springs, New York. There she met and developed a crush on Robert Lowell, which proved a somewhat dubious encounter. Perhaps out of devotion, naivete, or both, O'Connor found herself wrapped up in Lowell's attempt to bring down Elizabeth Ames, the director of Yaddo, for communist sympathies. As a result, O'Connor

and many of the other writers left the enclave, and she found herself for a brief time in New York City. It was during this time she was introduced to Sally and Robert Fitzgerald, who became lifelong friends, advisors, and editors. O'Connor's travels and experiences during these years would prove remarkably important to her future as an author as they were, with a few exceptions, her only forays away from home.

More than half of *Flannery* is devoted to the last thirteen years of her life spent living with her mother after her diagnosis with lupus in 1951. What was intended to be a visit home became a permanent move, as O'Connor quickly became unable to care for herself without help. Her illness and confinement, however, did not stop her work. Sally Fitzgerald refers to them as "grist for her mill," noting that her stories are set in the rural South and are populated with "broken bodies" much like her own.

Although she was limited in her ability to travel, O'Connor was not completely isolated from the rest of the world. She communicated regularly by letter with a number of friends and fans. She also received a number of visitors, one of whom became more to her than just a regular face on the farm. Erik Langkjaer, a handsome young publishing representative, visited O'Connor several times, and became something of a love interest to her. The romance between O'Connor and Langkjaer was not to be, however. Upon returning to his home in Denmark for a summer visit, he was soon engaged to be married. O'Connor was heartbroken to receive news of his engagement in a letter some time later.

In the last few years of her life, O'Connor was incredibly productive, mastering the art of short story writing and producing her second novel *The Violent Bear It Away*. She also traveled occasionally on invitations to speak to different groups around the country. Given that she never made much money from her fiction, these speaking engagements were largely responsible for her income. As her health continued to decline, she reluctantly agreed to visit the shrine at Lourdes, France, at the encouragement of her cousin who, along with her mother, hoped for a miraculous cure. Despite a short-lived improvement in her condition, O'Connor was soon found to have a large tumor, which had to be surgically removed in early 1964. She spent her final days furiously writing to finish her last collection of short stories before her death on August 3 of that year.

In the final, poignant scenes of the documentary, O'Connor is remembered for the remarkable and lasting contribution she made to American literature in the span of such a relatively short career. The film closes with the last lines from one of her last short stories, "Revelation": "At length she got down and turned off the faucet and made her slow way on the darkening path to the house. In the woods around her the invisible cricket choruses had struck up, but what she heard were the voices of the souls climbing upward into the starry field and shouting hallelujah."

## What is most appealing about O'Connor's work is that, in it, she is not afraid to look into the unknown and let it remain unknown—to give it revelation without resolution.

There has been some criticism leveled regarding the lack of depth and time which Coffman and Bosco devote to the more controversial aspects of O'Connor's life and work, particularly her attitudes about race, segregation, and civil rights. While there may well be some validity to those criticisms, given the importance of the issues, they are not ignored. They are raised, discussed, and dealt with honestly and fairly. O'Connor was a complex person, living during a complex time. Regrettably, she did not live long enough for us to know how her attitudes would have evolved. Lengthy speculation would have not served the purposes of the film.

*Flannery* is a film worth taking the time to watch. For casual O'Connor readers, it is a fascinating look at the life of an author who led a somewhat inauspicious life and about whom not a lot is known. For ardent fans, it is a reminder of why she is so beloved and why her work remains important and captures our imaginations some sixty years after her death.

What is most appealing about O'Connor's fiction is not her characters, settings, or often even the stories themselves. What is most appealing about her work is that, in it, she is not afraid to look into the unknown and let it remain unknown—to give it revelation without resolution. Alice Walker describes it as her ability to go “straight to the craziness without trying to make the craziness black or white...[she] just looked at the mystery of the craziness.” Her life and experiences taught her to see the mystery inherent in humanity and in creation and not try to solve the riddle. O'Connor teases everything but forces nothing.

In a 1961 article for *Holiday* magazine, “Living with a Peacock,” O'Connor wrote that:

When the peacock has presented his back, the spectator will usually begin to walk around him to get a front view; but the peacock will continue to turn so that no front view is possible. The thing to do then is to stand still and wait until it pleases him to turn. When it suits him, the peacock will face you. And you will see in a green-bronze arch around him a galaxy of gazing, haloed suns. This is the moment when most people are silent.

That short paragraph immaculately captures my experience reading O'Connor. The enigmatic nature of her work, often conveyed as much by what she doesn't write as what she does, is for me, as a reader,

student, and educator both frustrating and captivating. It is often the missing elements that prove the most telling in the end, and despite my best efforts, those elements cannot be forced into appearance. However, when I sit with the story — when I let it be what it is — the peacock eventually turns his tail feathers my way and the true beauty of her work comes into full view.

In the last couple of years I've become more than just a lover of her work. As a student of Flannery O'Connor, I've discovered that the more I learn about the person, the more her words mean, especially in the times we live in now. It's true with many, if not most authors, that their writing is, at the very least, reflective of their own experiences. With O'Connor, every word I read reveals a life that is not only reflected in her work, but that is inextricably linked to it. The deeper I dive, the deeper I want to dive. Her work is as important today as it was when she penned it so many years ago.

Coffman and Bosco's film serves as a reminder why Flannery O'Connor remains one of the most important American writers of all time. She was imperfect and flawed, to be sure, but she recognized her flaws and did her best to work through them in a way that generations to come could learn from. And we are the better for it. ♪

# Not Furnishing Factual Answers

Sean Hooks

*Robert Trammell, Jack Ruby & The Origins of The Avant-Garde in Dallas and Other Stories.* Introduction by Ben Fountain; afterword by David Searcy. Deep Vellum Publishing, 308pp., \$17 paper.

**R**OBERT TRAMMELL IS AN AVATAR of the Dallas underground. In the introduction to Deep Vellum's new trade paperback edition of Trammell's *Jack Ruby & The Origins of the Avant-Garde in Dallas and Other Stories* (the title novella was first issued in 1987 as essentially self-published samizdat via Trammell's own Barnburner Press), National Book Award-winner Ben Fountain reveals Trammell as a 1960s wild man inhabiting the 1980s, a sort of Texan Bukowski-Hopper hybrid who at one point squatted in Oslo, Norway, and earlier, while a student at Southern Methodist University, was nearly run down by ultraconservative billionaire and propaganda-meister H.L. Hunt. Trammell spent time in a violent prison for possession of a tiny amount of marijuana, then later served as a fellow at The Dallas Institute of Humanities and Culture. His 2006 obituary (he died fittingly in Old East Dallas) in *The Dallas Morning News* dubs him a "beloved Texas poet whose ancestors helped establish the earliest frontier settlements in East Texas" and whose "work appeared in over 200 magazines including *Southwest Review*, *Exquisite Corpse*, *Another Chicago Magazine*, and *The Texas Observer*.

Bob spoke his mind whatever the situation and cut a wide and irreverent swath wherever he went."

Trammell's trippy treatise interpreting Jack Ruby's murder of Lee Harvey Oswald as an attempt at performance art initially picked up a readership in conspiracy circles, among assassination buffs mining buried nuggets and alt-truths in increasingly byzantine quarters. If this reminds you of the ever-questioning Nicholas Branch, the CIA operative compiling a secret treatise on the Kennedy assassination in Don DeLillo's acclaimed novel *Libra*, pull up a stool and let's jaw.

I'm in my forties now, a North Texas newbie to the Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex, and Trammell commands my attention due to his reputation as overlooked *artiste* ("Relatable," the writer deadpans *sotto voce*). As a late gen-Xer, I was in my teens when Oliver Stone's JFK became pop culture's highest-grossing reckoning with the American crime of the century (with all due respect to O.J. and the Lindbergh baby), a wild and speculative swirl of phone-bugging, smoke-filled backrooms, John Candy's Louisiana drawl, Jack Lemmon muttering about Operation Mongoose, Kevin Costner as the bespectacled agitator Jim Garrison, and Donald Sutherland going full-on crazy-wall-guy in a near orgasmic extrapolation about an American coup foisted by Lyndon Johnson and a cabal of ne'er-do-wells, the cigar chomping muckety-mucks "who really run America" like corpulent wizards of Oz.

When asking my students at the University of Texas at Arlington about the defining features of Dallas, almost everybody goes right to football's Cowboys, but only the history buffs and alpha-achievers raise their hands and shout out JFK. Always just those three letters, as if referring to a street, stadium, or airport. Not President Kennedy. No mention of Dealey Plaza, second shooters, or the grassy knoll, and then a *Seinfeld* allusion from their professor that draws little response. Nothing about the larger Kennedy clan or the Zapruder film, Junior's salute or Jackie O's sunglasses. No reference to that lone Catholic POTUS who got himself into the Oval Office by thrashing the less attractive Nixon via television, the handsome young prez who used to shtup Marilyn Monroe and lucked his way out of the Cuban Missile Crisis. Not a "poxed and suppurated Philoctetes," as Christopher Hitchens called Kennedy, whose assassination has, Hitchens argued, "reached an actuarial point of diminishing returns... the colossal images of September 11, 2001, have easily deposed the squalid scenes in Dallas, of the murders of Kennedy and Oswald, which once supplied the bond of a common televised melodramatic 'experience.'"

That melodrama has been wrought into varied forms of postmodern art, from intentionally subversive takes like John Waters's *Eat Your Makeup* (starring Divine in the pink pantsuit and pillbox hat) and Andy Warhol's *Since* (with various "factory girls" and "superstars" playing JFK) to the quasi-camp of Kevin Costner's second go-around in JFK lore, 2000's *Thirteen Days*. Of more recent vintage is *Mad Men*'s presentation, the penultimate episode of Season 3 where Don Draper's workplace is interrupted by news of Kennedy's death ("What the hell is going on?" Don intones), inciting mass-grief solemnity which in mere days turns to full-blown unheld-center chaos invading the Draper home, his wife Betty's afternoon TV viewing punctured by a

scream as she witnesses Ruby's shooting of Oswald and blares out her own "What is going on?", one aimed not at the husband next to her but at the television itself, the medium-message, a palimpsest, kaleidoscope, and vortex.

That triptych is a good way to describe Robert Trammell's *Jack Ruby & The Origins of the Avant-Garde in Dallas and Other Stories*, particularly the title novella. Reading it, I found it hard not to muse about hysteria on the whole, about Waco and the Koresh compound, the latter's 1993 invasion by the ATF another defining event for my generation and our abiding distrust of governments American and otherwise, or about the hysterical present, where in November of last year, Q-Anoners gathered in Dealey Plaza anticipating the return of the JFK Jr. they believe never died.

I then caught myself wondering who Trammell would be in today's paradigm. Duncan Trussell seems his most likely comp, right down to the name similarity, Trussell the vagabond drug enthusiast, comedian, frequent guest on Joe Rogan's podcast, and co-creator (with Pendleton Ward) of the Netflix animated show *The Midnight Gospel*. Or to push farther towards the extremes, Trammell could be an Alex Jones or an Edward Snowden. Or maybe he'd still be one of those gentle souls misplaced inside a jail.

With "Jack Ruby & the Origins of the Avant-Garde in Dallas," Trammell's satire, initially published at the height of Reaganism, hit too close to the nerve, a text disruptive to the rhythms of the "heart of Texas," a place where irreverence regarding an American tragedy was "too soon!" Those were more reverent times, and in 1986 Jim Schutze's *The Accommodation: The Politics of Race in an American City* (also now in reprint from Deep Vellum) was dropped by Taylor Publishing Company of Dallas for arguing that the civil rights movement never instantiated itself in Dallas, which Schutze

portrayed as a still-segregated city with an aversion to self-interrogation. Schutze also argued that “Dallas has not yet conceded that Dallas did kill Kennedy, by fostering intolerance and by depriving ordinary citizens of the most important source of sanity in American society—political self-determination.”

Whereas Schutze is an emeritus but still active investigative journalist, reporter, and analyst, Trammell’s work reads to me like that of the classic underappreciated-during-his-lifetime wordsmith. His persona may have been too much that of the bearded and ponytailed wastrel, a literary vandal, a trespasser whose Barthelme-inspired yarn made better sense of a president’s daylight murder than the self-serious truth-seekers in their quests to decipher the Warren Report.

## **“Dallas’s Andy Warhol before Andy Warhol was Andy Warhol” is one of Jack Ruby’s many appellations in Trammell’s novella.**

One thing a reader will notice almost immediately upon perusing *Jack Ruby & the Origins of the Avant-Garde* is that Trammell clearly *likes* the crazies. He opens not with two Jacks and a Lee but with Charley Starkweather and Caril Fugate—those most American of teenage spree killers, as reimagined by renowned Texas filmmaker Terrence Malick in his 1973 debut feature *Badlands*, and also by more famous crossovers like Stephen King, who said he would have become a Starkweather if it weren’t for writing, and Bruce Springsteen, who embodied Charley in the first-person murder ballad title track on 1982’s *Nebraska*.

Another fixation of Trammell’s that is more 1960s and 2020s than 1980s is its intercutting and intertextuality, a Burroughs-ish pasted-together text replete with referentiality that reads as internet-anticipating and Sebaldian. One of the crazies for whom Trammell shows affection is Betty Louise Barry, the murderer of Dallas mafioso “Chicken Louie” Ferrantello (she was his pregnant girlfriend), and let’s not forget the Texan origins of self-made experimental horror, a certain masterpiece about massacres and power tools hatched from the mind of Tobe Hooper in 1974. The true madmen are sometimes subversives and artists, but other times are darkness incarnate. Early in his photo-speckled and multi-fonted text, Trammell appends an eerie blurt at another inimically American madman: “Around that time Richard Speck left Dallas for Chicago where he killed seven nurses. We used to play with him in Tennison Park.”

To go back to those misplaced-and-jailed souls, there is a Dylan-esque refusal to play it straight in Trammell, and a mind like mine wonders if one Bob had a chance to catch the other. Both graduated high school in 1959, and Dylan played at SMU’s Moody Coliseum in September of 1965, his first concert ever with The Hawks (later The Band). Dylan contributed an all-timer to the canon of JFK art in his 17-minute epic “Murder Most Foul,” released in March 2020 during the carceral Covid pandemic lockdowns that initiated the decade. It’s easy to postulate a Dylan who’d cheer Trammell’s chutzpah for painting Jack Ruby as part of the historiographic panorama of American weirdos, a lovable local kook, “an unsaddled hothead with hero ambitions,” a man who tended to almost a dozen dogs and took his favorite, his dachshund Sheba, with him when he went riding off to kill Oswald.



Trammell's book is peppered with political folk, plugged-in rock, and music highbrow and low—everyone from Dylan to Frank Zappa, from Iron Butterfly to The Beatles to Mozart. The mélange reads truest, though, when “all those thirsty country music fans from dry Oak Cliff come pouring over the river to drink, to listen to Bob Wills, Ernest Tubbs, Hank Williams,” and where the title novella's first-person narrator (when he gets a word in edgewise amidst the sketches and poems) goes to interact with the “real cultural life of the city” after issuing his thesis on his subject, the former Jacob Rubenstein: “Jack Ruby Knew No Emotional Plateaus.”

This brilliant section announces Trammell's intentions in an anti-establishment bleat we might now call flash fiction, with Ruby as the invisible hand, a nightclub owner who wanted to go highbrow, “rarely seen at gallery or museum openings. But he played a big part behind the scenes in getting the Museum of Contemporary Arts off the ground. There was a flurry of activity. Claes Oldenburg and Robert Rauschenberg were seen in town. The Avant-garde in Dallas was bolting quickly to its finest moment.”

**One thing a reader will notice almost immediately upon perusing “Jack Ruby & the Origins of the Avant-Garde” is that Trammell clearly likes the crazies.**

The headlining novella in a book that also traces and traverses—in astute, aware, and intellectual fashion—the city of Dallas and its most esoteric denizens through

twenty-two Tom Waitsian tales originally released as *The Quiet Man Stories* (The Quiet Man was a dive bar named after the 1952 John Ford/John Wayne western), Trammell's is a punk manifesto, one where Jack Ruby consorts with Fluxus-founder Joseph Beuys, flashes back to his vicious upbringing in Chicago, and holds as touchstones both lesser known entities like the Scrap Iron and Junk Handlers Union and enduring icons like Billy the Kid and Al Capone. Ruby would become one of their imitators, and one of the greatest “impressionists” of the twentieth century, the fifty-six-year-old who shot the twenty-four-year-old who shot the president, and he did it under a newspaper on live TV.

“Dallas's Andy Warhol before Andy Warhol was Andy Warhol” is one of Jack Ruby's many appellations in Trammell's novella. “Jack had read a lot about the history of Dallas,” is the introduction to a beaut of a riff on La Reunion, a Utopianist commune from the 1850s, the first communists to settle on the banks of the Trinity River, and “Jack wanted revenge for them.” In *Libra*, DeLillo presents Ruby as a symptom of Dallas itself, a distillation of contradictions and discrepancies, an abuse-surviving bit player who wanted to be a lead on the national stage, the apotheosis of the common man, adopting his middle name, Leon, in tribute to his friend Leon Cooke who had been killed in a labor dispute. Trammell presents Ruby as inevitable, a death silhouette: “Elvis Presley didn't have all that much to do with it. He just took it to the bank. All those Rock 'n Roll visions charged around inside of Jack's brain, his coup at hand. Already known in many International Cities he'd soon be known in the rest.”

Trammell is largely unknown outside of Dallas, but Ben Fountain calls him “an essential American writer” and opens his introduction with a quote by the vanguard

filmmaker Maya Deren. And like Deren's imagery, Trammell's vision of Ruby as performance artist sticks. Its trenchant causticity also conjures up Richard Linklater's filmic debut, 1990 conspiracy-fest *Slacker*, a shoestring Sundance breakthrough for the Austin filmmaker released a year before Oliver Stone's twice-its-size fabulist dream. The avant-garde sometimes goes mainstream, and while this posthumous publication represents one fate for the creator who didn't get much acclaim, Linklater's filmography is Trammell's antipode as much as he seems unlike prestige boomer Stone. From a comic debut about Austin ennui made for less than \$25K to *School of Rock* grossing well over \$100M, one could call his oeuvre uneven, but at his best Linklater evokes real pathos by veering hard away from the sentimental (*Boyhood* and the *Before* trilogy are essential viewing) and he certainly is a wealthy and successful artist in his own lifetime. Had Trammell had more success during his lifetime, perhaps he'd have developed into the mix of experimental and mainstream creator that Linklater has become, or even returned to the subject of Ruby and the Dallas underworld in another guise, similarly to how Oliver Stone recently directed a documentary project titled *JFK Revisited: Through the Looking Glass*.

To allude to a last cinematic spark fired in my Gen X brain by Trammell's writings, it seems apropos to mention the work of a filmmaker that tried his hand at literary insurrection, Harmony Korine (apical American avant-garde wunderkind) in his 1998 bric-a-brac novel *A Crack-Up at the Race Riots*. This may be the single volume I was most reminded of reading Trammell's. In one of Korine's performance art appearances on David Letterman's program, the host says of *Gummo*, "You've assembled a series of very striking, vivid, disturbing impressions." Korine replies, "That's basically my style." *A Crack-Up at the Race Riots* feints

at many things, but one of its core echoes is of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Crack-Up* (edited by Edmund Wilson), particularly the posthumously collected fragments.

Predictable as it is, it comes back to the American dream. Deren, Malick, and Linklater have devoted hours of celluloid to it. Ben Fountain meditates on it in his own career-making opus *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* (what's more Dallas, TX than football and the military, two institutions whose pageantry is as irony-primed and self-satirizing as it gets?). I also see Fountain's intro as inflected by "Performance and Persona in the U.S. Avant-Garde: The Case of Maya Deren," published by film scholar Maria Pramaggiore in a 1997 issue of *Cinema Journal* from University of Texas Press. Pramaggiore delves into avant-garde celebrity, stardom, and persona—the self-made subversive, the self-publicizing indie artist, the uncompromised chronicler of the crooked. She quotes Manny Farber's thoughts on Deren's "ambition, belief in her own genius, love for esthetic verbalizing" as Deren pushed along a colony of artists on a tiny budget, quite like the indie-publishing endeavors of Trammell's new imprint Deep Vellum and its executive director Will Evans, a mustachioed maestro self-described as "award-winning publisher, writer, translator, bookstore owner, and advocate for the literary arts."

