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Special Issue: Crisis and Rupture

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Front Cover: Selection from Francesca Brunetti, *The Mushrooms of Plato's Cave*, 2023. Courtesy of the artist.

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1 SPECIAL ISSUE: CRISIS AND RUPTURE

Desirable Futures—New Histories

Nils Roemer

The COVID-19 pandemic, war, social tensions, political conflicts, and climate change have only amplified already existing fears about our collective futures. Amid these threat multipliers, actor William Shatner, famous for his role as Captain James T. Kirk in the original *Star Trek* series, traveled to space in 2021 with Jeff Bezos's company Blue Origin. Expecting to feel exhilarated and elated, Shatner instead wept for the Earth: "I realized it's dying." His response is part of a larger realization that the human history of the Earth—the Anthropocene—is believed by many to be approaching an end. Along with this recognition that we have devastated Earth, national and global trends have altered our communities and cultures for several decades, placing us at the end of a long and stable period, as American geopolitical analyst Peter Zeihan notes in *The End of the World Is Just the Beginning: Mapping the Collapse of Globalization* (2022). According to Zeihan, compared to what will happen in the near future, the period from 1945 until now has been the best possible era. Looking ahead, however, "The 2020s will see a collapse of consumption *and* production *and* investment *and* trade almost *everywhere*. Globalization will shatter into pieces. Some regional. Some national. Some smaller. It will be costly. It will make life slower. And above all, worse. No economic system yet imagined can function in the sort of future we face." Noticeably absent, though, from Zeihan's Cassandra list is an anticipated future and any cultural dimension. Along with this "catastrophic convergence" comes what could be called the end of history.

Our times, indeed, may indicate the end of a period. For much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, every generation of Americans and other Westerners became more productive, wealthier, better educated, and longer lived. That has changed. Incomes have declined, social stratification has increased, and life expectancy in America has fallen in recent years. As a result, many millennials are worse off than their parents. This acute sense of crisis ruptures our societies and undermines our ability to think about the present within the context of larger progressive histories. Furthermore, generative AI accelerates the collapse of inherited temporal frameworks. It places individuals in relation to knowledge that did not exist months earlier, occupations that did not exist a decade ago, and tools whose capacities change continuously. We no longer share the confidence and zeal of our forebears. Are we losing the capacity to tell stories about ourselves? In such a context, the past can no longer serve simply as a guide to action, but perhaps future making can. Historical thinking, attentive to contingency, context, change, and human agency, can help societies move beyond crisis narratives if it reorients itself toward the future.

Our current crises are not solely economic, political, or ecological; they are also cultural and human crises that unravel our ability to write a coherent history of our past.

Historical changes have brought together social, economic, and political transformations and given rise to new forms of historical consciousness of time. They have shaped personal experience, social, economic, political, and cultural change, as well as our concepts of time and philosophies of history. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, narratives about the past bridged accelerating changes by providing an evolutionary model. Reinhart Koselleck, an eminent German historian of the twentieth century, studied how historical change altered our sense of continuity, but also how narratives overcame the widening gap between realms of experience and horizons of expectation. Similarly, in his wide-ranging book *The Culture of Time and Space, 1880–1918* (1983), Stephen Kern shows how technological change altered how people experienced and conceptualized time and space in Europe and America. He argues that "a series of sweeping changes in technology and culture created distinctive new modes of thinking about and experiencing time and space." The sense of the present was "distinctively new, thickened temporally with retentions and protentions of past and future and, most importantly, expanded spatially to create the vast, shared experience of simultaneity," in part due to the introduction of World Standard Time in 1884.

How does the period from 1989 to today compare with Kern's 1880–1918? Historians have already argued that 1979 represented a formative change, ushering in new global polarizations. In *Strange Rebels: 1979 and the Birth of the 21st Century* (2013), Christian Caryl argues that the Iranian Revolution, John Paul II's papacy, Ayatollah Khomeini's seizure of power, the economic reforms of Deng Xiaoping, and Margaret Thatcher's rise pivoted our world in a lasting manner by unleashing free-market capitalism and politicized religion. Yet seeing our present times as merely a continuation of 1979 overestimates the lasting effect of those events and underestimates the profound social, economic, technological, and cultural transformations of the last decades and the ways they have affected our lives.

New technologies are changing our sense of the world and our experience of ourselves. Communications technologies, such as 5G cellular service, and beyond create new temporal structures defined by constant presence. As techno-social humans, we no longer live in one place at one time. In our world, there is time within time and space within space, where times and distances are linked into a new homogeneity. All text, images, and sounds that have ever been recorded are linkable; we can save every moment, report on it, and play it back. Shared on social media, these moments bestow social capital and increase the embeddedness that networks and nodes have with each other. These technological advancements shape our sense of time as much as continuous ideological struggles and a sense of crisis do. Together, they have contributed to the shrinking of temporal vision to the here and now and to the fleeting moments of social media.