Deren's works are inspired by poetry and dance, and the dynamism of this edition of Trammell's shaggy majesty (what Farber famously called "termite art") entrances in its display of the best aspects of erratic art house films, improvisatory poetry readings, or semi-pro dance recitals. It deflects narrative and refuses to suborn image to story. Through constant intercutting and rearrangement, Trammell is consistently partial, always endeavoring. His mannerism and his repeated, ritualized, almost fetishized subject matter, in its evocations of Deren,

makes Fountain's introductory comparison a nearly perfect one. The reigning perspective? Outsider Art.

"Deren acts as the dreaming protagonist whose body is both divided and multiplied; her movements are repeated, and certain inconsistencies arise which are incapable of recuperation in the figure of the initial dream," Pramaggiore writes of Deren's most influential film, *Meshes of the Afternoon*, a work where "repetition and symbolism displace narrative." A shattered-mirror cinema is what the shards on display in *Jack Ruby & The Origins of the Avant-Garde in Dallas and Other Stories* reflect, rearrange, and reconstitute, giving this underread writer's contributions a remembrance, in destabilized times indeed, both within Texas and without. Trammell merits special consideration in a season where Steven Pedigo argues that Texas has become the bellwether of America, unseating California from its long-held post, and where Elon Musk (whether you think him the second coming of Ford, Barnum, or Madoff) has recently moved

Tesla HQ. Scores more have relocated, the locals constantly tell me, for reasons political or economic, as seekers of freedoms or of jobs.

Texas has a history of iconoclastic scribes, from MacArthur genius art critic Dave Hickey and OG lit blogger Maud Newton to more canonical ones like Cormac McCarthy, Katherine Anne Porter, and Larry McMurtry. *Texas Literary Outlaws: Six Writers in the Sixties and Beyond* by Steven L. Davis covers half a dozen regional male writers while Kimberly King Parsons, writing in LitHub, recommends half a dozen ladies of letters. A last observation then about stardom in the literary world, be it poetry or prose, fiction or not-so-fictional—these are exceptions. Far more often for the truly counter-cultural artist, acknowledgement, or even publication, comes after the creator's death. Trammell would be 83 if he were alive today, and the literary scene would be in a better state for it—as *Jack Ruby & The Origins of The Avant-Garde in Dallas* proves, his art was not a safe or cautious one, and risk-taking art is something we face a dearth of in all formats in the present day. A

# To Like, Or Not To Like?

Jonathan Hartmann

Jonathan Gray, *Dislike-Minded: Media, Audiences, and the Dynamics of Taste*. New York University Press, 272 pp. \$89 cloth, \$29 paper.

**F**OR OVER TEN YEARS, MEDIA theorist Jonathan Gray has pushed beyond studies of fandom, the gathering of likers around their favorite programming, to explore the realm of what he terms dislike. As he explains in *Dislike-Minded*, we live through our favorite television shows much as we live through our pets. Just as dear Fido will always be sweet and harmless, so the programs we fall in love with can do no wrong, at least for the space of our infatuation. In *Dislike-Minded*, Gray turns media studies on its head, using qualitative interviews of more than 200 people to help explain why dislike matters more than simple liking.

Gray begins with our earliest attachment to our parents. To help explain our strong allegiance to our favorites, Gray draws on child psychologist D.W. Winnicott. Babies, says Winnicott, begin to wean themselves from their mothers by connecting with temporary substitutes like blankets and toys.<sup>1</sup> And this phenomenon extends well beyond infancy. As a boy, Gray tells us, he could experiment with independence by hefting a toy light saber and imagining he was Luke Skywalker.

Such behavior, putting ourselves in the shoes of movie or TV characters, can engage us in creating fan fiction—our amateur extensions of official programming.

Certain viewers have always enjoyed taking on others' characters. Starting in the 1970s, they could act as Oakland Athletics exec Billy "Moneyball" Beane or a medieval cleric through role-playing games such as *Fantasy Baseball* and *Dungeons and Dragons*. Today, the Internet has united media fans as never before. Via websites such as [archiveofourown.org](http://archiveofourown.org), enthusiasts have shared responses, often in the form of original stories, to broadcast works. Traditionally underserved populations like immigrant communities, Black women, and queer viewers have been especially active in transforming shows into something that speaks their language. For example, fan fictions have expanded on the televised kiss, back in 1968, between *Star Trek's* Captain Kirk and Officer Uhura, and have written up a romance between Kirk and Officer Spock.

Such experiments complicate our sense of exactly what each work is and what it is not. Following the lead of film critics, television critics have often described each show as a unique work, something produced by a single author. Since the 1960s, however, scholars—media fans *par excellence*—have increasingly discussed media objects as living, changing organisms. Writing in 1977, literary theorist Roland Barthes explained the difference. Like a bound book, a work (a story, book, game, movie, TV show...) "can be held in the hand." In contrast, treating a show as a *text* begins to soften its boundaries. A text, says Barthes, "is held in language, only exists in the movement of a discourse" and "is experienced only in an act of production" that "decants" the work "and gathers it up

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<sup>1</sup> D. W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Press, 1997), 77-78.

as play, activity, production, practice.”<sup>2</sup> Just as our edits of a Wikipedia entry can provide readers with new insight, so our engagement with works-as-media texts contributes to their meaning.

*Star Wars* is a case in point. Thanks in part to fan fiction, our sense of George Lucas’s 1977 *Star Wars*—itself the subject of many official pre- and sequels—has expanded beyond George Lucas’s parameters. Within a year of its release date, Ernie Fosselius paid the film the ultimate homage, parodying it with the low-budget fan fiction *Hardware Wars* (1978). Fosselius sent up the original by casting kitchen appliances as starships, with Ham Salad serving as right-hand man to Fluke Starbucker. On Internet discussion boards, fans tirelessly debate the merits of media texts such as these.

Would that we lived in a world featuring only the programs that pleased us! Gray insists that we most often choose between texts we find bad, and those we find less bad. Here we behave like gamers whose second selves endure injury and death. Such games, to the uninitiated, seem like a waste of time. Who wants to die a *League of Legends* (LoL) death over and over again? By expressing our *LoL* frustration to peers and developing solutions, however, we gain a sense of accomplishment, building on each gaming failure. Since our families and friends choose much of our viewing, we must endure a certain amount of less-than-thrilling material. Like gamers turning disappointment to joy, we may rest secure in our chat-room putdowns of a difficult show, even while putting up a happy front to friends and family.

Gray’s chapter “Performing Identity Through Dislike” focuses on people willing to explain their negative responses to programming. Many of his viewers act as

hatewatchers, who practice “competitive antifandom” by defining themselves in part by what they can’t stand. Many of Roger Ebert’s movie reviews paint him as a typical hater. Ebert’s book *I Hated, Hated, Hated This Movie*,” uses its title to entertain his fellow haters. In his volume *Your Movie Sucks*, Ebert finds *The Hot Chick* (PG-13) “too vulgar for anyone under thirteen, and too dumb for anyone over thirteen.”

Hatewatchers, aka antifans, will often compete online to drown out the positive responses of a show’s fans. Hatewatchers map out boundaries of taste reminiscent of those described in Pierre Bourdieu’s 1979 book *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Writing on France, Bourdieu suggests that dislike is mere snobbery—turning up one’s nose at people one deems beneath one. The Fox sitcom *Married with Children* (1987-1997), certainly offered food for snobs, sending up the midwestern nuclear family by presenting the ultimate cynical household and their annoying neighbors. While some viewers will enjoy such snarkiness; others will avoid it out of principle.

A second set of Gray’s viewers behaved differently than did Ebert and the hatewatchers. This group reported most disliking not the most unwatchable texts—for Ebert, *The Hot Chick*, and for a feminist viewer, *Two and a Half Men*—but those that most disappointed them. For example, viewers drawn to a *Jerry Springer* episode by its implicit promise of thoughtfully depicting gay marriage, were thoroughly disappointed by the show’s dissolving into a typical shout-fest. These viewers put their keystrokes where their dislike is, writing to analyze their reactions to *Married with Children*. Admittedly, without the presence of an interviewer, most do no more than summarize episodes, or at most spin off their own fan fiction.

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<sup>2</sup> Roland Barthes, “From Work to Text.” In *Image Music Text*, translated by Stephen Heath (Glasgow: Fontana Collins, 1977), 155–64.

We may sometimes be conflicted in our liking and disliking. Sports dislike is familiar: Americans dislike the most rich and successful sports franchises (in baseball, the New York Yankees), as there is no fun in a game that is no contest. On the other hand, viewers may simultaneously be ardent fans and griping anti-fans of a sports team such as the Dallas Cowboys. While faithful, these viewers may be quick to fault personnel decisions and harbor negative expectations for the season ahead. As when we call in to a sports talk show, posting to a disliker discussion board allows us to rehearse our response and reaction to the text.

Ultimately, says Gray, dislike helps shape each of our textual relationships. Indeed, he thinks we can use the disliking option for constructive ends. Noting that Americans' engagement with politics happens mainly through programs like Trevor Noah's *The Daily Show*, Gray posits that expressing ourselves through our responses to such

programming engages us in both world politics and issues closer to home. In this regard, several theorists have valorized emotional response as a vital political tool.

As communications scholar Zizi Papacharizzi suggests, the act of policing emotions in politics may censor content and keep many groups from participating.<sup>3</sup> Speaking on activism by women of color, Audre Lorde once said, "We cannot allow our fear of anger to deflect us nor to seduce us" into silence, "for It is not the anger of other women that will destroy us, but our refusal to stand still to listen to its rhythms, to learn within it to move beyond the manner of presentation to the substance, to tap that anger as an important source of empowerment."<sup>4</sup>

During this trying COVID-19 period, Gray's book offers two gifts to public discourse, urging scholars to fill in the gaps left by *Dislike-Minded* while prompting readers to listen more closely to others' hates and dislikes. A

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3 Zizi Papacharizzi, *Affective Publics: Sentiment, Technology, and Politics*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.

4 Audre Lorde, "The Uses of Anger." *Women's Studies Quarterly* 25, nos. 1-2 (1997): 278-85.

# Kyrie, eleison

Tom Palaima

A spool of cord  
A ball of yarn  
A coil of rope  
faith and hope  
that somewhere  
in the unraveling  
and unwinding  
the twisting  
and the tangling  
the entwining  
and refining  
hanging  
by a thread  
is charity.

3

**FOLIO**



**M**arjorie Norman Schwarz's new paintings, which she showed this past winter in *Six Patiences* at 12.26 in Dallas (December 11, 2021–January 22, 2022) grew out of an earlier body of work that she made between 2017 and 2020: a series of vertical canvases of about 36 x 30 inches each, along with some smaller horizontal pictures, which Schwarz painted with water soluble oils in subtle, shifting layers of pastel blues, greens, purples, and pinks at once soft and luminous. Rick Brettell wrote about those painted surfaces as not flat and material but multi-dimensional and vaporous, pictorial spaces that drew in the viewer but in which nothing was tethered or graspable. The new work, made over the course of 2021, is scaled up to twice the size: at 60 x 48 inches each, the six canvases in *Six Patiences* set up an encounter between painting and viewer that is both enveloping and calibrated to the human body. Schwarz has continued to work up her canvases with layers of water soluble oils, unthinned and sparingly applied, but her pictorial fields have become more varied and complex. These fields are decidedly tactile, engaging the body and the sense of touch. Overlapping passages of rhythmic hatching play against shifting, diaphanous grounds. The pastel palette is now punctuated with corals, vermilions, and lapis blues. Space is fragmented--open and sweeping, or close and jagged. The resulting compositions are looser, but more monumental. Monumental not in sheer size, however, but in the scope and seriousness of Schwarz's painterly attention. *Six Patiences* open pictorial worlds on large and small scales, recalling both vast seascapes with dramatic atmospheric disturbances, and close studies of swaths of greening earth.

—Sarah K. Kozlowski

Marjorie Norman Schwarz, *Untitled* (detail), 2021, water soluble oil on canvas, 60 x 48 inches. Photograph by Kevin Todora.





Marjorie Norman Schwarz, *Untitled*, 2021, water soluble oil on canvas, 60 x 48 inches. Photograph by Kevin Todora.




Marjorie Norman Schwarz, *Untitled*, 2021, water soluble oil on canvas, 60 x 48 inches. Photograph by Kevin Todora.



Marjorie Norman Schwarz (b. 1972 in Harvey, IL) received her BFA from Southern Methodist University in Dallas, TX (1999). Schwarz's recent solo exhibitions include: 12.26, Dallas, TX (2021 and 2020); Culture Hole, Dallas, TX (2018); Goss Michael Foundation, Dallas, TX (2015); Sonia Dutton Gallery New York/Austin (2015); Art Palace, Houston, TX (2015); Texas Contemporary, Houston, TX (2015), among others. Recent group shows include: The Art Museum of South Texas, Corpus Cristi, TX (2022); UT Dallas SP/N Gallery, Dallas, TX (2021); Erin Cluley Gallery, Dallas, TX (2019); The Reading Room, Dallas, TX (2018); Site 131, Dallas, TX (2015), among others. Her work resides in the permanent collections of the Dallas Museum of Art and the San Antonio Museum of Art. Schwarz lives and works in Dallas.

Marjorie Norman Schwarz, *Untitled* (detail), 2021, water soluble oil on canvas, 60 x 48 inches. Photograph by Kevin Todora.



4

**MUSICAL  
SPHERES**

# Lightness, Panache and Glistening Sonorities

## The Orchestral Music of Rob Keeley and Robert Carl

Daniel Asia

*Rob Keeley: Orchestral Music.* Toccata Classics TOCCo462, 2020. Compact disc.

*Robert Carl: White Heron.* Boston Modern Orchestra Project; Gil Rose, conductor. BMOP/sound 1076, 2021. Super Audio CD.

**T**HERE ARE A FEW COMPOSERS out there writing exquisite and accessible orchestral music, but they may not necessarily be those who you might have heard of, or who are winning today's prizes. Two of these are Rob Keeley and Robert Carl.

Rob Keeley was born in Bridgend, Wales in 1960. His musical life started with listening to his dad's small record collection and his grandmother's piano playing. Soon, he too was playing piano and oboe, and then singing in the school choir. He studied with Oliver Knussen before he became, well, Oliver Knussen, and composers he fancied early on included late Stravinsky, Carter, Britten, Tippett, Dallapiccola and Messiaen. In the late 80s he studied with Franco Donatoni in Rome and then with Leonard Bernstein and Hans Werner Henze at Tanglewood—the Boston Symphony's summer retreat in the Berkshires, which also includes an important

composers fellowship program. He subsequently taught at King's College London for many years.

Keeley is most known for his well-wrought chamber music. His music follows fairly traditional pathways, displaying an extended tonality within historical forms. It is always finely put together and displays elegant narratives that are full of surprises. This is all to say he is not a firebrand, but rather someone who sees his music fitting comfortably in the history of music.

His Symphony No. 2 dates from 1996, when the composer was thirty-six, and followed by a year from his first. It is in the traditional four movements, in this case Allegro (fast) Scherzo (joking), Adagio (slow), and finally Allegro molto (really fast).

The first movement is spikey and a bit knotty, like chewing on a flavorful piece of flank steak. The language is just a bit dark and intense, but relieved by pointillistic moments which provide air. The harp is used now and then to provide lightness and gentleness. The movement ends with the fading wisps of a solo clarinet, a bit sly and unexpectedly.

The second movement is full of surprise and quick contrasts, as a scherzo should be. It is witty in its alternation of orchestral choirs. It is full of chuckling rhythms, with a dotted eighth/sixteenth note figure pervading.



There a few boozy moments in the strings and relief provided by jaunty solo wind parts. It too ends a little devilishly, with a fading flute figure. The materials are mostly tonal with various known scales and a nice and clear motive that is almost of the vernacular, a 4-3-1 descent played in a swinging figure.

## **Keeley's first movement is spikey and a bit knotty, like chewing on a flavorful piece of flank steak.**

Adagios can be at a speed from fairly slow to glacial. This one is more at a contemplative tempo that never drags or gets dull, which is to say that while there are not tunes to speak of, its motivic materials are always in motion. I do not hear it as *adagio molto*, but its slower sections with just string chords might almost fit this description. (Incidentally, their harmonies are suave and luscious.) This movement finally does really end, but somewhat offhandedly, with a low bass note in the basses signaling its conclusion.

The *Allegro molto* is just that: fast, syncopated, and humorous. Moments of silence provide real breaks, with clearly delineated phrases. The pacing is sure and contrasts abound. Occasionally the winds come in heckling the others, and the conversation is clear, lean, and to the point. There are moments of delightful repose, with more subdued dynamics; and a clear dimensionality in the orchestration, as it bubbles along, effervescent and light on its toes. This movement has a definitive ending, as it should, since it finishes not just the movement but the entire symphony. This is a delightful piece that goes by much faster than its twenty-three minute duration would suggest.

The Flute Concerto, which dates from 2017, is a work for strings and solo flute and is in three movements with the latter two played without pause. They are *Andantino*, *Adagio*, and then *Allegro molto*. This is the typical format for a concerto, and it is a vehicle where the soloist gets to strut virtuosity and other aspects of great playing, that might include lyricism, spontaneity, and even improvisation.

The first movement is marked *Andantino* which is slightly faster than an *Andante*. If the latter is a walking gait, then the former is perhaps at about a skipping speed. And of course, neither is to be confused with *al dente*, which would refer to slightly undercooked pasta! But I digress. This opening movement starts with a steady pulsation in the strings suggestive of quiet introspection. This then gives way to music that is more speedy and playful. These two attitudes alternate throughout this six-minute movement. It is somewhat neoclassical in its piquant harmonies, syncopated, peppy rhythms, and transparent textures that frequently present a bass pizzicato note to which the upper strings then respond. It has a clear and present harmonic rhythm which is easy to follow, and this movement is perhaps less about virtuosity than a dialogic conversation between the flute and strings. It is playful and perky.

The *Adagio* is all about a dyadic (two-note) figure that is introduced first in a sighing descent, and then in the course of the piece is presented as a leap up. With the first the energy decreases, and with the second there is an increase in energy and tension. At first, both strings and flute present this material. Later in the piece this is varied, with the strings playing the two-note figure as the flute provides commentary thereon with groups of much faster notes. It is a clear and clever variation.

The third and final movement, an *allegro*, is all about speed and pulsation. It opens with

rapid pulsations in high strings against a pedal point in the basses. It is almost like a landscape with flickering light. The middle range is quite empty, so this hollow sound is quite singular in the context of the entire work. The difference might be suggestive of the neo-classic Stravinsky and the Americana of Copland, particularly his Appalachian Spring. There is much fast passage work, with lots of notes per square inch, most of them scalar. At the end a whimsical and almost out of place waltz appears before the final dash. Altogether, it is quite a charming piece.

The triple concerto is for two oboes, an English horn, or the oboe section of an orchestra, and, like the flute concerto, strings. It follows in the footsteps of George Telemann's orchestral suite for three oboes, three violin and basso continuo, which Keeley tells us he admires. You might wish to listen to this fine piece before listening to Keeley's. It is gay and bright and sets you up perfectly for its successor.

The first movement allegro is perky with lovely mixed textures. With the three wind instruments often treated as a group—just like in Telemann's symphony—it presents a sophisticated argument. The second movement scherzo: presto has quicksilver registral shifts and is formed yet again of a dyad either presented as short-short or long-short. The third movement is in three parts: an Andante, quasi-sarabande, and a final presto. The second part, a slow dance in three, is somewhat thick and perhaps a little cumbersome. The final presto is light, delicate and whimsical. In fact this last movement in many respects summarizes the entire journey of the Telemann. It is a fine example of one composer talking to, or commenting on, an earlier colleague and his work, and demonstrative of the continuity of the tradition in this music.

Keeley does something similar with the final piece on the disc, his *Variations for*

*Orchestra*, in which he communes with Elgar and his *Enigma Variations*, also for orchestra. Variations on a theme are a time-honored tradition. One thinks of the Diabelli Variations of Beethoven, or Brahms's Variations on a Theme by Haydn, or Paganini, or Schuman. Mozart wrote many movements in his various serenades of theme and variations. One might consider the process of development in the sonata-allegro format as types of variation. This process presents the opportunity for the composer to create a very wide swath of emotional states, all related very closely. One might therefore consider it proto-romantic, as that period is known for its restatement or reworking of a motive or tune to present widely disparate emotions.

Keeley's *Variations for Orchestra* was written in 2019 and is perhaps a summarization to date of his orchestral style, as well as the influence in the work of his "beloved Elgar." The theme is his own making, formed of rising 6ths and descending 7ths, and the work is formed of fourteen variations. The textures are in the main chamber-like and vary from one variation to the next. A tricky aspect of this form is not to make it too "stop and go," and to also build a workable larger architecture from the small parts. Keeley does this admirably. He accomplishes this by tempo similarities or differences.

The first six variations are all taken at a pretty good clip and each is about a minute long. The seventh is gracefully slow and almost two minutes in length, and provides pleasant relief from the previous speedy music. The fast music is: scherzando for winds and strings, then featuring the clarinet then oboe, highlighting contrapuntal lines, featuring flutes and high strings, a simple dance featuring flute, and then a rather rude dance featuring trombones. The following slow variation features pairs of oboes and rustling pizzicato strings.

Variations 8 to 11 are again quite quick; the music starts with a faux medieval

dance, the theme then coming as a *cantus firmus* in the strings, followed by a blend of timbres with repeated notes, and another dance that features a hopping rhythmic motive. All these variations are about a minute in length, with the exception of one that is almost twice as long. The twelfth variation is again slow and about two and a half minutes long, and contains the culmination or climax of the work. Variation 13 speeds up, and features scurrying upward driving scales in the strings and winds, broad bands of stalwart

brass, and perhaps yet another climax. This leads into the final variation, a Passacaglia-Finale, and an extended coda at about three and one-half minutes in duration. Keeley says that the fugal pizzicato violins sound like raindrops that gradually fill out into a denser musical landscape. The work comes to a somewhat abrupt close, one without a lot of preparation or signaling of its intent.

Keeley's music is genial and filled with lightness and panache. These works are very much worth getting to know.

**W**hite Heron is the title of a new CD of the orchestral music by the American composer Robert Carl. Born in 1954, he is of that generation whose musical development came during the breakdown of modernism and the rise of minimalism and Neo-Romanticism. By his own admission, he started composing somewhat later than most, in his middle college years, and a few of his formative influences were the composer and theorist Jonathan Kramer, and the firebrand Ralph Shapey. His development and transformation has been slow and sure, which has led to these pieces of the 21st-century, as Carl entered maturity. This music, while written in a time of musical totalism and a time of the breakdown between popular and high culture in almost all artistic genres, is still redolent of his studies at Yale and the University of Chicago. That is to say, while Carl's work is post-impressionistic, and about space and time, it utilizes materials in a most sophisticated and, dare one say, classical way. He states that this music is the result of his study and utilization of his personalized harmony, one that is "modeled on the harmonic series." One hears this in many manifestations: Carl creates a hierarchy of intervals from sonorities based on open intervals of the perfect fourth and

fifth, dominant chords, and sonorities of the highest partials including semi-tones. At the same time, he is unafraid to use the densest of chords, including close to or all of the twelve pitches available, which are, however (as in the music of Witold Lutoslawski), spaced to emphasize consonant intervals, giving these dense sonorities a tonal patina. Each of these orchestral works is also a journey, emotional and dramatic, with clear shape and form, and, most importantly, about consequential, and recognizable, musical ideas.

The first work on the disc, *White Heron*, was written in 2012 and is an impressionistic tone poem of nine minutes in duration. It can be described as a soundscape, a term used often in regard to electro-acoustic pieces of the 1970s and 80s that recreated sounds found in nature. Those works took their basis from the night music written by Béla Bartók, who was one of the first to write music of this sort. One also finds allusions in this work to—but who else!—Messiaen, whose compositions almost always included his musical representation, or transliterations, of bird song into the well-tempered scale of twelve pitches that forms the basis of our present musical materials.

Carl's work moves at a pace of slow, meditative time. Pulse is largely absent. The sound of the heron is most frequently found in the trumpets in a descending semi-tonal figure, almost as an *idée fixe*, within a larger sonic world combining fragments of Ives' *The Unanswered Question*, the semi-tonal clouds, brief glissandi of Ligeti, and large sonorities with tonal spacing that is reminiscent of the aforementioned Lutoslawski. The orchestration glistens, with nary a badly judged sound. The work often references back to a floating, one might say, grey-cloudy background of stasis, though it does burst open to luminous chords of open intervals and finally melody, or at least a melodic fragment. It is also dotted with silences that provide both repose and expectancy. A climax occurs at just about the Golden Mean: a melody appears in the strings and then a trumpet that is reminiscent of the Ivesian trumpet's question, formed of a quick large intervallic rise and a longer slower descent, that is repeated a number of times, above an ostinato in the harp. Dynamics, with the exception of the aforementioned climax, are on the soft side. Time has indeed almost stopped, or floats along at a leisurely pace. At the end, the work fades, with string harmonics in a glissando disappearing into the highest range, and finally the bass provides a quick low grounding, as the work gently ends. This is a suave and luscious piece.

*What's Underfoot* is a curious work. It starts in the very highest registral space and over its 16 minutes of duration gradually works its way to the lowest, as if one begins by hearing the highest partials of an elaborate harmonic series only to move on down to the fundamental. This is not done completely linearly—which would end up sounding quite trivial—but along a somewhat wave-like manner, with curvaceous meanderings possessing a hard-edged graceful quality. Along the way, one hears piquant highs of

piccolo, glockenspiel, piano, and violins, with sensual sweeps and repeated figures that again remind of Messiaen's birds. It begins in a slow, stately tempo and then in its unfolding, gradually increases in speed. One could say the same for the density of the materials themselves, as the sound grows from wispy to menacing at its conclusion. Upon each return of its cyclic harmonic progression, it grows in depth of sound and orchestration. High brass make their appearance somewhere in the middle, and the trombones are saved for the concluding third of the piece. There is frequent use of *klangfarbenmelodien* (a tone color melody) and refined two-part counterpoint. The piece moves in fits and starts, with a bold granitic quality, suggestive of Charles Ruggles' music or the canvasses of Clyfford Still. At its conclusion, low pedals of C-sharp and D-sharp appear along with a bold tonic of an A major chord that is heard with a rumble in the bass drum. This progression is again reminiscent of Messiaen, as he used a similar cadential formula in his early music. This piece's moves are surprising from beginning to end, which is a very good thing.

*Rocking Chair Serenade* can be parsed into its two components of a rocking chair and a serenade. The former rocks its participant into a ruminative state through its repetitive motion. Daydreaming is often the result. Time is slowed down, as one enters a liminal space between sleeping and consciousness. A serenade might be to woo, or to sweetly accompany. Mozart wrote numerous ones, the most important being that Serenade No. 10, "*Gran Partita*," a long and ambitious work for winds outdoors. Mozart's is a little ungainly in length, and it would seem that it is a combination of movements that don't suggest a clear larger architecture or structure. Or maybe it was meant to amuse, and only to filter into the listener's consciousness episodically during a long summer's dinner. Carl's serenade is about twelve minutes

long, and is a kind of brief meditation. It is mostly gentle, and even when its harmonic gears grind, they do so like two clouds that gently interpenetrate, only to then go their own ways. A rocking motion pertains pretty much for the work's entirety, in a rhythm of short-long, short-long, short-long, repeated endlessly, with a dotted quarter note being the primary beat. This essential motive, in the interval domain, is formed of a leap of an octave, then a return to the low pitch followed by a leap to a major seventh, then a return to the lower octave followed by a leap to the major sixth. One might imagine this as the three stations of one rock of the rocker: starting or stopped position, and then the two apexes of the arcing movement, forward and back. This material never bores, as there is frequently an accompaniment of slower materials that are chromatic and outside of whatever tonic area is present. In Mozartian terms, we might consider them as passing tones, or in Messiaen's terms, passing areas. Or these might be like rain clouds that rough up those bright white ones.

Like *What's Underfoot*, this work starts in the highest register and gradually fills in the lower range. As one might expect, dynamics are generally low, with only a few small rises and falls along the way. The piece moves through various major keys including B-flat, E, D, finally settling at its conclusion on G (with an unresolved major 7th, F-sharp) Which is also to say, it moves from a darker key to brighter ones, as the latter three include the open strings of the violin. There is a short duet of two violins soon joined by a cello. There is often the use of distant highs and lows, with a vacant mid-ground, creating a sense of a Coplandesque wide-open American landscape. Or maybe it just portrays a wandering consciousness at play.

Symphony No. 5, *Land*, might be thought of as a large panoramic view of an immense swath of America, its actual physicality. It might be thought of as a 21st-century

rethinking of Strauss's *An Alpine Symphony*. In that work, Strauss creates a detailed musical piece of landscape that covers the time of one day, from early dawn through to deepest night. In more than twenty episodes, Strauss's music depicts an ascent and descent, and the many encounters with nature during the journey. Carl's work moves from the plains to the mountains and finally to an imaginary land, one perhaps free of strife and discontent. Whereas Strauss's journey is a day's hike, Carl's might be a transatlantic flight. Fittingly, Strauss's takes over fifty minutes to cover its twenty-four-hour period, while Carl's lasts a little over thirty minutes from wheels up to wheels down. Its nine movements cover a wide temporal gamut, from, twenty-nine seconds (!) to twelve minutes and seventeen seconds. (This is somewhat similar to the chapters of *Moby Dick*, where the smallest one is only a brief paragraph and the others usually many, many pages.) There is a certain attractive whimsey in this. The movements are played pretty much continuously, with the occasional bleed-through from one section to another.

*Open Prairie*, in three large phrases, each containing mounting energy with a crescendo from beginning to end, begins with gentle rustling in the percussion. There is a sensuous melody presented either in unison or octaves and various repetitions of scale fragments in the strings. *High Plains* is characterized by combinations of brass and percussion (with the latter continued from the first movement), with the addition of the bass drum, and melodies in the clarinet and strings. A knotty dense texture, full of rising figures and increased volume, leads to a climax that dissipates with the arrival of the next movement, *Facing Mountains*, which is formed of slow majestic brass chords, string pedals both high and low. *Shimmering Mists* features an oboe solo over hushed tremolos in the strings, with very slowly changing

chords, and other brief fragments. *Wildflower Meadow* presents a gentle undulation, with a gentle weave of winds over sustained horns. Trumpets join in the fun with gliding down gestures. This is interrupted by *Storm Fronts*, the briefest of movements, which presents a massed orchestra all playing long luminescent chords. *Scaling* is also very brief, at only 48 seconds, and is formed of upward surging scale figures, but with out-of-sync rhythms, as if portraying different streams of wind pushing up over the mountains' surfaces. This too is very loud, and cut off with intensity and the only moments of silence in the entire work. In *Above the Tree Line*, the air becomes quite thin and translucent, with a bird-like solo flute and string tremolos very high registrally.

The basses enter, playing very low and slow, with sustained sonorities in the winds that have a gray and pale color (maybe a little fog?). *The Land Beyond* concludes our journey with music reminiscent of Ives' *The Housatonic at Stockbridge*. Strings breathe with gentle swells accompanying ephemeral and sporadic chimes and flute. Cellos and violins soar with punctuations of winds and brass. A flute reappears now with celeste, a softer chime sound if you will. There is a brief reference to the key of C minor, a little reticent and shy, and then without further ado, a quick fade of an adieu.

The music of Robert Carl is well-heard, well-paced, and, well, quite beautiful. It is full of memorable atmosphere, touching moments, and glistening sonorities. ♪

# A Journey on the Way of Bach

Nathan Jones

Dan Moller, *The Way of Bach: Three Years with the Man, the Music, and the Piano*. Pegasus Books, 224pp., \$28 cloth.

“ I THINK THAT IF I WERE REQUIRED TO SPEND THE REST OF my life on a desert island,” the legendary pianist Glenn Gould once said, “and to listen to or play the music of any one composer during all that time, that composer would almost certainly be Bach.” More than any other composer, Bach provokes these sorts of dramatically intimate gestures from other celebrated musicians. Chopin would sometimes lock himself in a room and play Bach to calm his pre-performance nerves; Robert and Clara Schumann shared a “Bach diary” during their honeymoon; Pablo Casals played Bach every single morning, as a “blessing on the house.” The list could go on, seemingly ad infinitum.

Even amateur musicians, though, often feel compelled to make such gestures. I told my doctoral advisor, very early on, that I would write a dissertation on Bach or none at all. Steve Jobs held a lifelong romance with Bach, from his early LSD-fueled visions of Bach dancing in nature, to his friendship with Yo-Yo Ma (culminating in the iPod’s launch advertisements), to his later claim that Bach’s music offers something like a proof of God’s existence. And in his recent book, *The Way of Bach*, Dan Moller, professor of philosophy at the University of Maryland, takes his reader through his three-year-journey of trying to play Bach on the piano, read Bach scholarship, and develop a book about everything he learned and felt along the way.

Moller states up front that he will not be offering pedagogical advice, or even anything approaching a true biography. What he *will* do, he says, is “convey the felt experience of an adult learning Bach, from the point of view of someone who *loves* Bach with a completely unprofessional, undetached abandon.” Yet he also wants to “explain that feeling in terms of his life and work.” For such a personal, devotional type of book, this ambitious aim is laudable. Moller is a tenured philosophy professor with serious academic credentials: he could write a book solely about his “Bach piano hobby” and find a readership for it.

However, since Moller wants to use Bach's keyboard music as a bridge between his own subjective experiences and the objective facts of Bach's life, his aim is dangerous as well. Bach did not leave us with a slew of his own personal writings, à la Wagner or Beethoven. In order to describe "The Way of Bach," Moller needs to be able to integrate his own experiences into our scanty extant documentation of Bach's life, work, and thought.

In this task, Moller succeeds early and often. His early discussion of Bachian counterpoint, for example, begins as a description of his own difficulty in playing contrapuntally, shifts to a historical account of Bach's version of counterpoint, and culminates in an unabashed *normative* claim that Bach clearly agreed with: counterpoint is the essence of music, the "musical approach to music," as Moller puts it. In the broadest of terms, Moller situates Bachian counterpoint between the Renaissance, with its emphasis on harmony (who listens to Palestrina for the tunes?), and the modern popular musical era, with its apotheosis of melody (who listens to Elvis for the harmony?). Such a historical bifurcation obviously requires far more specification, but his overarching point is a provocative and compelling one: the integration of melody into harmony, the "point" of music, peaked with Bach in the early-to-mid eighteenth-century. Accordingly, Moller has no qualms calling Bach "the greatest composer of all time," and even "the greatest musician in history." Such music, Moller claims, is well worth the suffering it requires to understand and perform.

And suffer Moller does. From physical ailments (his fingers, hands, and arms are almost always hurting) to social ostracization (his grandiose claims about Bach are rarely welcome at dinner parties) to professional distraction (the only thing that gets him through delivering his philosophy lectures is hearing Bach in his mind's ear), the reader begins to see Moller as a kind of musical monk who expresses his devotion through painful but intimate isolation. He increasingly seems to identify with Bach himself, and you can feel him becoming genuinely upset as he learns of the suffering Bach himself underwent (the death of loved ones and professional rejection being constants throughout Bach's life).

This monkish identification with his spiritual hero, however, yields some truly great writing. In his second chapter, Moller tries to explain what he admires so much about Bach. What separates Bach from others? Why be so fanatical about *this one guy* when there are dozens of other amazing composers out there? The answer, for Moller at least, is that Bach combined confident ability with humble service. "Here was the greatest composer of all time," Moller writes, "and he was spending hours, countless hours, in creating fancy editions of his teaching manuals there was no reason to suspect anyone else would ever see." Bach was a musical mad scientist, but he invited all comers into his laboratory, and the willing learners would receive his patient



instruction. In Moller's wonderfully pithy words, "the music of Bach dares things unattempted yet, but never feels the need to tell us so."

Later, Moller recounts the story of Bach applying to replace Johann Adam Reincken, one of the great church organists of the time, at St. Katherine's in Hamburg, then one of the great operatic cities in Europe. Despite an audacious and wildly impressive audition, in which he improvised for hours on Reincken's own "*An Wasserflüssen Babylon*" ("By the Rivers of Babylon"), Bach was not offered the position. Back-room financial dealings led to the appointment of the mediocre son of a wealthy Hamburger, and Moller is clearly crestfallen by the development. "By the rivers of Hamburg," he concludes the section, "we knelt down and wept." Here is Moller the allegorical exegete, who flattens time and space in order to interpret the suffering of another as his own.

By this late point in the book, Moller might also strike his reader as an old Augustine of Hippo, confessing divine seduction as he looks back on his own spiritual life. The last chapter is simply entitled "God," and Moller seems to understand that any account of "the way of Bach" must eventually involve "the way of the cross," the single most important theme in all of Bach's work. He quickly and rightly rejects the condescending attitude of many Bach scholars whose books "inevitably contained a brief, reluctant, treatment of his religion, which the author secretly thought was stupid." Moller even tries going back to church, but neither Protestant nor Catholic churches can help him understand God like Bach can. One could justly charge him with idolizing Bach, and he might even declare himself guilty.

Whether one can declare his ambitious final chapter a success, however, is a tougher question. Moller has not tried to write scholarship here, but he has waded into the deepest Bach-waters one can wade into: Bachian theology. Bach's theological credentials do impress him (Bach passed rigorous theological examinations with flying colors and "many a pastor in Bach's day would have been proud to have owned" his personal theological library, according to Bach scholar Robin Leaver), but strangely, Moller chooses not to attempt even a cursory explanation of Bachian theology in light of these books of (almost exclusively) Lutheran theology. What results is an unfortunately ham-fisted interpretation of a complicated scholarly subject.

Earlier on in the book, Moller casually referred to Bach's cantatas as "faceless," and that was a forewarning of the mistakes that were eventually to come. After all, the two most important "faces" in Bach's cantatas are those of Jesus Christ and Martin Luther. That much is obvious and inarguable. Had Moller researched Luther's musical theology, the books sitting on Bach's shelves at home, he would have spared himself from a blunder such as this: "Later, the Pythagorean ideas were revived by Galileo and Kepler, like a conversation briefly interrupted by 2000 years of mediocrity." No, well before Galileo and Kepler (who was a *Lutheran*), Martin Luther explicitly praised Pythagoras

for his “ingenious understanding of the mathematical order of things” (in his *Heidelberg Disputation*), for describing that “wonderful and most lovely music coming from the harmony of the motions that are in the celestial spheres” (in his *Lectures on Genesis*), and nods to Pythagoras in describing music as “sounding number” (in his *Encomium Musices*). Moller includes Luther in these “2000 years of mediocrity,” when in reality, his writings were the fertile soil out of which Bach’s music grew.