How can we regain a wider temporal perspective? At a moment when inherited narratives of progress no longer organize historical experience, historians must recover their capacity not only to interpret the past but also to imagine desirable futures. Roman Krznaric, in *The Good Ancestor: A Radical Prescription for Long-Term Thinking* (2020), reminds us of what has been called deep time: the realization that our own temporal being in the world as humans makes up only a short blip in the vast time of the world. Moreover, in thinking about our times within a multigenerational context, we must strive to be good ancestors, as the American virologist Jonas Salk noted, and "show future generations how we coped with an age of great change and great crises."

Futurity is distinctly different from contemporaneity. Future thinking can offer an alternative lens to the growing sense of the constant now. The future is, as the German Jewish émigré American philosopher Hannah Arendt argues, the consequence of our action. Thinking about unpredictable and unforeseeable futures restores agency and responsibility to us and makes us face our predicaments without absorbing them into an evolutionary model of progress. Our current crises are not solely economic, political, or ecological; they are also cultural and human crises that unravel our ability to write a coherent history of our past. In *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow* (2016), Yuval Noah Harari associates storytelling with

what makes humans unique. Indeed, without commonly accepted stories about ourselves, no complex society can function. Our ability to imagine, create stories, and make meaning allows us to organize ourselves flexibly in large numbers, Harari notes. To regain this ability, we might have to begin by letting go of an idea of history that will no longer serve us unless we want to continue mapping future crises onto preexisting maps of past social, economic, and global conflicts.

From its inception, historical writing has always extended into the future. The German philosopher Friedrich Schlegel called historians "backward-looking prophets." Nineteenth-century historians believed that the historical forces they observed would extend into the future. There is already a growing scholarly field that investigates how societies imagine futures and how those imagined futures shape action in the present. The German historian Lucian Hölscher calls this, in *Die Entdeckung der Zukunft* (*The Discovery of the Future*, 1999), the "history of the future." According to him, early modern Europe gradually developed a distinctly future-oriented society in which planning, progress, reform, and anticipation became central features of political and social life.

The psychologist and futures researcher Jennifer Gidley, in her *The Future: A Very Short Introduction* (2017), introduces future studies, while exploring how people have imagined, predicted, and attempted to shape what is ahead of them. She contrasts techno-optimistic with human-centered approaches to the future and distinguishes between probable futures and preferable futures. Can we write histories of futures whose events have not occurred, explore biographies of institutions that do not yet exist, and craft narratives of futures that remain open? For David J. Staley, historians have the necessary skills to imagine futures, as he argues in *History and Future: Using Historical Thinking to Imagine the Future* (2007). Among these is an understanding of contingency, context, path dependence, and change. Future-oriented historical narratives entail an ethical commitment and responsibility. To write as historians of the future is not to predict what will happen; it is to narrate what becomes possible if institutions, communities, and individuals act differently. Such writing asks us to imagine, from the vantage point of a desirable future, what transformations made that future possible. In futures studies this is known as backcasting. History becomes less an explanation of what happened and more an exploration of possible and desirable futures.

Historians could become the curators of possible futures. A simple prompt such as this opens us to possibilities: "You are a historian of the future looking at the transformation of universities between 2025 and 2050 as one of the most important institutional reinventions of the twenty-first century. What made that transformation possible? What historical events, practices, and ideas ultimately led to it? What were the challenges, and what were the opportunities?" *A*

Video Games and the Cheerful Apocalypse

Monica Evans

Players are bored of catastrophe. Video games have presented worlds ruined by climate change, nuclear winter, world wars, viral outbreaks, natural disasters, meteors, man-made plagues, gray goo scenarios, artificial intelligence networks, robots, aliens, vampires, mutants, and hordes upon hordes of zombies—to the point that post-apocalyptic settings are often considered overdone and clichéd. For game developers, barren wastelands and ravaged cities are tempting gameplay settings, for both technical and aesthetic reasons, but creating novel experiences in post-apocalyptic worlds is a challenge. In short, the apocalypse has become banal.

Regardless, there is no shortage of post-apocalyptic games.[1] Many of the longest-running and most critically acclaimed games and game series take place during or shortly after a global apocalyptic event, including *Fallout, Metro, S.T.A.L.K.E.R., The Last of Us, Horizon Zero Dawn, Days Gone, Left 4 Dead, Death Stranding, Nier: Automata, Frostpunk, Telltale's The Walking Dead*, and any number of games in which zombies, mutants, or plague-ridden creatures serve as the main antagonists. Recently, however, a surprisingly gentle trend has begun appearing in post-apocalyptic games. Rather than focusing on the player character as a hardened survivor wandering a crumbling and hostile wasteland, some games present a world in which the survivors are doing just fine: communities are thriving, the natural world is flourishing, and kind and helpful people are continually improving their circumstances. This trend isn't limited to smaller indie titles like *I Am Future* (2024), *Wildmender* (2022), and *My Time At Sandrock* (2023): one of the clearest examples is *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (2017), a triple-A mainline title in one of Nintendo's two flagship series and the launch title for the Nintendo Switch.