Moreover, Moller seems bewildered by Bachian tonality, again ignoring the Lutheran theological roots of Bach’s work. He wonders why major music sounds generally happy and minor music sounds generally sad, which is a classic issue in musicology. He is aware of “two wrong theories” among the “philosophers and musicologists”: tonality as a mere allusion (which he discards), and tonality as a function of the harmonic series (which he considers profound but flawed). His proposed third alternative, “tonality as a function of the human mind,” is only partially correct. The truth, supported by studies in both modern musicology and modern neuroscience (laid out nicely in Iain McGilchrist’s *The Master and His Emissary*), is something Luther had already suggested five hundred years ago: both the non-human natural world and the human world have fallen away from divine perfection, and the perfect correspondences that once obtained between “the music of the spheres out there” and “the human body in here” have been damaged. Nevertheless, a correspondence between the harmonic series and the human mind still obtains, and the tonal differences we experience subjectively in a piece of music remain linked to what Luther objectively calls “musical nature.” We *think* and *feel* dissonance, for example, because certain frequencies battle each other *in nature*. This is what God intended providentially, and Luther repeats this claim many times. Strong echoes of this old Lutheran theory can even be found in Bach, especially when his rhetorical mouthpiece Johann Abraham Birnbaum defended his artistic and aesthetic theory from a scathing attack by Johann Adolph Scheibe (one of Bach’s former students). Rather than smothering Bach in a morass of Romantic speculation, he should have ended this book with some musico-theological insight from the sources that obviously nourished Bach throughout his life: Martin Luther’s musical theology.

Despite these shortcomings, *The Way of Bach* is still a bracing read for anyone interested in Bach. Bach lovers will delight in Moller’s vivid descriptions, trenchant rhetoric, and naked admiration. The “Bach curious” will likely enjoy Moller’s sprawling literary and philosophical references, which one would expect from a philosophy professor writing about music. The “Bach dispassionate,” however, may want to look elsewhere, because this book drips with the sort of Passion that animated Bach’s music in the first place. ♪



5

**ART WORLDS**

# Looking at Roman Wall Paintings in Oklahoma

Elizabeth Molacek

*The Painters of Pompeii: Roman Frescoes from the National Archaeological Museum of Naples.* Curated by Mario Grimaldi and Paolo Giulierini. Oklahoma City Museum of Art, June 6 to October 17, 2021.

Catalogue: Grimaldi, Mario. *The Painters of Pompeii: Roman Frescoes from the National Archaeological Museum of Naples.* Mondo Mostre, 185pp., color ill., \$60 cloth.

**T**HE PAINTERS OF POMPEII: ROMAN Frescoes from the National Archaeological Museum of Naples attempted a new look at the Roman wall paintings that have often been considered some of the most valuable artifacts excavated from the city. As the title suggests, the exhibition foregrounded the creators and the process of making these frescoes, introduced the figure of the painter (Latin: *pictor*, better understood as an artisan) as distinctly different than our modern conception of painter or artist, and explored the notions of workshops, workbooks, and copies as essential techniques for the creation and dispersal of themes in the ancient world. The exhibition presented over 70 objects from the National Archaeological Museum of Naples, almost all of them wall paintings, some of which

had never been shown before in the United States, and displayed them to audiences in a sweeping four galleries at the Oklahoma City Museum of Art, the exclusive venue for the show. The exhibition fell short in supporting its valid yet expansive thesis, but was nonetheless dazzling given the quality and quantity of objects presented. One can't help but marvel when surrounded by 2,000-year-old frescoes, after all.

Roman wall paintings, executed in the fresco technique, are among the most vivid artifacts from the ancient world. In wealthy homes, paintings often decorated walls from floor to ceiling in bright colors, sometimes with scenes displaying well-known myths, history, or still life. *The Painters of Pompeii* was a feast for the eyes, and successfully transported its audience to a far different world: each gallery was intentionally painted in a different hue of deep green, ochre, lapis blue, or cinnabar red to mimic the rich tones found throughout the Roman house.

Entering the first gallery was initially refreshing, with its clear focus on painters, tools, and techniques (Figure 1). Here, two paintings of the same scene appear that explain how painters may have worked, using workbooks: a panel of Achilles on Skyros from the House of the Dioscuri



Figure 1 View of *The Painters of Pompeii* at The Oklahoma Museum of Art. Photo courtesy of Elizabeth Molacek

(Pompeii VI.9.6-7) and a second of the same subject from the House of Achilles (Pompeii IX.5.2), which are almost certainly both derived from a single ‘model’ painting.<sup>1</sup> Both paintings share certain iconographic similarities while also having marked differences—stylistic elements or small additions to the scene, which can be attributed to the Roman painters who created each panel. A crowd and docent favorite, judging from the two tours that I saw during my visit, was the panel of a female painter from the House of the Surgeon (Pompeii VI.I.10) (Figure 2), in which a female

<sup>1</sup> The descriptive names often given to houses or buildings in the Pompeii, such as the House of the Dioscuri, were given by excavators and in some instances different names exist for the same building. The three-part notation, Pompeii VI.9.6-7, refers to the systematic naming of individual buildings throughout the ancient city of Pompeii, begun by the Soprintente Giuseppe Fiorelli (1863-1875). Fiorelli was responsible for widespread methodological and procedural changes at the site, including the process of pouring plaster into the cavities left by organic substances (e.g., animals, humans). He divided the site into nine *Regioni*; individual *insulae* (city blocks); and entrance numbers (thresholds and doorways)—thereby providing a tripartite, standardized naming system for future research.

figure is shown in the act of painting a panel, the in-process *pinake* partially visible to us, the viewers. Rounding out the gallery’s emphasis on technique were two cases displaying pigments and tools including several compasses, a set square/level, and a handful of ancient cups containing remnants of vibrant pigments.

The exhibition’s focus on the painter and process largely disappeared after the opening gallery, giving way to a textbook overview of Roman wall painting organized, loosely, according to common subjects and themes. Introductory text or wall labels in some cases referred to the overall theme, but in general, the show was a greatest hits of Roman wall painting. But greatest hits are great for a reason. The second gallery displayed a number of large and well-preserved panels exemplifying common themes, particularly those drawn from myth or related to banqueting, and, according to the venue curators, ties these themes to parts of the Roman house. Accordingly, grander painting schemes appeared in more public rooms of

the house, such as the large mythological scenes. Here also was the most prominent evidence for painting practice outside of the exhibition's first gallery: four panels of a nearly identical scene of Selene and Endymion arranged in a two-by-two grid in the center of the gallery. The paintings, from the House of the Dioscuri (Pompeii VI.9.6-7), the House of the Silverware (Pompeii VI.7.20), the House of Chlorus and Caprasia (Pompeii IX.2.10), and Herculaneum (MANN inv. 9245)—are almost identical iconographically, with Endymion depicted as a hunter, nude and lounging in a rocky landscape, and the goddess Selene in flight, drapery billowing around her and the crescent moon on her head. The four panels share many similarities and suggest a workbook tradition, but their small differences—details such as gesture, coloring, or execution—point to distinct painters.

Mythological paintings continued into the third gallery, which also included still life and motifs “inspired by Greek art,” including theater and the three Graces. A brief mention of the influence of Greek painting on later Roman practice reminded the audience of the painter, but overall, this individual (or more precisely *individuals*) was absent, and our focus remained on the visual variety before our eyes. The same rang true for the fourth and final gallery, devoted to rediscovery, including a timeline of excavations, several modern reproductions based on ancient artifacts, and several Roman paintings, including what could be considered the exhibition's highlight, the important and well-preserved scene of Jason and Pelias from the House of Jason (Pompeii IX.5.18-21), the painter of which was also represented by another panel in gallery two, the Cassandra's prophecy from the House of the Iron Gate (Pompeii I.2.28). Unfortunately, this important connection was lost due to the physical distance of the panels from each other.

As is sometimes the case with extensive exhibitions, the catalogue provides the commentary necessary to understand the overall premise or make connections between individual objects. Here, the accompanying volume is an overview of ancient painting more broadly, with concise and digestible essays on Roman painting in Pompeii, the rediscovery, and original context of the works—as well as Etruscan painting, and techniques of ancient Greek painting. Two essays offer insight more relevant to the supposed topic at hand: Mario Grimaldi reviews the social role of Roman painters, the practicalities of how they worked, and what we know about them from modern research. In a separate essay, John R. Clarke discusses how painters laid out their compositions using grids and made copies using various aids including model-books, outline-books, and figure-books—insights that were missing from the exhibition itself.

Especially helpful in the catalogue is the up-to-date bibliography, high-quality color images, and entries for each painting; these will be a welcome addition to English-language material on the subject, so much of which is in Italian or French, particularly for an undergraduate or lower-level graduate course. The object entries are also where some of the more interesting insights can be found about the paintings, their creators, and the process of making. It is here that we find a clear explanation of the Achilles on Skyros, Selene, and Endymion, and other ‘workbook-based’ paintings—outlining their similarities and differences that lead scholars to understand they were created by separate painters but based on a shared workbook—as well as discussion of paintings in the exhibition made by the same painter, the Jason and Pelias painting and Cassandra panel mentioned above, and the visual characteristics that lead to this conclusion. This rich information would



Figure 2 Fresco of a female painter painting a statue from the House of the Surgeon, Pompeii (VI.1.10, room 19, east wall), First century CE. National Archaeological Museum of Naples (inv. 9018). Photo: Wikimedia Commons / Public Domain



**Figure 3** Fresco of a mask on vine leaves and bunches of grapes from the east wall of triclinium 13, House of V. Popidius, Pompeii VII.14.9, 55 x 55 cm, first century CE. National Archaeological Museum of Naples (inv. 9798). Photo: Heritage Image Partnership Ltd / Alamy Stock Photo



have been welcome in the exhibition itself, and certainly have strengthened the narrative.

While the exhibition falls short of its lofty goal—to “be an immersive experience seen from [ ... ] the point of view of the *pictor*”—it had more than a few gems that made it a worthwhile display of Roman paintings.<sup>2</sup> Heavy hitters like those from the House of Jason or the two opening paintings of Achilles on Skyros were alone worth the visit; however, I was more entranced by the smaller, more intimate scenes, and the opportunity to view them up close. A small painting at the entrance to the second gallery especially caught my attention: a mask amidst bunches of grapes and vines from the House of v. Popidius (Pompeii VII.14.9) (Figure 3). Less than two feet by two feet square, the small fragment is from the genre of garden paintings, which became popular in the first century BCE. In the center a small round mask is visible surrounded by a field of grape leaves. Up close, one can see the layers of paint, which creates a texture and contributes to the feeling of lush, verdant greenery found in actual gardens. Yellow and purple grapes are carefully highlighted amidst the foliage and appear about to tumble off the vine and into one’s hand. Standing at eye level in front of this painting, only inches from the surface, I could truly appreciate these details and the individuals who executed them.

The true strength of the exhibition may be its versatility. I saw the exhibition with a non-art historian and our reactions were as different as one would expect, yet we both enjoyed the experience. He was most taken by the sheer number of paintings present. Having only before seen such a volume of

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2 Grimaldi, Mario. *The Painters of Pompeii: Roman Frescoes from the National Archaeological Museum of Naples*. Rome: Mondo Mostre, 2021. p. 91.

wall paintings on site at Pompeii itself, he was struck by the quality of preservation of many of these panels and vivid subject matter—the still lifes topped his list along with the close-to-life-size panels from the House of Lucrezio Fronto (Pompeii IX.3.5). Surprisingly, his least favorite aspect of the exhibition was my favorite: the four panels of Selene and Endymion, which he felt lacked context or explanation. Conversely, I left the exhibition feeling like I had just finished a live action speed-read of Roger Ling’s *Roman Painting*, but I was still infinitely satisfied after spending an embarrassingly long time staring at the four paintings of Selene and Endymion side by side.<sup>3</sup> I suppose there is truth in the adage that *there is something for everyone*.

One final note: *The Painters of Pompeii* would have been a momentous exhibition under any circumstances. As the exclusive venue for the exhibition, the Oklahoma City Museum of Art brought over 70 objects from the National Archaeological Museum of Naples to the Southern Plains of the United States, making visible some of the most vivid paintings from the ancient Roman cities of Pompeii and Herculaneum. This alone would have been enough. But given the circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic, the opening of any exhibition over the past 20 months was an even more momentous occasion.<sup>4</sup> The organizers of the exhibition must be commended for the success of this beautiful and extensive project—a visual delight.

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3 Ling, Roger. *Roman Painting*. Cambridge University Press, 1990.

4 For an understanding of the challenges the COVID pandemic created for international loan exhibitions, one need not look further than the exhibition, *Alonso Berruguete: First Sculptor of Renaissance Spain* at Dallas’ own Meadows Museum. Venue curator, Wendy Sepponen, explained how the Meadows overcame some of these hurdles in an interview with Erin Quinn-Kong for *Texas Highways*, “In Dallas, Curators Use WhatsApp to Stage an Exhibition of Renaissance Artwork” (September 19, 2020).

*From Heroes to Immortals: Classical Mythological Prints* May 15–November 28, 2021

*Room with a View: Scenes of the Italian Countryside* May 15–November 28, 2021

Running concurrent to *Painters of Pompeii* were two smaller installations consisting of objects from the OKCMA's permanent collection. *From Heroes to Immortals: Classical Mythological Prints* featured over 15 prints from the museum's permanent collection. Works by familiar artists including Grace Hartigan and Leonard Baskin explored and reinterpreted familiar themes and stories from classical mythology such as Hercules, Theseus and the Minotaur, or Narcissus.

*Room with a View* presented paintings, prints, and photos depicting the Italian countryside. The sixteen works in this installation spanned a period of nearly 300 years, yet offered a surprisingly familiar look at the campagna. Particularly resonant was Thomas Cole's largescale painting, *An Italian Autumn*

(c. 1844–1877 CE) which occupied a single wall and, as the label explained, captured Cole's fascination with the Italian light. Having just spent time with the Roman frescoes (c. first decade of the first century CE), I couldn't help but be reminded of the landscape paintings that, like Cole's depiction of the Roman countryside, are dotted with buildings, carefully highlighted. What a rare privilege, to see two different painters visualize the Italian landscape, albeit roughly 1800 years apart.

These two smaller, more intimate exhibitions were a welcome bonus—they stood independently, but also complemented *Painters of Pompeii*, providing visitors with the chance to witness the ongoing legacy of themes and subjects, as well as the opportunity to reflect on these in a more digestible context.

A

# Two Great Frenchmen in Seventeenth-century Rome

David Carrier

Sheila McTighe, *Representing from Life in Seventeenth-century Italy*. Amsterdam University Press, 256pp., 89 b/w plates, \$144 cloth.

Richard Verdi, *Poussin as a Painter. From Classicism to Abstraction*. Reaktion Books, 368pp., 223 color, 18 b/w illustrations, \$50 cloth.

**A**BOVE MY DESK IS A CHEAP nineteenth-century print of a painting by Jean-Baptiste Leloir, *Claude Lorraine, Nicolas Poussin and Gaspar Poussin in the Roman Campagna* (Figure 1). Claude is preparing to make a drawing, advised by Poussin, who married the sister of Gaspar Poussin, the third figure here who stands at the side. Such genre fantasies were popular at that time. They played a significant role in the process by which these two French-born men who worked in Rome became identified as *French* painters. We know a great deal about the practice of later French artists. There are, for example, photographs of Paul Cézanne and Camille Pissarro in the countryside preparing to paint together. Knowing that they worked from life, we can contrast their landscapes,

and compare them to early photographs of those scenes. We take for granted that modernists often worked from life in this way. But how, from the much more limited evidence available, can we reconstruct earlier studio practices in a way that illuminates our experience of Italian art?

In the seventeenth century, the most important and prestigious Italian commissions typically were for large sacred works. But just as small mammals lived already in the age of the dinosaurs, so there was then in Italy already a real interest in landscapes and still life paintings, two often inherently naturalistic genres that became of central importance under modernism. Also, if you look at the religious works, you usually find contemporary urban or country scenes in the background. And often the saints and martyrs appear to be painted from models. This much is obvious. But painting with immediate reference to lived experience seems to have been of minor importance for most major artists. The interest of Sheila McTighe's remarkable book lies, then, in the way that she develops an original, highly suggestive analysis, indicating in a precise way how some artists in Italy painted from life.



Figure 1 Claude Lorraine, Nicolas Poussin and Gaspar Poussin in the Roman Campagna. Nineteenth-century engraving after a painting by Jean-Baptiste Leloir.

*Representing from Life* has a long methodological introduction; a chapter on Caravaggio; two chapters on the great printmaker Jacques Callot; one on Claude Lorraine and another on images of the Neapolitan Revolt of Masaniello, which took place in 1647. In different ways, it argues, all of these otherwise varied artists represented from life. This, its important central claim, is best understood by analogy to some accounts from literature. Just as some writing underlines the presence of the author, the creator of the text, whilst other writing pretends to be impersonal, effacing the role of its writer; so, analogously, some

pictures emphasize the creative role of the artist, but others appear to be, as it were, impersonally created, written without reference to the author's presence. Thus a visual image may imply, "this is how the world appears, apart from being viewed" or, rather, it may suggest, "this is what I saw," as if the artist had included evidence of his presence in the visual image.

Sometimes, McTighe argues, the visual artist pretends to be present to what he depicts as a way of guaranteeing the truthfulness of his image. (I write "he" because all of the examples here are male). Here are some examples. Artists who seek

to underline their presence may show in reflections images of themselves or their studio. (Caravaggio adopted this procedure in some early works.) They can use verbal inscriptions asserting their presence (Roelant Savery, a Flemish artist, did this.). And they can depict themselves making the image within the image (Callot and Claude made such images). The gap “between observation and memory,” McTighe nicely says in her introduction, is the gap in which “representation takes place.”

But once we allow, as she clearly tells us, that Caravaggio sometimes emulated past art; and, once she explains, in the case of Michelangelo Cerquozzi’s depiction of Masaniello, that “the painter worked *dal vivo*, but he was not there to see the scene. He was absent, but has made us present [ ... ],” what does this account of representing from life come to? To speak of “absent witnessing” seems a contradiction in terms. And once this is allowed, the much-repeated phrase “from life,” or the various synonyms cited by McTighe, threatens to lose all meaning. If it doesn’t identify an image made by the artist while viewing the subject, then what can it mean?

Here, I believe, the parallels between the procedures of literary critics and those described in McTighe’s account are suggestive. Truthfulness in narrative description can be an illusion, like its equivalent in a visual image. It is, still, an illusion that matters, in visual art as in prose, because it underlines the reality of the representation. There are several ways that visual artists can achieve this result. In some early Caravaggios we see reflections showing “human figures who gaze out of the image into our space.” (In the 1980s the painter David Reed drew my attention to some of these effects, which are not visible in the small murky plates in this book). In her account of Claude’s *Siege of La Rochelle*, McTighe speaks of “the artist’s fictional

presence and literal absence,” citing an upside-down signature in the sheet held by a draftsman shown at work. And in some other Claudes we find images of a draftsman “whose presence declares ‘I am transforming my looking into a making of the view.’”

What this naturalistic illusion would require, if I understand McTighe’s account, is that in the picture we see not only the representation of its subject, but also the artist’s activity of making that representation. How is that possible? Surely the artist must be outside the picture he creates! Here perhaps a modernist example would suggest how such an image would function. In the 1920s, Henri Matisse painted his odalisques in strikingly self-sufficient pictures, showing himself at work depicting the very model we view. And, more dramatically, in a number of drawings, he showed the *mise-en-abyme*, the infinite regress in which we see the image (of an artist making an image (of an artist . . .)). Usually naturalism in seventeenth-century art is contrasted to the depiction of idealized figures, as when Caravaggio’s peasants with bare, muddy feet are juxtaposed with Poussin’s perfect High Renaissance figures. But that’s not McTighe’s concern when she links it with painting *dal vivo*. She, rather, is interested in the way that the pictures of interest show immediate evidence of their own production, as in Matisse’s *mise-en-abymes*. As she rightly notes, the effect she describes is a fascinating form of visual illusionism. Normally a figurative image merely presents its subject. In the cases she presents, it’s as if the artist has added a promissory note, in effect saying: this is a truthful image that I have made.

There are some minor problems in McTighe’s exposition. Her introduction gets distracted with a too brief critique of Ernst Gombrich’s well known theory of art history as making-and-matching. In

particular, the reference to an essay by Joel Snyder is puzzling because it's not really concerned with a critique of Gombrich. In any case, McTighe doesn't need to take a stand on Gombrich's account in order to develop her own very interesting theory. And the account of Cerquozzi's representation of Masaniello doesn't develop clearly. Here an unhappy editorial glitch leaves incomplete the reference to the fullest recent account, whose plausible claims are not really addressed.<sup>1</sup> Finally, although there are repeated suggestions that McTighe's analysis relates to Svetlana Alpers's famous discussion of Dutch art, that interesting claim never becomes clear.

These are minor problems in an exciting, pathbreaking book. What's very daring about *Representing from Life* is that it applies to seventeenth-century Italian art a way of thinking usually used only with reference to literary modernism. That, needless to say, doesn't show that all of its claims are true. Further investigation is called for. But since seicento-studies are in real need of innovative thinking, the stimulus provided by her account should be welcomed. McTighe repeatedly suggests that her analysis links these representations from life to a history of patronage, a tantalizing suggestion that deserves more study.

**N**icolas Poussin (1594-1665) had a highly unusual career. Born in Northern France, he emigrated in his twenties to Rome, the center of the art world. And after some early, not entirely successful attempts to produce public works, he then, thanks to his artful cultivation of French bourgeois patrons, pursued a career essentially outside of the

Roman scene. His chosen subjects were drawn from Greco-Roman history and Scripture, apart from two portraits made to please supporters. His extensive correspondence reveals his thinking and, also, his success at marketing his art. Compared with his peers in Rome, he was remarkably good at going his own way.

The founding father of the French tradition, much admired by connoisseurs and some modernist artists, Poussin is an old master who doesn't engage the larger public, unlike his *bête noir*, Caravaggio. He was fortunate to attract two very different twentieth-century scholars: Anthony Blunt, who published an elaborate account of his intellectual background, and Denis Mahon, whose reconstruction of his development is unsurpassed. And thanks to the championship of Pierre Rosenberg, longtime director of the Louvre, who identifies him, along with Paul Cézanne, as the greatest French painter, a great Paris exhibition was organized in 1994, the 400th anniversary of his birth.

*Poussin as a Painter* is a masterpiece, a sustained and extremely lucid commentary. Verdi's close attention to detail, his magisterial discussion of color, composition and Poussin's reworkings of his themes make this by miles the best such account that I know. One senses that his love for this strange artist has been a lifelong, fruitful inspiration.

Almost a century ago, Roger Fry praised Poussin the formalist, while admitting that his pictorial content was banal, even boring. Rejecting that approach, in 1958 Blunt contrasted the account he provided of Poussin's intellectual climate with discussion of "Poussin as a painter [ ... ]," describing a study he hoped but failed to write. Endorsing this basic dualism, Verdi now provides such a book, exploring the "visual aims and attractions" of Poussin's art. He believes that we can best appreciate

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher Marshall's "'Causa di Stravaganze': Order and Anarchy in Domenico Gargiulo's *Revolt of Masaniello*," *Art Bulletin* 80:3 (Sept. 1998), pp. 478-97.



Figure 2 Nicolas Poussin, *Blind Orion Searching for the Rising Sun*, 1658. Oil on canvas, 46 7/8 x 72 in. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Public Domain / Open Access

these artworks without discussing their “intellectual and philosophical background” But, this account is very different from the extended discussion of Poussin’s colleague Giovanni Bellori, who sought to inspire historicist reflection. Why is Verdi’s whole approach so different from that of an intelligent writer who knew the artist?

In my judgment, distinguishing between discussion of Poussin as a painter and accounts of his intellectual background imports into the seventeenth-century a limiting modernist aesthetic. What we learn from “close study of the pictures themselves” depends upon what knowledge we bring to them. Consider one test case, *Landscape with Orion* (1658; Figure 2). The story is about the giant Orion, blinded for

attacking the goddess Diana. Verdi says that the “picture may be read as an allegory of the circulation of water in nature” What he fails to discuss, however, is the inherently paradoxical nature of a picture about blindness. Poussin shows dark clouds around Orion, whose outstretched left hand is juxtaposed from our viewpoint with the seashore, towards which he walks, guided by the man on his shoulder, to regain his sight. Surely an artist who neglected nothing intended this detail.

Poussin, Verdi says, “sought constantly to discover in such ancient tales a key to the mysteries of the universe and to the order and balance of nature.” In his last painting, *Apollo and Daphne* (1664), Apollo looks with unrequited longing at Daphne.

Verdi describes this “view of existence” as derived from Heraclitus, “who regarded the harmony of the universe as created by the tensions between opposing forces.” But he doesn’t discuss the odd composition of this scene about erotic desire in which Apollo on the far left glances at Daphne, far right, who is indifferent to him. Although he notes earlier that Poussin’s pictures “usually centre on a love without hope,” he doesn’t pursue the visually important implications of this pregnant conception.

The problems with Verdi’s methodology become clearest in the conclusion, when he traces Poussin’s influence on modernism. Presenting an anecdotal nineteenth-century watercolor, *Poussin on the Banks of the Tiber Finding the Composition of his ‘Finding of Moses*, he says: “[n]ature had already provided the raw material.” But surely this is a composition modeled *from* Poussin’s famous painting. And when he writes, “One of Poussin’s great innovations—to make every element in his pictures active and equal *on an abstract level*—has resurfaced at the onset of modern art,” this genealogy for what’s usually called ‘all-overness’ isn’t plausible. Poussin’s pictures, Verdi says, are “far from being objects of luxury,” a claim that would surprise his many grand collectors, who identified luxury with restraint. You cannot really understand his place in the seicento without saying something more about patronage.

Since Blunt’s day, Paul Barolsky, Oskar Bätschmann, Malcolm Bull, T. J. Clark, Elizabeth Cropper and Charles Dempsey,

David Freedberg, Tony Green, Ann Sutherland Harris, Sheila McTighe, Louis Marin, Todd Olson, Jonathan Unglaub, and Richard Wollheim have all written about Poussin, as have I. And the 2015 Louvre exhibition had a massive catalogue. Thus there has been serious revisionist commentary. Some of these writers are in Verdi’s bibliography, but their claims do not enter the text. Just as Poussin resolutely set himself apart from the contemporary Roman world, so Verdi offers an extraordinarily self-sufficient narrative in which his hero develops almost entirely upon his own terms. You couldn’t write a book like this about any other major baroque figure. If it is at all plausible, then Poussin-scholarship is effectively a closed subject. But while I agree that this attitude well adapted to Verdi’s subject, I am not convinced that it’s ultimately satisfactory.

This very beautiful book is as perfect, within its self-imposed terms, as the artist it presents. But it’s not the whole story. Poussin is a great artist who is closely tied to his own time and place. His pictorial subjects and his visual sources all come from a now distant visual and intellectual culture. An easel painter in baroque Rome, he defined himself in part by opposition to that world. You can appreciate Chinese landscapes even if you can’t read the inscriptions. But if you don’t have a classical education, then many of Poussin’s themes will seem bookish, and his achievement will be impossible to adequately understand. **A**



# The Authentic Warhol?

John J. Curley

Blake Gopnik, *Warhol*. Ecco, 976 pp., \$45 cloth, \$25 paper.

Matt Wrbcian, *A is for Archive: Warhol's World from A to Z*. Andy Warhol Museum / Yale University Press, 316 pp., \$45 cloth.

**I**S A BIOGRAPHY OF AN ARTIST A WORK of art history? Should a detailed personal history of an artist inform the interpretation of their art? The two forms were inseparable in sixteenth-century Europe. What some scholars call the first art historical text—Giorgio Vasari’s *The Lives of the Artists*, published in two volumes in 1550 and 1568, respectively—is a collection of short biographies. While later scholars have questioned the book’s veracity, as well as Vasari’s bias toward artists from Florence, these books (along with Karel van Mander’s Northern European counterpart, published in 1604) established the field of art history in Europe. Vasari relied upon a biographical model to think about art’s historical development in Renaissance Italy, connecting the works of fourteenth-century artists like Giotto to childhood (not yet having mastered linear perspective, for example) and the masterworks of Michelangelo in the sixteenth century to that of a mature adult (full mastery). Such a model might even predict the many deaths (and rebirths) of painting ever since.

Early art historians did not always have access to biographies, however. Johann Joachim Winckelmann looked at ancient Greek sculpture produced by unknown artisans (*History of the Art of Antiquity*, published in Germany in 1764). Without biography to help with interpretation, he focused instead on the ways that the “beauty” of the objects could suggest something of Greek society and its freedoms. Art history continued to evolve in the first half of the twentieth century with other methodologies that also explicitly rejected biography—notably Heinrich Wölfflin’s formalism and Erwin Panofsky’s iconographic approach. Wölfflin’s focus on a formal elements of the work of art, especially through comparisons between the paintings from the renaissance and baroque periods in Europe, overlooked subject matter in interpretation. Whether the painted canvas exhibited “linear” or “painterly” qualities was more important to Wölfflin than narrative content. Erwin Panofsky rejected such formalism in favor of an iconology, delving into subject matter and symbols to decode meaning, relying on extensive research into Biblical stories, ancient myths, and their period reception.

Despite the vast influence of Winckelmann, Wölfflin, and Panofsky, the lives of artists—their upbringing, training, networks of friends, romantic entanglements, mental health, struggles with addiction, or legal problems—nevertheless remained important to the interpretation of artworks. This interpretive framework accompanied modernism’s focus on heroic and romantic notions of the singular artist, a figure whose creative output reflects personal and social alienation. In some ways, biography is the most popular kind of art history: stories about van Gogh’s amputated ear, Michelangelo’s fiery temper, or Jackson Pollock urinating in Peggy Guggenheim’s fireplace carry much weight among casual museumgoers. Many professional art historians also incorporate

details of the artist's life, combined with other methodologies, into their interpretations. My own work on Andy Warhol, for instance, has explored the ways that his commercial art career allowed him to make unexpected connections between advertising and postwar American abstract painting. His heavily annotated calendars from the early 1960s, for example, provided evidence that he visited the studio of Frank Stella, one of the most important abstract painters in postwar New York, on numerous occasions. For me, these meetings (and his purchase of Stella's work) "prove" Warhol's serious interest in rigorous and geometric abstract painting.

The rise of intellectual Marxism, which conceived of artworks as expressions of larger cultural and social processes, rather than of an individual artist's will, put biography's use in art history on notice again. Arnold Hauser's pioneering *Social History of Art*, first published in 1951, is a key early example that ties, for example, the increased naturalism of Renaissance art to the development of mercantile capitalism. If Hauser—and the social art historians of the 1970s and early 1980s, such as T.J. Clark and John Barrell—implicitly questioned the usefulness of biography in the study of art, the French literary theorist Roland Barthes made such ideas explicit with his 1967 essay "The Death of the Author." Barthes contented that a consideration of the life of an author (or, by extension an artist) unproductively limits the reader's (or viewer's) interpretation of creative products. This understanding is predicated upon the idea that once a work enters the public domain, it enters into a new discourse, rendering the private experiences of the artist irrelevant to how a work comes to signify and function in the social world. The semiotic life of an artwork—how it engages with the public—matters the most for many art historians, especially for those who work on contemporary art.

In a particularly trenchant essay from

1985 on the cubist collages of Pablo Picasso, Rosalind Krauss bemoaned the prevalent use of biography (particularly his relationships with women) to interpret his works. For her, Picasso's collages from around 1912, which incorporated pasted bits of newspaper, have nothing to do with the daily rhythms of the artist's life but instead are responding to other works and questioning the very nature of traditional representation in art. If works of art foreground, to quote Krauss, "impersonal operations," why should the artist's life factor into its meaning? The popularity of French critical theory in the art world in the late 1970s and early 1980s called the very nature of originality into question—whether the ideas of Barthes, Michel Foucault, Jean Baudrillard, Jacques Derrida or others. In response, some artists began to obscure their own biographies, symbolically enacting their own death. This became one of the key tenets of "postmodernism" which dominated discussions of art in the early 1980s and beyond. In her *Untitled Film Stills* (1977–80), for example, Cindy Sherman did not want viewers to consider her life experiences when looking at the work, but rather the ways that this series of self-portraits demonstrates the power and misogyny of female stereotypes in films. Sherman's work implies that film—and, by extension, the mass media more broadly—shapes us as subjects more so than any personal agency or abstract "essence." If social forces like capitalism structure individuality, then what is the role of

**To think that Warhol merits a biography of this length is also to acknowledge his greatest artistic feat: there is no authentic Warhol to discover.**

**W** biography in art history today? With his recent biography of Andy Warhol, Blake Gopnik engages with these issues. Gopnik's book is the first comprehensive biography since Warhol insider Victor Bockris published one in 1989, soon after the artist's death in 1987. Since then, Warhol's stature in both the art world and the culture at large has ballooned into gigantic proportions, with a host of licensed products, blockbuster museum exhibitions, and astronomical prices at auction. Perhaps, the enormity of this subject—Warhol is as much a cultural touchstone as he is a specific person—has led to smaller and more focused volumes. The stakes seem more manageable when an author does not have to make sense of Warhol's entire life and artistic output. The poet Wayne Koestenbaum and philosopher Arthur Danto each published slim biographies in 2001 and 2010, respectively. Additionally, biographies have focused on the decade of the 1960s (Tony Scherman and David Dalton's *Pop: The Genius of Andy Warhol* from 2009) as well as the 1970s and 1980s at Warhol's *Interview* magazine (Bob Colacello's *Holy Terror: Andy Warhol Close Up* from 1990). Clocking in at 912 pages of text, with endnotes available only online, Gopnik's book, in addition to discussing the full sweep of Warhol's life and work, also could serve as a proverbial doorstop or a useful prop to raise a laptop's camera during Zoom meetings. The book's imposing physical presence suggests its attempt to acquire that all-important descriptor of "definitive."

What does it mean to write the definitive account of a complex figure like Warhol? I want to use Gopnik's book to return to my opening question, but with a Warholian turn: how should one write a biography about an artist who intentionally resists the very idea of biography? Can one write an effective biography when its subject eradicated himself from much of his artwork (even, ironically, in his self-portraits), intentionally misled

friends and reporters, and left behind an archive that is as vast as it is confounding? In other words, is the traditional "big biography" possible, or indeed desirable, if the author/artist has agreed to die in order to secure the openness of the artwork? If biography is still tenable under such circumstances, then might it actually do a disservice to artworks that explicitly attempt to dismantle subjectivity?

To his credit, Gopnik does deflate many myths about the artist and corrects the historical record on some important points. To list just a few, he reveals that a college-aged Warhol saw many important artists, like Marcel Duchamp, in a Pittsburgh gallery called Outlines, and that he began his silkscreen series of Marilyn Monroe *before* she died (not afterwards). With its richness of anecdotal detail and some new information, the book will certainly find its way into future scholarly bibliographies.

Gopnik is at his best when subtly discussing the very difficulties of his project, writing the following when discussing the mid-1960s: "Was he himself a joke or a genius, or a radical or social climber? As Warhol would have answered: Yes." To think that Warhol merits a biography of this length is also to acknowledge his greatest artistic feat: there is no authentic Warhol to discover. In a sense, Gopnik's biographical efforts in *Warhol* can be viewed alongside Edward Casaubon's unending writing project in George Eliot's novel *Middlemarch* (1871-72). Casaubon's *The Key to All Mythologies*, which purported to unlock the ultimate meaning and origin of "all the mythical systems or erratic mythical fragments in the world," is an impossible project. There is no key to unlock or explain either human mythologies or Warhol's artistic practices. Warhol designed his artworks precisely to confound some notion of singular meaning. One could say the same about his life. As such, there is no way that a traditional biography (birth, maturity, death) can capture the singular achievement of Warhol's subjective

## Can one write an effective biography when its subject eradicated himself from much of his artwork (even, ironically, in his self-portraits), intentionally misled friends and reporters, and left behind an archive that is as vast as it is confounding?

erasure and social ubiquity.

A quick look at Warhol's Campbell's Soup cans, begun in 1962, can demonstrate the ways his art eludes secure interpretation and biographical treatment. Warhol himself stated that he painted this subject because at some point he ate the same lunch every day, a can of Campbell's Soup. By using a biographical detail of the most literal and mundane sort to explain his work (a story that Gopnik debunks as false), Warhol allowed these painted cans to take on an interpretative life of their own. Gopnik discusses an "origin" story for the series, sharing how Warhol paid an art dealer fifty dollars for an idea for his next work, and she told the artist that he should paint "something you see every day that everybody would recognize. Something like Campbell's Soup." Gopnik then mentions a few interpretations that work with and against biography: Warhol's quip to a friend of their Dada-like nothingness that rejected the individualist cult of Abstract Expressionism, the camp aesthetic of the cans themselves appealed to Warhol's gay sensibility, and brands like Campbell's Soup began to market themselves to the working class at precisely this moment, perhaps reminding Warhol of his childhood poverty.

In other words, Gopnik provides insight into the Campbell's Soup cans for the non-specialist, but he also curtails and shuts down their interpretative potential. What about Warhol's background in advertising? His interest in *Life* magazine where soup advertisements appeared weekly? His

awareness of the connections between graphic design and contemporary abstract painting? Or even the ways that soup cans were a staple found in nuclear fallout shelters? In talking about Warhol's photo booth portraits from just after the first Campbell's Soup cans, Gopnik writes, "But, for once, biography might *not* be the key to unlocking the roots of Warhol's creations" (emphasis his). I would contend that biography never provides a key to Warhol's practice. Biography can be evidence—sometimes compelling, other times not—that factors into a constellation of interpretations. By leaving the meaning of his works (and life) open, Warhol enabled the construction of constellations of potential and sometimes contradictory meanings. This intentional rejection of prescribed interpretation is part of what makes him one of the most important artists of the twentieth century.

Along these lines, Gopnik tries too hard to make sense out of (and defend) Warhol's disparate ventures of the 1970s and 1980s, especially the portrait commissions, *Interview* magazine, publicity gambits, and television ventures. He classifies them all under the rubric of "business art," which the artist described as "the step that comes after art." Gopnik then compares this "business art" to the work of Marcel Duchamp, with Warhol explicitly and radically blurring the divides between capitalist enterprises and art making. Of vital importance to Duchamp's practice, however, was *negation*—something Warhol's work largely lacked, especially after his 1968 shooting. In Duchamp's canonical readymades from the

1910s— everyday objects that are recontextualized as “art”—it was crucial that the chosen objects were rendered useless when they went on display as art. It is not desirable to urinate in an unplumbed, upside-down urinal (his *Fountain* from 1917), for instance. Can one say the same about a Warhol-designed ad for Absolut Vodka in 1985? Warhol was paid handsomely and presumably, many bottles of Swedish Vodka sold as a result. Some projects from this period—like Warhol’s abstract *Shadow* paintings (1978-79) or his *Oxidation* series (1977-78) that produced large-scale, Pollock-esque abstract paintings by means of the artist’s urinating on a ground of copper paint—deserve more attention. But other works are woefully substandard and desperate, with some, like his *Cowboys and Indians* series (1986) and his active seeking of commissions for portraits of Imelda Marcos and the Shah of Iran in the mid-1970s, even morally suspect. Lumping all Warhol projects together as part of a larger “business art” strategy is not only

## **Gopnik offers readers a conflicted view of an artist desperate to have both massive fame and impeccable avant-garde creditability.**

disingenuous but also dangerously amoral.

In demonstrating the increasing notoriety of the artist by the mid-1960s, Gopnik quotes Warhol-insider Paul Morrissey on what would make for an effective Warhol biography: “Andy’s biography should really be written just from his press clippings [...] That’s closer to the truth.” Such a pop mode of biography seems appropriate for an artist who tried to erase any subjective traces from his work. Morrissey’s hypothetical book would be

written by many and encompass a frustrating diversity of opinions on the artists and his work, not just the single voice of Blake Gopnik attempting to present a coherent version of “Warhol.”