This recent prevalence of cheerful post-apocalyptic games is driven not only by a desire to innovate on a popular gameplay setting, but also by developers reflecting on and reacting to a world in crisis, and in many ways in decline. The progression-focused mechanics of open world games, advantages of isolated wilderness settings in game spaces, and desire to make games that speak to our present moment result in game worlds in which the apocalypse is not only survivable, but also the catalyst for positive change and a sustainable way of life.

A great deal of current media, including video games, is concerned with the end times. One can argue that apocalyptic thinking informs not only our art and entertainment,

1 Tamayo, Paul. "Why are videogames obsessed with the post-apocalypse?" *Kotaku.com*, March 18, 2019.

but much of modern life, a shift that began in the 1960s and continues to the current day.[2] The modern conception of the apocalypse, rather than a religious or divinely ordained calamity, can be described as a "world-altering catastrophe" stemming either from random chance or "the tragic outcome of human failure," without the redemptive hopefulness of its Biblical counterpart.[3] Much of our interest in apocalyptic media results from a dissatisfaction with current society, as well as yearning for experiences that will uncover our heroic potential, whether through physical prowess, intelligence, or forethought and preparation. As such, many postapocalyptic narratives focus on survival through battle or other tests against a "tangible enemy… be it alien, monster, machine, or forces of nature that require conquering, such as the sudden coming of an Ice Age," [4] a structure that maps well onto the action and strategy-oriented mechanics of many games.

While digital games can tell a wide variety of stories, they are particularly adept at heroic fantasies, particularly those in which the main character is a lone hyper-competent savior, which meshes well with many post-apocalyptic narratives. From a practical standpoint, destroyed worlds are appealing to games developers as well. Ruined cities deliver spectacle: games that present the apocalypse through future ruins of recognizable buildings "manifest a long tradition of sublime ruination" in order to emphasize "the destructive capacities of modern societies." [5] Rubble and interestingly ruined structures also afford platforming and movement challenges that would feel out of place in undestroyed structures. Additionally, empty environments are less resource-intensive and easier to create than those with numerous non-player characters, in that creating beautiful static structures is technologically simpler than designing, programming, animating, and writing and recording lines of dialogue for high-fidelity digital humans. Given that the themes and narratives of post-apocalyptic fiction also fit well with multiple popular game genres—particularly the mechanics and systems of open world games, survival games, and games focused on crafting and base management—it is unsurprising that the post-apocalyptic game remains popular and pervasive.

For the purposes of this article, the post-apocalyptic game can be defined as follows: the majority of the game takes place in the aftermath of an environmental, systemic, or other large-scale crisis event that is not preventable by the player, substantially reshapes the world, and must be survived, weathered, and potentially recovered from by the characters in the game. This definition separates the post-apocalyptic from more widely defined dystopian settings that are also common in digital games, although the two are by no means mutually exclusive. Additionally, while the player character must be operating at some point in the crisis event's aftermath, post-apocalyptic games can take place over a variety of time-scales: from *The Last of Us* (2013), in which the player experiences the inciting incidents of a zombie apocalypse in the game's opening minutes but spends the bulk of gameplay about twenty years later; to *Horizon Zero Dawn* (2017), in which the player, controlling main character Aloy, discovers that her pre-industrial world exists on Earth approximately 900 years after a grey goo scenario that eradicated all organic

2 DiTommaso, Lorenzo. "Apocalypticism in the contemporary world." In Colin McAllister, Ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Apocalyptic Literature*. Cambridge University Press, 2020: 316-341.

3 Renner, Karen J. "The appeal of the apocalypse." *Lit: Literature Interpretation Theory* 23, no. 3, 2012: 203-211.

4 Renner, 2012.

5 Fraser, Emma. "Post-apocalyptic play: Representations of the end of the city in video games." In *Broken Mirrors*, Routledge, 2019: 121-137.

material on the planet's surface.

Thematically, post-apocalyptic games can be considered as critical dystopias, which are marked by three discourses of heroism: "(1) the post-apocalyptic cowboy model, which stresses individualism and family; (2) the 'back to nature' discourse; and (3) discourses geared towards community leaders and the value of empathy." [6] While the "cowboy" savior is present in many post-apocalyptic games, all three discourses appear in the cheerful post-apocalyptic game, each supporting the optimistic view that the world is both recovering from catastrophe and is potentially better for it. Cheerful postapocalyptic games also take place in pleasant environments. Most post-apocalyptic games are bleak in their worldbuilding and in the narratives they support: often "unflinchingly cruel," they depict the player and other humans as "selfish entities seeking only self-survival" in destructively violent, oppressively lonely environments.[7] Games in *The Last of Us* and *Fallout* series are particularly known for their shocking plot points and heartbreaking environmental storytelling. Cheerful post-apocalyptic games, on the other hand, emphasize the beauty and idyllic nature of the unpopulated natural world, rather than its isolating loneliness; as well as the strong, supportive nature of survivors' communities. This is particularly clear in open world games, in which players can spend hundreds of hours simply abiding in the digital world, which means that the world itself must be an enjoyable place to spend time.[8] Both *Horizon Zero Dawn* and *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* are exemplars here, in that they both focus on the exploration of large-scale natural landscapes while interacting with various small communities and cultures that are by and large thriving in the remains of the previous civilization.

Much of our interest in apocalyptic media results from a dissatisfaction with current society, as well as yearning for experiences that will uncover our heroic potential, whether through physical prowess, intelligence, or forethought and preparation.

While this positivity may seem unusual for a post-apocalyptic setting, it is encouraged by the structure of digital games themselves. Previously, I have written on the tension between bleakness and positivity in games. Even in the most hopeless and horrific circumstances, [9] or in narratives explicitly focused on death and grief, [10] digital games have a core of optimism inherent in their mechanics:

6 Pérez-Latorre, Óliver. "Post-apocalyptic games, heroism and the Great Recession." *Game Studies* 19, no. 3, 2019: 415-437.

7 Wintle, Phil. "Mutants and Zombies Everywhere! Or Villains, Violence, and Selfishness: Questions of Humanity in the Post-apocalyptic (Pandemic) Video Game." *Games and Culture* 19, no. 8, 2024: 959-980.

8 Muncy, Julie. "Open-world games are changing the way we play." *Wired.com*, December 3, 2015.

9 Evans, Monica. "'Should my best prove insufficient, we will find another way': time loop mechanics as expressions of hope in digital games." In *International Conference on Human-Computer Interaction*, pp. 198-209. Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland, 2023.

10 Evans, Monica. "'I Hope There Are Beasties in the Next One': Positivity Through Interaction in Death-Themed Digital Games." In *International Conference on Human-Computer Interaction*, pp. 177-190. Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland, 2024.

to move through a game, players must explore, gain resources and knowledge, improve their skills and abilities, and overcome challenges. From this standpoint, the cheerful post-apocalyptic game is a natural progression: to build out from the individual character and extend the mechanics of betterment to their community, environment, and world. Additionally, digital games are built to be as frictionless an experience as possible, in order to keep players intuitively focused on strategic challenges rather than remembering which buttons to press—meaning that even the most unrelentingly hostile game environments are intended to be comfortable for the player, at the very least in terms of control scheme and graphical UI. Regardless of content, digital games are built around mechanics and systems that emphasize skill acquisition, improvement, and solving problems that are designed to be solvable. Inevitably, his turns the play experience towards positivity and optimism. For developers that increasingly want to react, reflect on, or respond to the crises of our real world, the inherent positivity of game mechanics proves useful: it provides a way to consider major global catastrophes as things that are, if not fixable, then at least comfortably survivable.

One potential concern with the cheerful post-apocalyptic game is that it makes players too comfortable, in that experiencing a world that is thriving after a calamity might encourage players to downplay or ignore the real world's rising crises. As deterministic technological systems, digital games generally reinforce their own status quo, particularly in heroic or survival narratives, and rarely allow for radical change, particularly within the traditional mechanical structures that players expect. *Horizon Zero Dawn*, for example, does an excellent job of encouraging players to consider ecocritical themes, but its action-heavy mechanics and focus on combat ultimately place it closer to a heroic power fantasy, despite its emphasis on the economic, systemic, and corporate factors that led to Earth's original ecological downfall. [11] As a side note, a number of recent "cozy" games have used an apocalyptic event as a precursor and backdrop to glossy pastoral happiness; and while games with a cozy aesthetic are narrowly focused on player comfort, more than perhaps any other aesthetic or genre, their disconnect from the terror and suffering of a world-ending apocalyptic event is telling.

Rather than a cheerful apocalypse or a bleak one, other models might serve more useful for inspiring activism and action—for example, games such as *Citizen Sleeper* (2022), which keeps the player on an explicitly uncomfortable precarious edge in order to survive a post-capitalist wasteland. Similarly, *Outer Wilds* (2019) famously presents players with the potential end of the universe, but subverts expectations to create, essentially, an existential crisis in a box. But not all postapocalyptic games need to present solutions to the crises of our current world. It is encouraging to see that, rather than continuing to focus on cycles of violence and survival at any cost, more and more digital games are creating play experiences centered on empathy, community, and the best parts of humanity in response to widespread calamity and crisis. ▲

11 Condis, Megan. "Sorry, wrong apocalypse: Horizon Zero Dawn, Heaven's Vault, and the ecocritical videogame." *Game Studies* 20, no. 3, 2020.