Morrissey’s approach to biography reminds me of literary theorist Hayden White’s discussion of the ways that narrating history (and by extension, biography) cannot escape the subjective “impulse to moralize reality.” In a contrast, White explores older modes of historical writing from the medieval period that escape the implicit bias that a narrative framework provides. He looks to the bare-bones styles of *annals*, which list years and events with neither priority nor connection, and the *chronicle*, which lacks a tidy narrative and any larger interpretation of events. While White is not advocating a return to these medieval frameworks, his essay can compel historians and biographers to think carefully about how they deploy artificial narratives in their work and to be more honest and upfront with their intentions and biases. While a Warhol biography written solely from press clippings would lack a narrative thrust and interpretation (and be thousands of pages long), it would also refrain from packaging the artist in a way that works against the very thrust of his artistic projects.

Gopnik acknowledges that Warhol himself tried to thwart neat and packaged narratives in his work and life. For instance, when Warhol was charged with curating an exhibition with objects from storage at the museum of Rhode Island School of Design, the resulting *Raid the Icebox* (1969) featured objects that had never been on display, including paintings with holes, empty frames, fifteen examples of an identical Windsor chair, and masses of kitschy objects. Even more radical was the way that Warhol’s display mimicked the museum storage room—showing objects stuffed on modular shelves and resting on the floor, sometimes with paintings even partially blocked. If museums usually try to tell a clear narrative in their

curatorial selections and display, then in *Raid the Icebox*, Warhol's choice of objects (too many to consider) and his manner in presenting them (akin to museum storage) exposed the arbitrariness of established aesthetic categories. Curators choose what objects are on view in museums and thus what stories to tell; Is a biographer any different? If not, what would a *Raid the Icebox* approach to biography look like?

Gopnik suggests an answer by connecting *Raid the Icebox* with Warhol's own arbitrary archival system, known as his *Time Capsules*, housed at the Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh. Warhol did not throw away much in the way of paper during his time in New York, whether receipts, drawings, books, or newspapers. In the mid-1970s, he began a process of storing his vast collection of miscellany for posterity, placing materials from the whole range of his life in what eventually amounted to 610 standard-sized cardboard boxes. While the exterior appearance is order and rationality, with boxes displayed, grid-like, on modular shelves, the contents of each box defies any organizational logic. For example, Gopnik references *Time Capsule* number 212, that holds 538 items, including McDonald's French fry sleeves and paper salt packages, among other things more directly related to Warhol. But what are researchers supposed to do with this evidence? Did Warhol eat McDonald's fries often or was this just a singular instance that Warhol wanted to remember? We can't know; this is the joy and frustration of the *Time Capsules*. *Time Capsule* 61 (not discussed by Gopnik) is significant for holding some very significant biographical objects: Warhol's autographed photograph of Shirley Temple from his childhood and his hospital bracelet that he wore in the aftermath of his 1968 shooting. Rubbing up alongside those is a pair of embroidered Capri pants, lots of mail from publishers and galleries, pictures he borrowed from the New York Public library in 1954 (and never returned), a playbill from a dance performance, a book

about the chemistry of aluminum, and scores of other objects. Does one even dare to attempt to connect the disparate dots? Or is the whole system of *Time Capsule* a taunting joke aimed at potential biographers and scholars?

Gopnik is aware of this condition: "The hundreds of thousands of items in the *Time Capsules* seem to reveal everything you could ever want to know about the man and artist names Andy Warhol. They also could do more to confound, overwhelm and even foil his biographers than the most direct of his lies ever did." This passage is remarkable in that Gopnik acknowledges the limitations of his book and indeed any Warhol biography: Warhol has stacked the deck against coherence, whether in the *Time Capsules*, or in the reams of conflicting accounts of events given by those in Warhol's orbit. Despite this, Gopnik has done a remarkable job under the circumstances, offering readers a conflicted view of an artist desperate to have both massive fame and impeccable avant-garde credibility. However, the book is also a disservice to the artist, trying to provide an artificial sense of coherence to an artist who knowingly wanted to confound biography by constructing an infrastructure of allegorical possibility into his legacy.

Gopnik also alludes to the interpretative chaos of the *Time Capsules* in his preface to another recent book about Warhol, Matt Wrbcian's *A is for Archive: Warhol's World from A to Z*. Wrbcian, who was the chief archivist of the Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh before his premature death of cancer in 2019, seemed to subscribe to the idea that to know about Andy Warhol was to know about all his stuff. *A is for Archive* is a remarkable book in that it discusses and illustrates the range of materials found in Warhol archives. Wrbcian used the alphabet as a guiding principle. "A is for Autograph" and "B is for Box" start the book, and "Z is for Zombie" conclude it. Such a structure seems to follow Hayden White's cautions against historical narratives

that simplify and sanitize messy material. Wrbican's structure allows readers to grasp the range of Warhol's collected objects, ephemera, and trash, while also demonstrating how any "coherent" idea of Warhol is a fiction. While Wrbican offers perspective on the contents and biographic details, he is more of a chronicler—reporting rather than interpreting the existence of material evidence. This approach allows the enigma of the artist to take center stage.

Warhol slyly commented on his relation to biography in a famous 1967 interview with Gretchen Berg, "If you want to know all about Andy Warhol, just look at the surface of my paintings and films and me, and there I am. There's nothing behind it." By downplaying his own multi-dimensionality as an individual, as well as his capricious intellect and complexity as a subject appropriate for a biography, Warhol implies that viewers should consider his works relative to the larger visual world, whether archives of fine art or mass media. As such, to silkscreen an image of Marilyn Monroe fifty times in a modular grid is more concerned with celebrity and the public lives of images than with the private life of Warhol as an individual creator. It is clear that artists like Cindy Sherman, discussed above, learned much from Warhol's example of directing attention away from romantic notions of self-expression. These two new books on Warhol both illuminate how the artist was "postmodern" long before this term became common parlance. Blake Gopnik does this through his meticulously organized content, building up intentional patterns of self-erasure in his carefully plotted narrative. Its legible form of a traditional biography, in a sense, undermines the very untraditional content. Matt Wrbican's volume perhaps reveals more about Warhol, in that its organization demonstrates the chaos and interpretative openness of the artist's life and artworks. The author is not dead, as Roland Barthes argued, but just dispersed and fragmented in the archives. **A**

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# Dave Hickey Now

Julia Friedman

Daniel Oppenheimer, *Far From Respectable: Dave Hickey and His Art*. University of Texas Press, 152pp., \$25 cloth.

**R**OLAND BARTHES' 1979 *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* introduced into art theory the opposition between 'studium' and 'punctum'—the two facets, according to Barthes, that are necessary for a photograph to be effective. *Studium*—an “application to a thing ... a kind of general, enthusiastic commitment ... but without special acuity” correlates with an interest in content, the thing that compels the viewer to look at a photograph closely. It is “of the order of *liking*, not of *loving*.” *Punctum*, by contrast, is at once an irrelevant detail, outside of the image's narrative purpose, and a poignant feature that metaphorically “pricks” and “bruises” the viewer. *Punctum* is already in the image, and in an effective photograph a bespoke association triggers it. Barthes' *studium/punctum* dichotomy came to mind as I read, and then reread, Daniel Oppenheimer's book about Dave Hickey. Because I know Dave personally, and collaborated with him professionally a few years ago, I was already all set in the *studium* department. So on my first reading of the text in May 2020, still in its manuscript form, I concentrated almost solely on the descriptions of Dave the writer and Dave the person—particularly the bits that were new

to me, either because I lacked the writerly insights of the author, or because I was unfamiliar with the facts revealed in Oppenheimer's extensive research. At the time, the book struck me as thought-provoking, yet slightly solipsistic. Much like *Camera Lucida*, which Geoff Dyer astutely described as “a mediated portrait of the workings of his [Barthes'] own mind,” *Far From Respectable: Dave Hickey and his Art*, read as a mediated portrait of its author's mind. It was a book about Dave, but it was also a book about Daniel.

It took me another year and a half to get to the *punctum*. Initially, Hickey's warnings about the danger posed to art by the “therapeutic institutions” (museums, art schools, and fund-granting bodies) laid out in his now-canonical 1993 volume *The Invisible Dragon*, and elucidated in Oppenheimer's masterful argument, seemed to me exaggerated. I was at a loss to explain why, while Hickey's brilliant writings about Ed Ruscha, Joan Mitchell, Bridget Riley, Ken Price, and Lynda Benglis were barely mentioned, an entire chapter had been devoted to an ideological squabble prompted by a museum show he did not even write about. All that changed, however, as a swell of ideology suddenly shifted the attention of the art world from object to virtue. As high-profile police killings became the inflection point of America's racial reckoning over the summer of 2020, Black trauma was no longer one of many subtexts, but the focal topic



whenever references to race were involved. In the ensuing months public and private museums, art schools and art publications scrambled to prove their *bona fides* in anti-racism, implementing an array of DEI initiatives. The operating assumption was that the prevailing meritocratic order is, in both theory and practice, systemically racist. The solution was to shift towards identity-based privileging of URMS (underrepresented minorities). Reinforced by Twitter, the virtue-oriented ethos took hold, and Hickey's prediction about the "puritanical intellectuals and activists [...] regulat[ing] culture in the name of justice, equity, and identity" has been transformed from a theoretical probability into a palpable reality. The *punctum* of *Far From Respectable*, which according to Barthes, was "already there," has now fully revealed itself.

As I reread the text in book form, in September of 2021, its *punctum* pricked and bruised me with the realization that Hickey was spot-on in his warnings on the pages of *The Invisible Dragon*, and that Oppenheimer was wise to highlight the standoff between the artists who prioritize beauty and the institutions that prioritize virtue. My bad. Now I was certain that the author's opening question of whether Hickey is "particularly relevant right now" can only be answered with a resounding affirmative. Hickey's forecast that art will be threatened and suppressed by "the new puritans," who will no longer come from the conservative Christian right but from the progressive left, has been resoundingly vindicated. When the administration of major museums declare that they will use exhibitions as vehicles for "the powerful message of social and racial justice," (as in the Philip Guston case I discuss below), and when a respected *New York Times* art critic suggests that "art from the distant past [should be] viewed through the lens of the political present," as he welcomes the moral scrutiny of "#MeToo evaluation" applied to Titian's "repeated images of

gender-based power plays and exposed female flesh," it is fair to say that Hickey's dream of cosmopolitan paganism is dead. And while the motivation of "the new puritans" from the left might be well-intentioned, the result, in Hickey's own paraphrasing of Michel Foucault is bondage, and the loss of creative freedom. Care is control, as Dave likes to say.

## **Oppenheimer was wise to highlight the standoff between the artists who prioritize beauty and the institutions that prioritize virtue.**

Oppenheimer is the first writer to dedicate an entire book to Dave Hickey, who is now in his early eighties. Although Hickey made occasional public appearances in the 1970s and the 1980s (most notably as a smartly dressed and inexorably clever member of the 1975 panel on William Buckley Jr.'s *Firing Line* with Tom Wolfe), he came into real prominence in the mid-1990s, with the publication of *The Invisible Dragon: Four Essays on Beauty* (Art Issues Press, Los Angeles: 1993) and *Air Guitar: Essays on Art and Democracy* (Art Issues Press, Los Angeles: 1997). Invitations to speak at various art institutions began to pour in, and Hickey delivered dozens of intrepid lectures in which he dazzled audiences with knowledge and wit, while mocking the academic and museum bureaucrats who paid his honoraria. In 2001 he was awarded a MacArthur Fellowship, also known as the Genius Grant, and in 2006 Hickey won a Peabody Award for his work in the *American Masters* series documentary about Andy Warhol. The College Art Association honored him with the Frank Jewett Mather Award for art criticism in 1994.

His decades-long writing career has included essays on art, music and culture in *Rolling Stone*, *Art News*, *Artforum*, the *London Review of Books*, and *Art in America*, where he also served as an executive editor.

In 2012 a revised and expanded version of *The Invisible Dragon* was published by The University of Chicago Press, which also printed *25 Women: Essays on Their Art* in 2016, and *Perfect Wave: More Essays on Art and Democracy* in 2017. In 2014, *Pirates and Farmers* (Riding Press, London) hit the shelves, sending Twitter into overdrive. There is even a collection of short stories, written in the 1960s and issued in 1989 as *Prior Convictions* (SMU Press, Dallas). As Hickey's fame grew, and his readership expanded, a new generation of art students fell under the spell of his artful prose. But he also made enemies along the way and, by the time *Pirates and Farmers* was published, his detractors were burrowing into his frequent infractions of the tightening PC codes.

In his book, Oppenheimer sets out to bring the spotlight back on Hickey's serious writing. Penetrating the ruse of his subject's impish provocations, and fully understanding the power of critical thought, Oppenheimer builds a solid argument for revisiting Hickey's books—not only because they contain some of the best-ever Anglophone writing on art, but also because we badly need Hickey's evaluation of the 1990s to help us survive the culture of the 2020s.

*Far From Respectable* pays overt stylistic homage to Hickey's irrepressible, idiosyncratic prose. It is not an exhaustive analysis of Hickey's oeuvre, but an argument for his contemporary relevance. It is not a comprehensive biography along the lines of Benjamin Moser's recent monograph on Susan Sontag; yet Oppenheimer provides enough biographical and psychological background to contextualize Hickey's ideas.

The book consists of only four chapters, like *The Invisible Dragon*, and following Hickey's example, Oppenheimer makes his points in a spare, rhetorical style. His introduction tells the story of Hickey's unrealized book project *Pagan America*—a country of a “large, secular, commercial democracy,” united by shared icons across cultural strata. Hickey is said to have lost the manuscript, so he has never shared his aspirational vision, but if he had, he would have been proven wrong. The art community of the “pagan” celebrated by Hickey has, as Oppenheimer put it, been “colonized by the virtue-promoting institutions”—a trend that has only gathered pace since the summer of 2020. Unlike the culture wars of the 1990s, the new puritans came from the ideological left, but their orthodoxy was equally stifling. Hickey understands the danger they posed, as he laments the art establishment's consistent moral cowardice. The first chapter of Oppenheimer's book describes the infamous 1989 cancellation of the exhibition *Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment* by the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington DC—a preemptive, cowardly maneuver meant to thwart an anticipated Christian conservative backlash.

It is impossible not to connect this decades-old event with a more recent, similarly cowardly maneuver by another respected Washington institution: the National Gallery of Art. In September of 2020, the NGA shared a joint “Statement from the Directors” of the four venues for the long-awaited retrospective “Philip Guston Now” that was to originate at the National Gallery, delaying the traveling show by a whopping four years in order to “bring in additional perspectives and voices.” The purported goal was to mitigate the damage from potential accusations that some of the paintings in the show might implicate the artist as a racist, because they contained visual references to the Ku Klux Klan. Even though

the exhibition's catalogue contained plentiful proof of Guston's anti-racist stance (including a Black contributor to the catalogue referring to Guston's paintings as "woke"), the administration argued that it was the potential *impact* on the viewers, and not the artist's *intention*, that mattered. Following a considerable pushback from artists, critics and curators, the date of postponement was moved back. But the damage has been done: the framing of the show had shifted from art to virtue.

Who was behind the postponement? Art bureaucrats from the therapeutic institutions. As Oppenheimer tells the story of the Mapplethorpe exhibition debacle, he simultaneously lays out Hickey's aesthetic cosmology, in which "the messy democratic marketplace, which was the proper incubator of the artistic value in our society" is under attack from "the villains," "the blob of curators, academics, review boards, arts organizations, governmental agencies, museum boards, and funding institutions that had claimed for themselves almost total control of the assignment and negotiation of value to art." Hickey famously declared: "I characterize this cloud of bureaucracies generally, as the 'therapeutic institution.' Their aim is to elevate virtue (as they understand it), not to promote beauty. Motivated by power and control, and the "fear of freedom and pleasure and undisciplined feeling," these therapeutic institutions, according to Hickey, espouse "the puritanical canon of visual appeal." They are the new church militant, poised to accuse and to condemn anything that might be deemed at odds with the reigning orthodoxy.

Hickey, on the other hand, worships not virtue, but beauty, which the "bad boy of art criticism," as he is often introduced, revealed through provocation. His currency is "beautiful provocations," a term he used to describe Mapplethorpe's work as it was attacked by the illiberal right in the 1990s. An

Now, Titian's "beautiful provocations" are under attack from the illiberal left, as the *New York Times* review cited above demonstrates. Oppenheimer, a writer himself, is open about his enchantment by Dave Hickey's art. He argues that Hickey's remarkable impact as an essayist was not due to the fact "his theory of beauty was superior," but that it was "because his performance while articulating it was so beautiful." For Oppenheimer, *The Invisible Dragon* is "seeded with so many small bombs of insight and elegance, so much wit, and so many dazzling connections, the text became a work of art in itself." In a sense, Hickey performs what he preaches.

Oppenheimer's second chapter examines Hickey through the eyes of his friends, colleagues, and family members. Their testimonials are loving without being hagiographic, and their memories of the young Dave provide an excellent addendum to Hickey's own fictionalized recollections, familiar to readers of the autobiographical writings from *Air Guitar* (1997) and *Perfect Wave* (2017). Hickey certainly does not suffer fools gladly, but he is unanimously described as forgiving, supportive and gentle, sometimes to a fault, by his friends and former partners. The chapter's title, "The semi-transitional epiphany tactic," is a witty riff on what Oppenheimer identifies as his subject's lack of planning, and "certain tendencies to depression and self-sabotage," combined with "a talent for writing, a daimonic intellect, and intuition for where certain kinds of cultural energy were coalescing." This personal context matters because it underscores Hickey's innate caring, authenticity, and utter lack of interest in being a part of anything resembling a bureaucratic hierarchy. In practical terms, this gonzo attitude was manifested in what could be interpreted as career setbacks: his unfinished graduate studies, his forsaken gallery directorship, the editorial and academic positions that are conspicuous by their absence from his

resume, and ultimately his well-publicized 2012 “retirement” from the art world. Hickey is fallible enough, but he is indisputably a man of integrity: an endangered species threatened with extinction in the prissy and self-righteous art world of the twenty-first century.

The third chapter of *Far From Respectable* looks back at an incident that, in retrospect, was a premonitory tremor of the earthquake presently rocking the art world to its foundations. The events in question were set in motion by the 1996 exhibition “Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago’s Dinner Party in Feminist Art History,” curated by Amelia Jones for the .2"# Hammer Museum. The Hammer exhibition proved to be a telling antecedent of today’s battles over identity art. In his review of the show, the *LA Times* art critic Christopher Knight blasted Jones for subordinating the art to the curatorial agenda: “Lengthy object-labels and preachy didactic panels direct the audience in proper theoretical viewing of the art. With a curator who is an ideologist, theory is privileged over practice. Art is thus misused, its eocacy undermined by curatorial trivialization.”

Libby Lumpkin’s review in *Art Issues* was similarly damning, pointing to the heavy-handed ideological spin, referring to the show as “kitsch, nothing more and nothing other, a blatant, popular artifact rendered ludicrous by its higher aspirations.” Like Knight, she criticized the reduction of art to a mere prop in the political *agitprop* of “Sexual Politics.” Oppenheimer’s summation of Lumpkin’s scathing review is spot on: “If art is just reduced to politics of theory or therapy by other means, who really cared? Why not do a protest or a seminar or a healing circle instead?” Hickey himself did not opine on the exhibition in print, but his past essays on beauty, combined with his personal associations—Knight was his good friend, and Lumpkin his wife—placed him in the middle of Jones’ crosshairs.

***The Invisible Dragon is “seeded with so many small bombs of insight and elegance, so much wit, and so many dazzling connections, the text became a work of art in itself.”***

Her rebuttal “Every man knows where and how beauty gives him pleasure’: Beauty Discourse and the Logic of Aesthetics,” came three years later in Los-Angeles-based critical discourse quarterly *X-Tra*. Jones argued that the culture wars of the 1990s were not about artists and art lovers fighting against Christian conservatives. Instead, as Oppenheimer explains, the wars were fought between “those like Jones who believed that leftist politics and critical theory were essential tools in deconstructing and demystifying old ideas of beauty and taste” and “the beauty brigade, the defenders of those hoary old concepts and their thinly veiled retrograde politics.” Dave Hickey, as the author of “the single most influential art book of the decade,” was the main target of Jones’ essay, as she insisted that the discourse of beauty is never innocent, but always involves taking inherently ideological positions.