Slow Catastrophe

Eileen Chang's "Blossoms Afloat, Flowers Adrift" and the Archive

Mai Wang

On a recent research trip to the University of Southern California Special Collections Library, while browsing the papers of Eileen Chang, a major Chinese writer who spent her last days living in exile in Los Angeles, I came across a curious artifact. Tucked away in a folder of ephemera from the author's final years, a single-page document issued by the Immigration and Naturalization Service contained a Freedom of Information Act request initiated by Chang on May 5, 1991. Two sets of handwriting fill the page. The first consists of neat block letters in all caps belonging to Eileen Chang Reyher, identifying Chang by the married name she had adopted after wedding her second husband, the writer Ferdinand Reyher.

In contrast, the other set of handwriting is a loose cursive script belonging to an official who verified Chang's request to replace her lost naturalization certificate. Below their brief explanations, filled-in boxes provide a shorthand account of Chang's earlier life: she was born in China on September 30, 1920, and was living in Hong Kong when she boarded the *SS President Cleveland* to cross the Pacific Ocean, disembarking in Honolulu on October 22, 1955. By the time she became a naturalized U.S. citizen in June 1960, she and Reyher were living together in an apartment in San Francisco, but all she remembers about the naturalization process is that it took place in a "law court in the city." There is no mention of why Chang lost the original proof of her American citizenship, nor why she needed the replacement copy.

Based on my archival research, it seems likely to me that Chang's frequent moves around Los Angeles and her advanced age caused her to misplace the vital records she needed to prove she really was who she claimed to be. While Chang was living alone in an apartment located at 454 S. Bentley Street at the time she filed the FOIA request, she had already moved to her final apartment at 10911 Rochester Avenue by the summer of 1992, when she wrote to the New York office of the city clerk searching for her marriage license to Reyher. The deputy city clerk wrote back suggesting that Chang may have misremembered where she got married: "We find no record in the borough of Brooklyn for the abovementioned names." The correspondence led to a dead end, just as many of Chang's earlier efforts to establish a stable new personal and professional identity in the U.S. had ended in tragedy and disappointment.

Violence—particularly when it happened to others—became so routine it could be overlooked, and even dead bodies on the streets could be ignored.

In many ways, Chang's life as an immigrant with no fixed address was defined by her ability to endure one crisis after another. The monumental losses piled up: the death of Reyher in 1967, her stalled writing career after failing to find critical and commercial acclaim for her English-language novels, and her declining health in her final years. Chang's transpacific journey had led her to a precarious life, one that bore very little resemblance to the one she must have been hoping to find when she boarded the passenger ship that would take her away from mainland China for good (she only returned to Asia once in the early 1960s to visit Hong Kong and Taiwan). Yet Chang continued writing about China, even as much of the work she produced in her final decades remained unpublished in her lifetime.

The recent publication of *Chang's Time Tunnel* (New York Review Books, 2025), which features short stories originally written in Chinese translated into English for the first time, reveals an urgency behind her lifelong commitment to exploring how war and displacement impact ordinary individuals. In her late semi-autobiographical fiction, Chang carried insights with her from her firsthand experience of the Japanese occupation of Shanghai and the Chinese civil war. Many of these crises unfolded not as singular events but rather as prolonged conflicts of indefinite duration, leading to tremendous psychological uncertainty for every class of citizen: men and women, rich and poor, soldiers and civilians.

Chang recognizes this phenomenon and explores its ramifications for people who kept following the rhythms of everyday life, eating and drinking and falling in love and moving houses even as atrocities unfolded by their doorstep. Violence—particularly when it happened to others—became so routine it could be overlooked, and even dead bodies on the streets could be ignored. Chinese citizens who experienced history as a series of slow catastrophes punctuated by intermittent wars learned how to avert their gaze when it was convenient to do so. The reckoning, if it came at all, was deferred until a later date. Those who lived long enough to survive the conflicts sometimes became refugees and immigrants who, like Chang herself, could only access their homelands through memory, and by then the past often appeared in a different light.

In the translators' afterword to *Time Tunnel*, we learn that Chang penned one of the short stories from the collection, "Blossoms Afloat, Flowers Adrift," in the 1970s, when she was already living in seclusion in Los Angeles. The story follows the contours of Chang's own life as a writer who lived in exile for most of her adulthood. Chang deploys frequent flashbacks in a retrospective narrative that follows the trials of its young female protagonist, Luozhen, who has fled her family home in Shanghai to seek refuge in Hong Kong before setting sail for a ten-day journey to Japan on a cargo ship. Luozhen experiences the aftermath of the Chinese civil war as a descent into solitude, and she remains aware of her vulnerable position as a woman traveling alone.

Early in the story, Luozhen takes the train to Canton (modern day Guangzhou) en route to Hong Kong, and finds herself being followed by a stranger who insists that she resembles a beautiful woman whose photograph he keeps in his pocket. After the man finally disappears, Luozhen concludes that "this was an old game for him; it was clear that he'd used the photograph ruse many times before. But others who had no strategy like his still went out stalking, it had become a trend." Instead of condemning the stranger for his despicable behavior, Chang's idiosyncratic protagonist connects his crime to a broader societal phenomenon of men stalking women out of a keen sense that their actions may no longer incur any consequences. The historical moment they are living in encourages reckless, impulsive behavior, since old norms have broken down, and it is unclear when a new set of rules will take their place. Surprisingly, Luozhen attributes the abundance of stalkers on the streets to a general "sense of looming apocalypse" in the cities following the Communist victory. No one knows how the CCP regime will change their lives, least of all the men who have decided to indulge their worst fantasies: "Having handed their fate over, they now felt a hand's grip at the nape of the neck and were squirming around, trying to get away with whatever they could, while they still could."

These lines reveal how Luozhen manages to adopt the perspective of the men, and she detects how their only remaining freedom lies in their ability to pursue weaker targets. In a sense, they are victims of history turned into perpetrators of petty crimes. While Luozhen is careful to

disassociate from them, she also recognizes their shared fate as Chinese citizens who are equally vulnerable to running afoul of the Party. Chang elevates her protagonist above the ranks of the men she will never know by allowing her to glimpse what they do not seem to understand about themselves: faced with ongoing political turmoil, they are motivated by fear more than lust. As the narrator wryly notes, "terror does not have one face only; it can have a thousand faces." The story depicts Luozhen as an isolated figure who must learn to cope with her own fears after facing random acts of harassment during her travels. No one comes to her rescue, and she does not ponder the feasibility of returning home to Shanghai, where she was living with her older sister. Once a journey has begun, Chang tells us, there is no going back to one's point of origin.

Even after Luozhen arrives in Hong Kong, she fails to find lasting solidarity among the displaced. Her main contact is a friend of her sister who has adopted the English name of Fannie, but Fannie has no space to host her for longer than one night. Like many formerly wealthy Chinese from the mainland, Fannie has been forced to economize, filling her makeshift quarters with "plain and paltry" furniture that matches the "watery and tasteless" food Luozhen is served as her welcome dinner. Through her compact descriptions of domestic spaces, Chang captures the downward mobility of these women's lives, detailing how individuals build barriers between themselves and others in order to preserve the dwindling resources at their disposal. Fannie is not a surrogate mother to Luozhen, nor even a particularly welcoming hostess, and Luozhen soon rents an unfurnished room in a nearby apartment building. For the first time, she lives alone, and she soon discovers that the other inhabitants pass judgement on her:

> Everyone looked in through the open doorway when they went by, and there they saw Luozhen sitting on her grass mat with all the things she needed for the day spread out, ike a peddler's stall. This really was a refugee who'd moved in, diminishing the value of the place. She herself, sitting on the floor, was quite content: She'd successfully simplified her life…Still, the disdain in the eyes of all these Shanghainese was a little hard to take.

Luozhen's descent into the underclass of poor refugees has been swift and irreversible. Unlike Fannie, who has maintained her privacy, Luozhen lives under conditions of extreme impoverishment made visible by the fact that her paltry possessions are laid out for the public to scrutinize. Reduced to the lowest level of society through her resemblance to the street peddlers, Luozhen is held in contempt by the other displaced Shanghainese who occupy more fortunate positions, even as she feels liberated by her lack of material encumbrances. The subtle class distinctions between those who have managed to rent larger rooms and those who can only afford the cheapest units have not disappeared under a shared recognition of their statelessness; in fact, these differences have only sharpened. Chang withholds any easy form of consolation for Luozhen—in the hands

of a lesser writer, it is easy to imagine how the story would default to a depiction of how the protagonist seeks refuge with a family friend or forges new alliances with others from her hometown. Such friendships remain unavailable to Luozhen, because Chang understands how easy it is to place the pursuit of one's own survival above all else when one is already living under duress. It is a lesson that Luozhen also ends up learning once she boards the cargo ship to leave Hong Kong.

Perhaps like Chang herself, Luozhen finally finds solace in solitude. The ocean voyage to Japan becomes a metaphor for the only kind of relief available to the displaced: the illusion of safety generated by the sense of being away from one's fellow citizens, whose acts of betrayal and complicity can more easily be forgotten at sea. The journey offers relief from the trials of urban life because it allows Luozhen to temporarily live in a state of suspension. Reflecting on her tendency to avoid the other passengers, Luozhen realizes her reclusive behavior stems from how she "just too greatly prized this vacuum-tube passage, this being untethered and untied, floating along at ease, like someone discovering, after finally sitting down, how bone-tired and exhausted she was."

Chang stacks one metaphor on top of another in her depiction of the contradictory emotions that accompany Luozhen on board the ship. She is at once exhilarated by the lack of constraints—even the passage of time itself seems to be inconsequential—and beginning to register how much she has undergone involuntarily. Luozhen is no longer trapped in China and not yet a newcomer in Japan, where she is choosing to emigrate despite the radical uncertainty surrounding her decision. Towards the end of the story, Luozhen chooses solitude as a form of self-protection in her quest to forget the traumas of the past and her worries about the future. Chang reminds us that a safe harbor remains elusive for her protagonist. Luozhen has no idea what will happen to her next, but she knows she must prepare herself for the next crisis waiting to unfold on distant shores. ▲

Notes on *ALHAMBRA*

From *STUFF AS DREAMS: My Work in Theatre*, a forthcoming book reflecting on fifty of my plays

Fred Curchack

In May of 2016, Laura and I joined our friends Sarah and Chuck Riehm on a two-week trip through Spain. Sarah was researching a play that she was writing about Flamenco artists and wanted to visit some of the locations. I knew little about Spain and had no thoughts about writing anything, although I had committed myself to direct my first student production in years at UT Dallas.