As Oppenheimer notes: “[F]or Jones, Hickey was much worse than his beauty-loving white male forebears like Immanuel Kant and Ruskin [because] Hickey was trying to reassert the primacy of beauty in the political context in which its reactionary implications were already visible.” Despite the obvious pertinence of such observations,

I must disagree with Oppenheimer's vision that Amelia Jones "mischaracterized Hickey's writing." Her view of Hickey's subtle and complex arguments as "straightforward declarations of the universality and immutability of beauty" is less of an issue than her casting of Hickey as an ideological enemy. Oppenheimer is right to point to the anger Jones exhibited toward Hickey—a resentment that seems illogical considering the lack of direct contact between the two.

Their rift was about more than misaligned ideologies. Rather, it was about the degree to which ideology figures into the creation of art. Hickey's proposition that "works of art [might be] considered frivolous objects or entities with no intrinsic value," was heresy in a world where art is nothing but a tool for social struggle against Western patriarchy. In Oppenheimer's words, Hickey "was skeptical of interpretations that leaned too heavily on straightforwardly political or economic explanations for why people were or weren't likely to invest in a given work." A man for whom art is autonomous and "intrinsically ineffable" is virtually the opposite of Jones who, according to Oppenheimer, "was clear about her debt to Marxist and feminist thinking." She sought "an ethically responsible path forward for artists and art lovers who didn't want to continue to be complicit in the oppressive habits of Western art." For instance, writing about Renee Cox's photograph *Yo Mama*, Jones employed the now tiresomely familiar trope of self-demotion as a white woman: "In my sometimes pain at being white, with the negative responsibilities this entails in Western patriarchy, and experiencing the inevitable privilege that my 'visible' bodily appearance assigns me in this culture, I want to *be this someone else*." Within this politicized framework, ideology supplants aesthetics.

The power of *The Invisible Dragon*, according to Oppenheimer, is rooted in "its attacks on the art critical and curatorial establishment at a time when it was exerting an immense and often stifling influence on the teaching and practice of art." Hickey's rhetoric is protean in its register. He can be a populist, "a champion of the common viewer's instincts and preferences against the dry philosophizing of elite academics and uptight bureaucrats," but he can also attack "as a highbrow, dancing circles of French theory around the middlebrow moralizing of art bureaucrats." What makes Hickey's writings so dangerous, so "rhetorically devastating" to the moralizing of art bureaucrats is that "his true field was not aesthetics, but the sociology or politics of beauty." He always has a bigger picture in mind.

This bigger picture is the reason why *Far From Respectable* is so timely, and why we need to reread Hickey now. As Oppenheimer explains:

*By 2020... it was clear that the orthodoxies and tendencies that Hickey was resisting back in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when they existed in their concentrated form in academia and the art world, hadn't so much evaporated as percolated down to the groundwater of American culture, welling up from there to infuse whole new realms of cultural and political life, rendering more legible than ever what was most dissident in his writing. It had not lost the dialectical charge he feared it would, though the landscape of contestation had spread out and diffused. The therapeutic institution, the blob, was everywhere and everything, issuing judgements at a million miles a second on Twitter.*

What Hickey offers us is exactly what we need: a way to shift the focus from meta-issues, like ideology, back to the art objects themselves. In Kantian terms, we must abandon the "thing for us" and return to the "thing in itself." *Air Guitar* contained a brilliant meme of the authoritarians as

“Aryan muscle boys,” a type of conformist and orthodox actor who suppresses and dominates “what was wild and seductive and subversive in art.” Oppenheimer underscores that for Hickey “the aryan muscle-boys weren’t just actual aryan muscle-boys; they were all the puritans and schoolmarms, of whatever color, ideology, and affiliation, who think art isn’t just subordinate to ethics but a practical branch of it.” Today, “the descendants of the aryan muscle-boys” are not “just uptight political conservatives,” but also “politically correct professors and curators, well-meaning activists and art teachers, right thinking bureaucrats and philanthropists.” Amelia Jones, who was ahead of her time in the late 1990s, falls neatly into that category.

Perhaps more important than his diagnosis of the malaise of puritanical orthodoxy, Hickey’s writings also contain a prescription for treatment. By identifying “what kind of art is not the answer”— “[not] anything that is made by aryan muscle-boys of the right, [...] not be work born of the mirrored galleries of the aryan muscle-boy left, with its infinitely reflecting visions of carefully pruned souls endlessly watching and reproaching and correcting each other,” Oppenheimer, paraphrasing Hickey, points out an obvious fact that has somehow escaped the puritanical commissariat of left-wing culture: “Whatever justice is made of ...art is not downstream from it. It is not an extension, distraction, evasion, or even .... a compliment to justice. It is a rival source of value in the world.”

Hickey’s ideas about a healthy art ecosystem offer a blueprint for resolving today’s tensions. His vision of art extending outwards into the world of popular culture,

based on “binding people together in sympathetic orientation around the work they love,” is a way to halt runaway Balkanization and imposed orthodoxy. Hickey’s nonjudgmental attitude is necessary to help us avoid sacrificing art to institutional commitments, and sacrificing beauty to virtue. Hickey, “a grantor of permission and forgiveness, a purveyor of caring, knowing acceptance, and encouragement” is the perfect symbolic father for this movement away from intolerance. The “earnestness and vulnerability” of his writings, is the opposite of critical theory’s caustic cynicism.

*Far From Respectable* makes an excellent case for reading Dave Hickey again. The corrosive model which prioritizes virtue over art has been failing us for at least three decades by suppressing heterodox artists. The only winner in this unfortunate experiment, in which art is assumed to be downstream from justice, is the art market. Its explosive growth over the same period of thirty of so years, correlates precisely with the growth of the therapeutic institutions. As the quest for righteousness shrunk the space formerly taken up by aesthetics, rampant financial speculation and insider trading moved in to fill the vacuum. Oppenheimer’s book is more than an homage to Hickey. It is also a reminder that the imperative of virtue-signaling is fundamentally at odds with “the cultivation and flourishing of eccentric, subversive impulses that [have] the potential to remake the whole society from the outside in.” Hickey’s writings remind us why we might want to participate in an earnest and vulnerable art world, in which outsiders can still bond over beauty. a



Figure 1 Evelyn Beatrice Longman, *The Spirit of Communications*, 1915. Gilded bronze. 24 feet (7.3 meters) high. AT&T Discovery District, Dallas, TX, 2021. Photo credit: Courtesy of AT&T

# Evelyn Longman's *Genius of Electricity*

## Public Sculpture as Corporate Icon

Margaret Samu

VISITORS TO DOWNTOWN DALLAS now encounter a new sight at the intersection of Wood Street and South Akard: a monumental gilded sculpture of a man with a broad chest and powerful muscles (Figure 1). Heroic in scale, with immense spread wings, the gleaming figure speaks of raw energy. Rising up on his toes, he stretches his left arm upwards to seize bolts of lightning from the sky. Swirling cables curve around his body and terminate in his right hand with a sizzle of electricity. The sculpture is owned by AT&T, Inc., which calls it *The Spirit of Communication*, with the nickname “Golden Boy.” The company recently moved the figure from inside the lobby of Whitacre Tower to its current outdoor site, where it anchors the south end of the newly opened Discovery District.

This golden hero first entered my life two decades ago, when I was writing my

undergraduate thesis on the artist who created him, Evelyn Beatrice Longman (1874-1954). Our college museum had just acquired a *Victory* figure by Longman and a portrait of her by Daniel Chester French, both donated by her family. The prospect of conducting new primary research excited me. I compiled a database of her sculptures and their reproductions that added ninety-four new entries for Longman to the Smithsonian Institution's Inventory of American Sculpture, and later published a short article on the sculptor's life and work.<sup>1</sup> In graduate school I turned to other projects, but have continued to follow the peregrinations of her best-known sculpture with interest. Because Longman titled her work *The Genius of Electricity*, and because its every facet bursts with electrical energy, many—myself included—still call it, simply, *Electricity*.



## Longman and *Electricity*

LONGMAN WAS THE FIRST AMERICAN woman of her generation to establish a career in large-scale public sculpture, and the first woman sculptor to become a full member of the National Academy of Design (1919). She studied at the Art Institute of Chicago with Lorado Taft, who trained and encouraged women to become professional artists. He had helped launch the professional careers of several of his female students by hiring them to produce work for the 1893 World's Fair in Chicago. Training under Taft, who fiercely advocated for public sculpture in Midwestern cities, undoubtedly spurred Longman to pursue commissions for large-scale monuments. After moving to New York City in 1900, Longman soon became a studio assistant to Daniel Chester French, one of the foremost sculptors in the country. She set up her own studio near Union Square, where many other artists also lived and worked. Initially, she fulfilled portrait commissions mainly from French's overflowing workload. With time, Longman began to receive commissions for large-scale works, and started attracting patrons without French's help. By 1906, she no longer worked in his studio, but they remained close friends and trusted colleagues.

In an era when few women became professional artists, even fewer worked in sculpture, which was considered too physically strenuous for a lady. Because organizations such as the National Sculpture Society discouraged women from competing for public commissions, the few who made professional careers as sculptors found success producing small-scale works such as portraits, fountains, and tabletop figurines. With so few women producing public sculpture, and none of them making it the primary focus of their career, Longman had a

challenging path ahead of her. French's support helped ease her entry into the field, but entering anonymous competitions for large-scale works allowed her to thrive in her own right. Like the leading male sculptors of the period, Longman pursued large, public commissions as her main work, and created portraits and small pieces in between. Her talent and professionalism earned her the respect of other artists. By 1911, a colleague told French, "We no longer speak of Miss Longman as doing good work for a woman."<sup>2</sup>

In designing *Electricity*, Longman built on the success of her first public commission, the *Victory* figure that crowned the Festival Hall of the St. Louis World's Fair in 1904. Gilded and standing about twenty-five feet high, it became the visual centerpiece of the fair.<sup>3</sup> Poised on a small globe, Longman's long-limbed young man seizes a laurel crown and oak branch in one hand as he triumphantly acknowledges the public with his other. Slim and muscular, this *Victory* is an athlete in his moment of glory. The burgeoning popularity of sports at the turn of the century promoted the image of the athlete—young, strong, and virile—as the ideal American man. Longman's unusual choice to personify victory as an exuberant athlete instead of the traditional winged female figure exemplifies one key to her success: her ability to capture an institution's message in a novel visual form.

The commission for *Electricity* came to Longman after she had already gained a national reputation. Following her debut at the World's Fair, she began positioning herself for public sculpture commissions by entering blind competitions. Submitting her work anonymously meant that she could be judged fairly in a field of male sculptors. Her next large-scale work was an immense pair of bronze doors for the U. S. Naval Academy Chapel in Annapolis, Maryland, which she

won in a blind competition against thirty-two men (1906-1908). In 1912 she won another competition for a complex, multi-figure monument to Senator William Boyd Allison in Des Moines, Iowa (1912-14), which she made in collaboration with architect Henry Bacon. Both projects paid handsomely—the Allison Memorial alone brought her \$50,000—and news reports at the time consistently noted her earnings. Longman's success in a male-dominated field, as well as the high sums of money involved, brought her a great deal of attention in both the art world and the press.

While Longman was enjoying the success of her *Fountain of Ceres* at the Panama-Pacific Exposition in San Francisco (1915), she was already working on the *Genius of Electricity*, commissioned jointly by the AT&T Corporation and Western Union for their new headquarters at 195 Broadway in Lower Manhattan.<sup>4</sup> She was one of four sculptors invited to compete in a blind competition and received payment for their submissions; four uninvited artists also submitted entries without compensation. Architect William Welles Bosworth charged the sculptors to design a seated “figure of Zeus holding the thunderbolt [...] a Greek figure in harmony with the Greek style of architecture in which the tower is designed and [...] allied to the electricity utilized by the Telephone & Telegraph Company.”<sup>5</sup> Bosworth took classical design elements seriously, adapting them to the proportions of a twenty-nine-story skyscraper. Although its engineering was fully modern, the building's exterior elevation displays engaged Doric and Ionic columns, and its interiors feature Greek decorative elements in marble, bronze, and alabaster. The sculpture would crown a small Ionic temple with a stepped roof atop one wing of the building (Figure 2). Despite Bosworth's request for a seated Zeus and his taste for classical design, Longman won the competition, by a unanimous vote of the judges, with an image that seemed to better reflect the nature of the

client's business. By virtually ignoring the architect's instructions, she created an image of modernity that would become a corporate icon.

Rather than a dignified seated figure, Longman produced an image of unbridled energy. Retaining only the thunderbolts from Bosworth's guidelines, she discarded the iconography of Zeus and focused instead on the company's use of electricity (Figure 3). Her powerful male nude with outstretched wings represented its speed and magic. His chiseled features and contemporary haircut reflected new ideals of masculinity, seen in contemporaneous commercial images such as the Arrow Collar Man. One observer described him as “a strong-faced, American type of man, with brawn and sinew, but still graceful.”<sup>6</sup> In a daring departure from Bosworth's instructions, Longman introduced a long electrical cable into her design. Stylistically, it exemplifies the transition from Art Nouveau's sinuous lines to Art Deco's abstraction. Winding around the figure's lower body and looped around one arm, it suggests dynamically stylized classical drapery while making an unblushing reference to the virile power of electricity.

If anyone at the time thought twice about an unmarried thirty-nine-year-old woman producing an exuberantly nude male figure, no one said so—at least, not in print. Art schools in major cities trained students to work from models of both sexes. Once they had finished their training, however, women rarely produced male nudes, which would require having a naked man in their private studios. Women sculptors typically focused instead on female figures and children; their male figures were usually clothed or draped. In New York City, Longman spent most of her time in the studio and associated almost entirely with male sculptors. Her unconventional habits and lack of concern for feminine social conventions liberated her to produce a powerful male form.



Figure 2 Evelyn Beatrice Longman, *The Genius of Electricity*, atop the Western Union/AT&T Building at 195 Broadway, designed by William Welles Bosworth, facing the Woolworth Building, in New York City. Photo credit: Longman Papers, Loomis Chaffee School Archives.



**Figure 3** Unknown photographer, Evelyn Beatrice Longman's model for *The Genius of Electricity*, 1914. Photograph from *American Architect* (July 5, 1922).

## A Technical Tour de Force

WHILE LONGMAN'S DESIGN DREW considerable attention, so did the technology that went into producing the full-size sculpture.<sup>7</sup> Standing twenty-four feet high and weighing approximately sixteen tons, the figure was made to be placed 434 feet above street level, attached to its base only by its feet (Figure 4). The outstretched arms and wings had to be stabilized to withstand dangerously strong winds. Whether for durability or due to her familiarity with the medium, Longman wanted the figure cast in bronze, rather than a lighter medium. The foremost foundry of monumental bronzes in the country, the Roman Bronze Works in Brooklyn, was responsible for the casting and for engineering the sculpture to ensure its structural soundness.

Visiting Roussel Studios during my thesis research, I learned about the sculpture's complex engineering from Christine and Marc Roussel, who have worked on *Electricity* since the 1980s. The figure was anchored to its spherical base using steel pins six inches in diameter that went up to its mid-calf. In 1916 engineers debated with the architect over securing the wings, whether to use simple bolts or a complex armature connected to the pins at the ankles. Eventually they chose to use Roman joints, a technique similar to dovetailing in carpentry, but reinforced by bolts and blind pins. Roman joints are remarkably strong attachments that allow the wings to move in the wind without weakening the structure. Packing the joints and seams with lead gave the surface a smooth appearance, as if it had been cast as a monolith. In fact, the figure had to be cast in twenty-four pieces, using both sand casting and lost-wax techniques. The swirling electrical cables proved to be the most difficult to cast. In order to create a regular

curve, the foundry used curved wood rather than plaster to make the molds, and cast them in several pieces that were later assembled.

The seven-foot plaster model that Longman produced after the competition served as the basis for the final twenty-four foot version. It was enlarged, or "pointed up," at the foundry, a potentially risky process: enlarging sculpture in three dimensions exponentially exaggerates even slight errors in proportion that are not visible in smaller models. Longman's model for *Electricity* was enlarged by almost three and a half times without revealing any flaws in proportion. Because it would be viewed from street level more than 400 feet below, her design had to compensate for an unusually sharp viewing angle. The success of her work despite these potential pitfalls testifies to her abilities as a sculptor. At the time it was produced, *Electricity* competed for the status of second-largest sculptural figure in New York (after the Statue of Liberty) with Adolph Weinman's sculpture *Civic Fame* (1913), which crowned the nearby Municipal Building. Both *Civic Fame* and *Liberty* were made with thin sheets of repoussé copper over a steel or iron armature, rather than cast bronze. Marc Roussel calls *Electricity* a "technical tour de force unmatched anywhere in the country." Articles in metalworking and architectural journals attest to the impressive engineering involved in producing Longman's monumental work.<sup>8</sup>

Mounting the finished sculpture on top of the Western Union building also proved to be a technical feat. An article titled "Electricity Goes Aloft: Thousands



Figure 4 Unknown photographer, Evelyn Beatrice Longman, *The Genius of Electricity*, at 195 Broadway building, New York City, undated photograph. Photo credit: Roussel Studios



Figure 5 Evelyn Beatrice Longman's renamed sculpture, *The Spirit of Communication*, on the 1941 Manhattan Telephone Directory. Photo credit: Courtesy of AT&T Archives and History Center

See "Huge Bronze Figure Lighted on Top of W.U. Building" appeared in the *New York Times* in October 1916. The exaggerated statistics in the story—measuring the sculpture at eighteen tons and thirty-four feet high—convey the excitement of the spectacle. Secured in a wooden frame, the assembled sculpture took ninety minutes to hoist to the roof, where it was uncrated and mounted on the skyscraper's Ionic temple. Thousands of viewers looked on from the street and nearby office windows.

Longman's commission for *Electricity* came at a moment of transition between civic ideal sculpture and corporate imagery. In the tradition of civic sculpture, it seeks to uplift people spiritually through an aesthetically pleasing image, yet it also anticipates the commercial desire to

promote the company and its product. It conveyed AT&T's corporate ideology, showing the company's harnessing of electrical power in the service of public telephone and telegraph communications. Standing against the Manhattan skyline for over sixty years, *Electricity* remained an emblem of modern technology and of Longman's artistic ingenuity. The gleaming golden figure became a landmark.<sup>9</sup>

While the commission's prestige and the sculpture's visibility atop a 29-story Manhattan skyscraper brought Longman widespread attention, the image was no longer under her control. In 1930 the AT&T Corporation renamed Longman's sculpture *The Spirit of Communication* to reflect its expanding global mission. Employees nicknamed him "Golden Boy." From the

1930s through 1960s, the image appeared on the cover of the company's Bell Telephone directories nationwide, with its new title in a banner and no reference to Longman (Figure 5). Later, images of *Electricity* could be found on AT&T company stationery, as well as the menu cover and matchbooks in the executive dining room. For decades they appeared on employee service awards, such as plaques, watches, pendants, and paperweights. Now employees can get Golden Boy T-shirts. As a diminutive reproduction, the figure became a mascot, similar to Mr. Clean or the Michelin Man. Color photographs of *Electricity* have appeared on the covers of a volume of poetry and a book on the history of telecommunications.<sup>10</sup> The book jackets credit only the photographer, graphic designer, and AT&T. The company began to credit Longman for the work in its publicity on a regular basis only in the mid-1980s.<sup>11</sup>

This wide diffusion introduced Longman's image into unexpected places. In the early 2000s a drawing of *Electricity* appeared in the men's magazine *Bound and Gagged*, illustrating an advertisement for a new leather publication titled *Super MR*, surrounded by graphic images of bondage and leather gear (Figure 6). Now suggesting restraints, the electrical cables encircling his body terminated in his upraised hand, which held a telephone receiver to encourage viewers to subscribe. Could it be that imposing, winged figures in other spheres, such as Tony Kushner's stately female Angel in *Angels in America* (1991), or Matthew Bourne's all-male *Swan Lake* (1995) helped Longman's figure to capture the imagination of bondage devotees? Through its use and misuse, Longman's image became a universally recognized brand, part of an elite set of high art images whose familiarity leads them to be memed.