We planned the trip over long-distance telephone, choosing rental apartments and hotels in Madrid, Seville, and Granada, with a stop in Cordoba. Laura and I would then go on to Barcelona and beyond. I did my obligatory, cursory tour book prepping and off we went. On various tours through touristic sites, I was intrigued by guides speaking about *Convivencia* (co-existence) a historical theory that posits that from the Muslim conquest in the 8th century until the expulsion of the Jews in 1492, Christians, Muslims, and Jews lived together in relative peace and harmony. This seemed to be a favored theme for the Spanish tourist industry which tends to romanticize history and ignore the darker aspects of religious and racial relationships.

I was deeply troubled about the U.S. presidential primary race, fearing that the jingoistic, racist slogans would prevail. Xenophobic rhetoric was roiling the American currents of white supremacy, Islamophobia, antisemitism, anti-Mexican hysteria, homophobia, sexism, not to mention plain old fascism. The notion of *Convivencia* seemed like a desirable contrast to the shitstorm nightmare brewing back home.

In Granada, we booked a private tour of the Alhambra with an extraordinarily insightful tour guide. I asked him about *Convivencia* and little-by-little, the idea for a play emerged. Like many of my works, it would

Recognizing the unlikelihood that my infinitesimal artistic creations would accomplish anything to change the world, I still felt impelled to articulate my own madcap sense of reality for the benefit of all, hoping against hope that my efforts would serve as a subtle healing emanation.

grapple with my fears about the state of the world, searching for a way to make peace on earth and within ourselves. In some ways, the play would be a sequel to *Golden Buddha Beach* my 2004 play about our adventures in Thailand, which featured Buddhism, tourism, and the tsunami. Recognizing the unlikelihood that my infinitesimal artistic creations would accomplish anything to change the world, I still felt impelled to articulate my own madcap sense of reality for the benefit of all, hoping against hope that my efforts would serve as a subtle healing emanation.

Focusing on creating professional theatre work, I hadn't directed a university production in eight years since adapting my play *MONKEY: The Quest to the West* for a student ensemble in 2008. My colleagues at UT Dallas had asked if I'd like to direct again and even knowing it would be much, much more work than the two, once-a-week classes I had been teaching, I said yes. I chose to teach an acting class in the fall semester in order to train some actors who might then work on a production in the spring. I didn't have a clue what the show would be, but I thought I just might crank out something new.

When we got home from our journey, I researched Spanish history, art, architecture and religion. Reading through forty-plus books, I started to see rich possibilities for the play. The differences and even contradictions between how historians interpreted history were particularly interesting. I reread *The Rings of Saturn* by W.G. Sebald, a masterpiece of indefinable genre in which the narrator recalls his walking tour of East Anglia in England. The people and places that he encounters stimulate wide-ranging associations about history, culture, time, identity and ruminations about humanity's inhuman propensity for cruelty and oppression. In Sebald's book, it isn't possible to know what is autobiographical travelogue and what is fiction.

Of course, travel can expand one's horizons, but the word "tourism" can be used as a pejorative, critical of how superficial we tend to be as we scarf down impressions on our vacations. Many people live their lives as eternal tourists, casual sightseers who never see past the touristic

I found hope and inspiration in Spain's great Sufi sage Ibn Arabi, the Christian saints Teresa of Avila and Saint John of the Cross, the Jewish Cabala, Moses Maimonides, Gypsy flamenco, Garcia Lorca's poetry and his thoughts on "duende," Picasso, Dali, the transcendent architecture of the Real Alcazar of Seville, the Mezquita of Cordoba and of course, the Alhambra.

attractions on the surface of their own existence. I thought that I'd use the actual, factual itinerary of our touristic journey to explore deeper reflections on what we saw.

Spain's horrifying history of religious intolerance, the Inquisition, the Spanish Civil War, Franco's fascist regime, all of these exist alongside of a luminous legacy of art, literature, architecture, and Christian, Muslim, and Jewish philosophy and mysticism. I found hope and inspiration in Spain's great Sufi sage Ibn Arabi, the Christian saints Teresa of Avila and Saint John of the Cross, the Jewish Cabala, Moses Maimonides, Gypsy flamenco, Garcia Lorca's poetry and his thoughts on "duende," Picasso, Dali, the transcendent architecture of the Real Alcazar of Seville, the Mezquita of Cordoba and of course the Alhambra.