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Figure 6 Advertisement for *Super MR* magazine, published in *Bound and Gagged*, c. 2002



## Electricity on the Move

**A**FTER MORE THAN SIX DECADES atop the 195 Broadway building, *Electricity* took wing. In 1980 AT&T announced the company's move from Lower Manhattan to Midtown, to a new building designed by Philip Johnson and John Burgee at 550 Madison Avenue—now a canonical postmodern work nicknamed the “Chippendale Building.” The decision to move *Electricity* to the lobby of their new headquarters sent shock waves through New York's architectural preservation community. Although 195 Broadway was not a designated landmark, preservationists considered the sculpture an intrinsic part of its design. Susan Henshaw Jones, the executive director of the New York Landmarks Conservancy, protested to AT&T president Charles L. Brown that “such a move would be inappropriate for the statue, which was designed to be seen from its present height and position.”<sup>12</sup> The debate became public when excerpts from her letter appeared in the *New York Times* alongside responses from Brown and Johnson defending their decision. Brown maintained that taller buildings now obscured views of the sculpture; besides, since the sculpture symbolized AT&T, “he goes where we go.” Johnson declared, “As the Romans carried [household] gods to new houses, so AT&T should carry its symbol to its new home.”<sup>13</sup>

In the end, nothing could prevent the sculpture's removal. The Roussel Studios team dismantled *Electricity* and conducted extensive conservation over two years.<sup>14</sup> Rather than condemning Brown and Johnson for desecrating its original site, the National Sculpture Society credited them for maintaining and moving the sculpture indoors, awarding them a medal for “their insight and imagination in preserving and

restoring the AT&T landmark.”<sup>15</sup> In 1983 Roussel Studios installed *Electricity* in its new location, atop a twenty-one-foot high black granite base in the six-story lobby of the new headquarters on Madison Avenue (Figure 7). In a monumental space scaled to fit the sculpture, with a round window forming a halo behind its head, *Electricity* created a flash of light in the austere interior. The high pedestal preserved something of the original steep viewing angle, but many people walked past without looking up.

Nearly a decade later, in 1992, AT&T moved *Electricity* out of Manhattan altogether, from its custom-built site at 550 Madison to a fourteen-acre office park, the company's new operational headquarters in Basking Ridge, New Jersey (Figure 8). While the outdoor setting provided the open space and blue sky of its original location, the sculpture appeared utterly incongruous in the suburban corporate campus. *Electricity* now perched uneasily before a low, horizontal building whose top-heavy design made it loom overhead. Erected in the center of a circular driveway, the figure stood on a small pedestal, visible at close range from cars driving into the ground-floor parking garage. Visiting the sculpture during my thesis research in early 2001, I found that an ideal vantage point did not exist. Standing in front of the sculpture meant seeing the gleaming figure—designed for the pinnacle of a skyscraper—overpowered by the modern corporate headquarters. Up close, his extraordinary energy and dynamism appeared overblown and slightly absurd. From indoors, the building's second-floor reception area provided a close-up view of his muscular buttocks, leading some employees to jokingly call the figure “Golden Buns.”

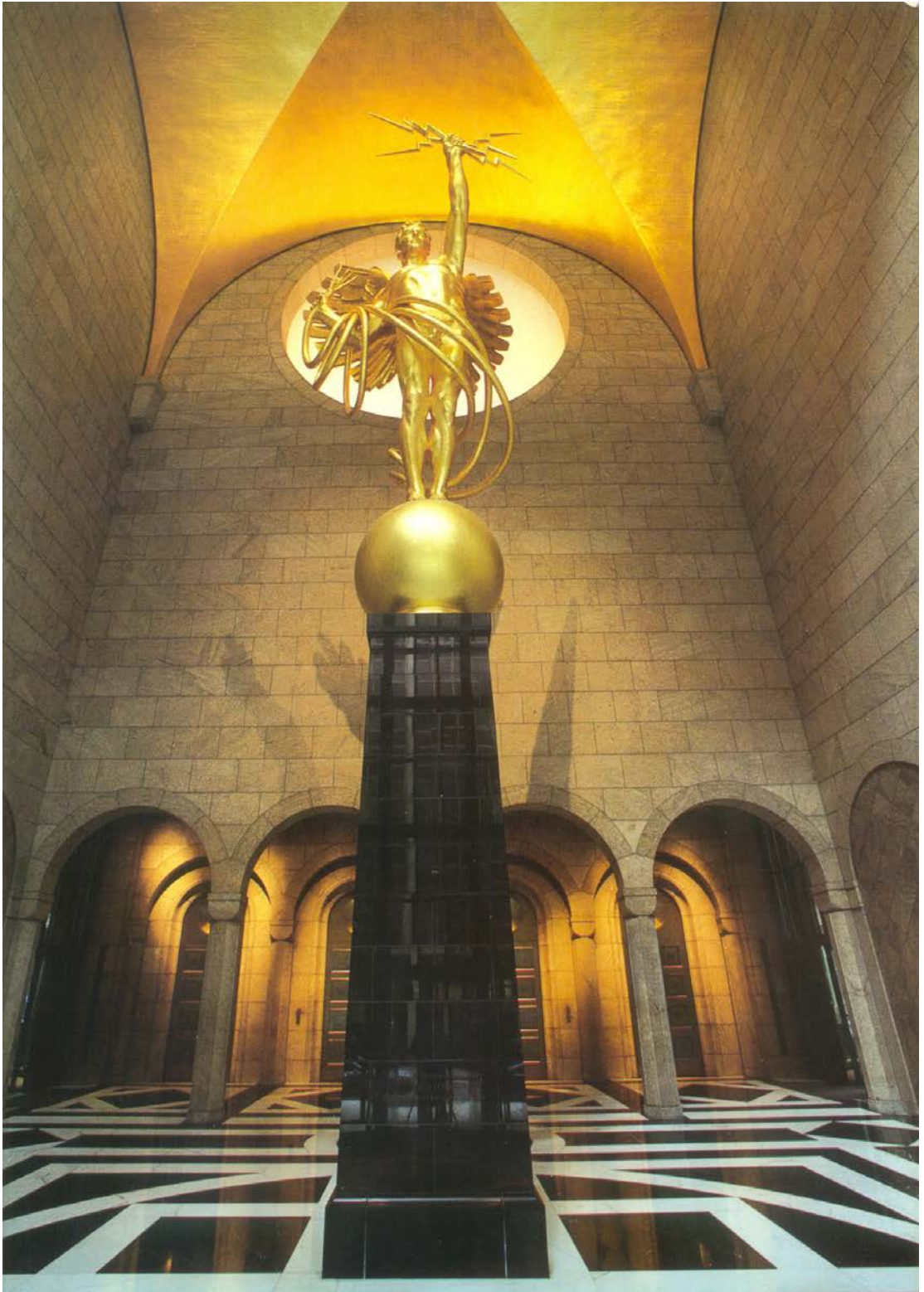


Figure 7 Unknown photographer, *The Spirit of Communication* in the lobby of 550 Madison Avenue (the "Chippendale Building"), c. 1984. Photo credit: Roussel Studios



Figure 8 Unknown photographer, *The Spirit of Communication* at the AT&T corporate headquarters in Basking Ridge, New Jersey, 1993. Photo credit: Courtesy of AT&T Archives and History Center



Figure 9 Unknown photographer, *The Spirit of Communication* at the AT&T corporate headquarters in Basking Ridge, New Jersey, ca. 2001. Photo credit: Roussel Studios

It was a striking comedown for a sculpture that had once graced the New York City skyline.

Little did I know that company officials were already planning *Electricity's* next move, which they hoped would be back to Manhattan. As AT&T was restructuring, they proposed transferring him to the top of their long-distance service headquarters in the Tribeca neighborhood, at 32 Avenue of the Americas. When that structure proved unsuitable, then-chairman C. Michael Armstrong decided to get rid of *Electricity*, offering him to the NYC Department of Parks and Recreation, causing outrage among employees and retirees alike. The prospect of its return to Manhattan raised hopes in the arts community, as the Parks commissioner worked to find a suitable site atop a building or in a park. The proposed recipient, Tribeca's Washington Market Park, dismissed the sculpture as "too large and too gold and too gauche" to view at close range, "totally out of proportion" for a small neighborhood park.<sup>16</sup> In debates over

rebuilding Lower Manhattan after the 2001 World Trade Center attack, *New York Times* architecture critic Herbert Muschamp called for its return. In the end, *Electricity* remained with AT&T, landing at another suburban office park in Bedminster, New Jersey, in October 2001 (Figure 9).

In less than a decade, after AT&T's acquisition by the former Southwestern Bell, which renamed itself after its former parent, the new corporation relocated its headquarters to downtown Dallas, bringing *Electricity* to its new home at Whitacre Tower in July 2009 (Figure 10). The *Dallas Morning News* reported that the sculpture's move signaled the company's commitment to building its future in the city.<sup>17</sup> The lobby was remodeled to accommodate the sculpture, making it visible from outdoors through a glass wall added to the marble façade. Visitors could enter the gleaming white interior to see the sculpture up close, as the sphere now sat right at ground level. A label near the base credited Longman and gave the title, *The Spirit of Communication*. With AT&T as an anchor for revitalizing

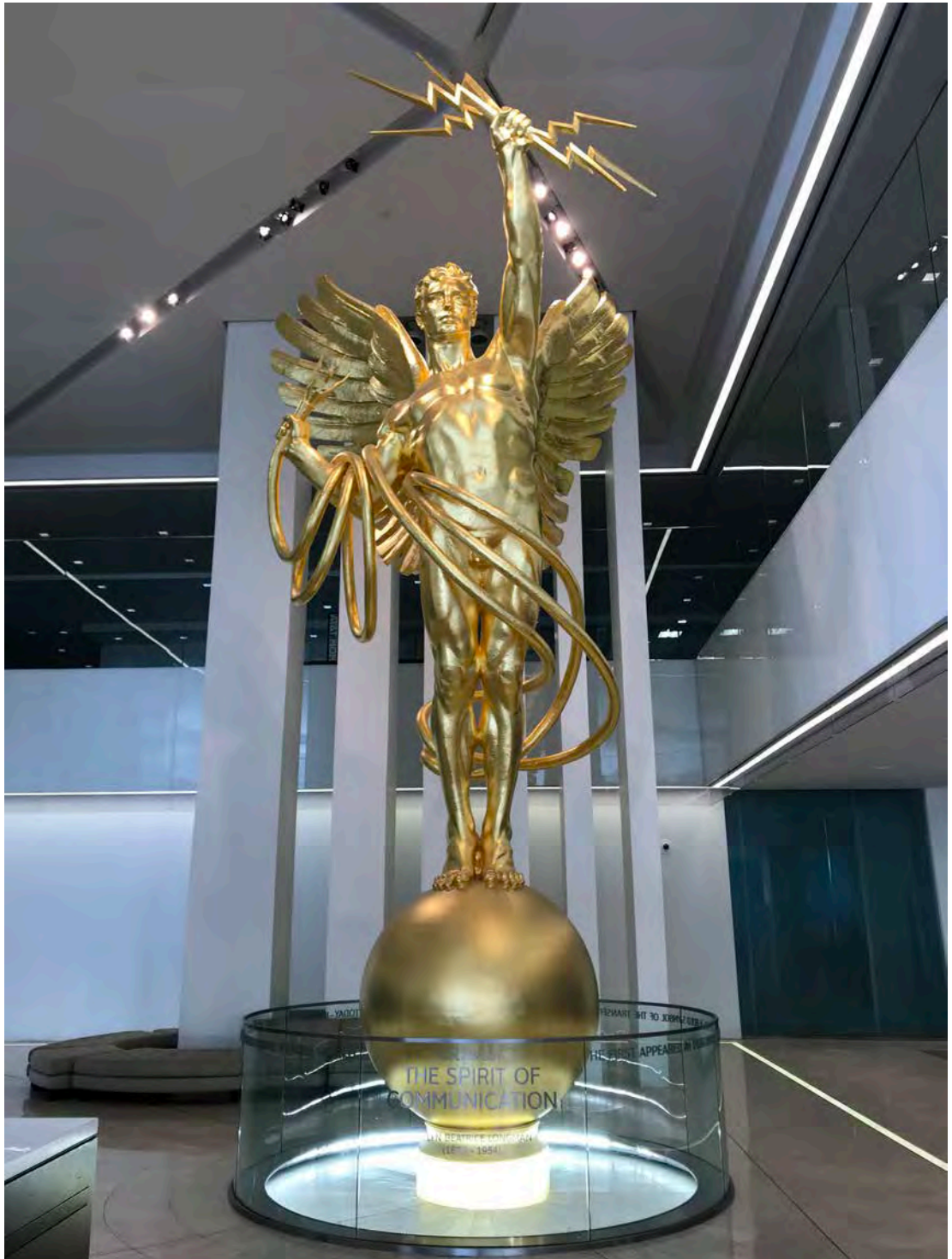


Figure 10 Unknown photographer, *The Spirit of Communication* in the lobby of Whitacre Tower, the AT&T corporate headquarters in Dallas, Texas, ca. 2009. Photo credit: Courtesy of AT&T



Figure 11 Patricia Hoerth, Longman's inscription under Electricity's heels, visible in Discovery District installation in Dallas, 2021. Photo credit: Patricia Hoerth

retail business in downtown Dallas, *Electricity* became a sightseeing attraction.

Over the past year, *Electricity* has lit up the news once again as AT&T Plaza, renamed the Discovery District, gradually opened to the public. The new district combines the functions of a world headquarters campus with a civic space. Similar to L.A. Live in Los Angeles, the idea was to create an urban destination for public leisure—a local, corporate-branded version of Times Square. With lawns and fountains enclosed by the company’s four buildings, the space features a multistory media wall for video installations. It also contains a three-dimensional realization of AT&T’s globe logo that changes colors as visitors stand inside it. Emulating Anish Kapoor’s camera friendly *Cloud Gate* (“The Bean”) in Chicago’s Millennium Park, it is quite literally a logo-as-public-sculpture. The district’s website touts *Electricity* among plaza amenities: “There’s plenty of green space to enjoy here. Feel free to work in The Grove (a treelined outdoor seating area), post a selfie with Golden Boy (our iconic, century-old statue), or just chill out on the lawn.” In addition to the gilded bronze sculpture itself, *Electricity* is also featured on the media wall in a high-definition rendering that shows him evolving, over the course of an hour, from a representation of early telegraph and telephone communication to the image of a

twenty-first-century media company. This hybrid of public sculpture and corporate imagery has now become a work of media art.

Longman’s *Electricity* once belonged to a community of gilded allegorical figures, eagles, and spires that populated the New York City skyline in the early twentieth century. His dynamism carried the skyscraper’s vertical thrust upward into the heavens. From a distance, his monumental scale, brilliant gold, and operatic power resolved against the sky. He will not appear on top of a building again. Still, his new urban, outdoor setting is an improvement over other recent sites. One of the yellow brick buildings flanking the sculpture is the former Southwestern Bell Telephone building, designed in the late 1920s by Lang & Witchell, then the premier architectural firm in Dallas. Its stylish Art Deco detailing complements the figure’s curving lines. Despite being brought to earth, *Electricity* remains transcendent. AT&T uses him to honor its company legacy, while recognizing the sculpture as a treasure, a notable work in the history of women artists. A plaque at the base credits Longman’s work, and her inscribed name is visible beneath the figure’s gilded heels (Figure 11). While some of the meaning that *Electricity* carried in its original site may be lost, its power as both a corporate icon and work of art endures. A

## Endnotes

- My thanks to Tiffany Heikkila in AT&T Corporate Communications; AT&T Corporate Historian Sheldon Hochheiser; Melissa Phillips, Director of Corporate Initiatives for the AT&T Discovery District; and Marc Roussel of Roussel Studios for their assistance with my questions about the sculpture's new installation. I am also grateful to Pat Hoerth and Wendy Salmond.
- 1 The archival and other primary research used here are cited in my thesis and article: Margaret Samu, "Establishing a Career in Public Sculpture: Evelyn Beatrice Longman," (Senior thesis, Wellesley College, 2001); and "Evelyn Beatrice Longman: Establishing a Career in Public Sculpture," *Woman's Art Journal* 25, no. 2 (Autumn 2004/Winter 2005): 8-15, doi. org/10.2307/3566511. Since then, new discoveries continue. See Ellen Wiley Todd, "Remembering the Unknowns: The Longman Memorial and the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Fire," *American Art* 23, no. 3 (Fall 2009): 60-81. doi. org/10.1086/649776 and a forthcoming biography of Longman by Pat Hoerth.
  - 2 French to Darragh de Lancey, 10 Feb 1911, 35.023, Longman Papers, Loomis Chaffee School Archives.
  - 3 This enlarged version of *Victory* was made of staff, plaster fortified with fiber, which was used for temporary structures such as fair buildings and decorations. It was destroyed after the fair. The three-foot-high plaster model of the work, on display in the Palace of Fine Arts, received a silver medal from the fair's jury. Numerous bronze casts were made after the fair, some of which entered museums, other served as trophies.
  - 4 195 Broadway was originally called the Western Union building because it was built on the site of the company's previous headquarters. Since AT&T owned a controlling interest in Western Union at the time and Theodore Vail presided over both companies, the sculpture was a joint commission. By 1916 AT&T had divested its interest in Western Union and eventually became the primary occupant of the building.
  - 5 William Welles Bosworth to Longman (letter to the four invited sculptors) April 20, 1914, Box 1, folder 35.022, Longman Papers, Loomis Chaffee School Archives.
  - 6 "Electricity Goes Aloft," *New York Times*, October 25, 1916, 22.
  - 7 Information on technical aspects of producing *Electricity* comes from Marc and Christine Roussel, interview with the author at Roussel Studios, Brooklyn, January 16, 2001.
  - 8 "Restoring the Spirit of Communications," *Metals in Construction* 2.1, (New York: Iron and Steel Promotion Fund; Architectural, Ornamental, and Miscellaneous Metal Industry Promotion Fund, 1980): 2-5; and "The Genius of Electricity," *Architecture* 74, (February 1985): 50.
  - 9 New York poet Christopher Morley noted it in his 1921 ode to the downtown skyline "St. Paul's and Woolworth." See his *Chimneysmoke* (New York: Doran, 1921), 149.
  - 10 Robert Pinsky, *Jersey Rain* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2000), 23; George Oslin, *The Story of Telecommunications* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1992).
  - 11 The company apparently began crediting Longman after a letter to AT&T Chairman Charles L. Brown from an alumnus of the Loomis Chaffee School, where Longman lived and worked after 1920. After this letter, from about 1984, a small brochure appeared, and company press releases began to draw attention to her work. Box 1, folder 35.022, Longman Papers, Loomis Chaffee School Archives, "Electricity."
  - 12 Jones to Brown, quoted in Carter B. Horsley, "City's Landmark Policies in Crossfire of Criticism," *The New York Times* July 27, 1980.
  - 13 Philip Johnson, quoted in Ita Gross, "Golden Boy Comes in from the Cold," *Sculpture Review* 33, no. 1 (Spring 1984): 8-9. *Sculpture Review* is the quarterly publication of the New York City-based National Sculpture Society, which had administered the competition in 1914.
  - 14 *Metals in Construction* 2, no. 1 (undated, early 1980s). See also AT&T Tech Channel, "Restoring AT&T's 'Golden Boy' Statue," [www.youtube.com/watch?v=kYbsnV7sMXk](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kYbsnV7sMXk) [accessed August 19, 2021]
  - 15 Gross, "Golden Boy Comes in from the Cold," 8-9.
  - 16 Quoted in John T. Ward, "Unwanted, Bolts and All. AT&T to N.Y. Park: Take our statue, please," *The Star-Ledger* (March 16, 2000).
  - 17 Rudolph Bush, "Striking Gold in City's Center," *Dallas Morning News*, July 8, 2009.



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