The notion of *Convivencia* doesn't only mean coexistence with other races and religions. Doesn't our capacity to live peacefully depend on whether we can make peace with our neighbors and within ourselves? In *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson*, G.I. Gurdjieff has "Saint Buddha" saying that the best means of freeing oneself from unconsciousness is "intentional-suffering," and that "the greatest 'intentional-suffering' can be obtained in your presences if you compel yourselves to be able to endure the 'displeasing-manifestations-of-others-towards-yourselves.'"

On the trip, our relationship with Sarah and Chuck was harmonious. We were easily able to accept and even joke about each other's idiosyncrasies and quirks. For the purposes of the play, I decided to exaggerate and exacerbate the petty irritations one occasionally feels with people's annoying manifestations. I depicted our petty bickering as escalating global hostilities that culminated in a video projection of an atomic blast. I relate this to what Gurdjieff refers to as people's "predisposition to periodic reciprocal destruction," which he calls "an unimaginable horror."

I thought of the piece as a kind of vacation slide show where you

invite your friends over to hear about your trip. I would have served tapas and Spanish wine if the university allowed it. I made an hour-long video to accompany a lot of the action. Although I had taken mucho megabytes of photos in Spain, I ended up downloading all the show's images and videos from the internet. Since the performance was free and for educational purposes, I didn't worry about copyrights. I heard that the Picasso estate charged a hundred bucks per night to use a slide of "Guernica" for a show in a small venue! "Fair use" allowed me to legally pilfer dozens of images and videos. In any case, our little college show snuck under the radar of the royalty police - same with music. I helped myself to a glorious array of recordings to make the soundtrack.

I utilized a variety of projection screens. Video was projected onto a large white cyclorama curtain at the back of the stage. Occasionally a second white curtain was pulled across center stage. For some sequences, actors manipulated moving fabric to catch projections. In other scenes, actors moved four-by-six-foot white cardboard placards as moving kaleidoscopic screens. The costumes were all shades of white, so actors' bodies also served as projection screens. It was thrilling to refine and develop these visual techniques that I had experimented with in so many previous performances.

A major influence was Alwin Nikolais with whom I studied dance and choreography when I was twenty. I recall sitting next to him and watching him choreograph his dance company who were draped in fabric that served as screens for slide projections. Nik would have gone nutso with video projection.

Having written many rap songs for plays since 1989, of course I was driven to concoct several for *Alhambra*. The mind-melting success of the rap-historical-musical *Hamilton* guaranteed that audiences were primed for history lessons in rhyme. My rap uses simple rhythms and exact rhymes, so it sounds a bit like Dr. Seuss or as one critic once wrote about me, "like Leonard Cohen rapping." I wrote lyrics hoping that I could put some of them to music but my attempts to recruit a composer or decent musicians for no pay didn't pan out. I was game to compose the music myself, but the student cast I ended up with were decidedly not singers and I decided to scrap my melodic dreams and instead created multi-track beats for accompaniments. I also tried to recruit flamenco dancers and musicians, but with no pay? No way José. So, the compromise was to project videos of world class flamenco dancers onto various choreographed, dancing fabrics, placards, and screens.

In retrospect, the performance did not influence the presidential election nor did it put an end to racism, sexism, classism, fundamentalism, homophobia, bigotry, war, human cruelty or people's "predisposition to "reciprocal destruction." Still, I like to imagine that it was of some value in opening up the possibility of consciousness and conscience for those who participated in it and for those who witnessed the production and also, inexplicably, even of some value for others who didn't see it.

Excerpt from *ALHAMBRA*:

TILLY. Franco's tomb is behind the back of the statue of Jesus.

(*Video of dead Franco in his casket*)

ED. After he died in 1975, the "Pact of Forgetting" tried to smooth the transition to democracy.

(*Video fades out*)

LOLA. The "Amnesty Law" guarantees that no one responsible for crimes against humanity will be prosecuted.

ED. (*Sarcastic*) Forget the traumas of the past so we can focus on the future. Right?

TED. The "Association for the Recovery of Historical Memory" was founded in 2000, to collect testimonies about Franco's victims, and to identify bodies from mass graves.

(*Video projection of bones in disinterred mass grave*)

TED. So far, they've dug up over 1,300 of the 200,000 victims who "disappeared" under Franco's regime.

ALL. Where are Lorca's bones?

ENSEMBLE MEMBER 1. Spanish born philosopher George Santayana said:

SANTAYANA. "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."

ENSEMBLE MEMBER 2. Karl Marx said:

MARX. "History repeats itself, first as tragedy, then as farce."

ENSEMBLE MEMBER 3. James Joyce said:

JOYCE. "History is a nightmare from which I'm trying to awake."

ENSEMBLE MEMBER 4. U.S. President Richard M. Nixon said:

(*Video projection of photo of Nixon with hand on heart and Franco saluting together. Background music: Military Band "Star Spangled Banner"*)

NIXON. "General Franco was a loyal friend and ally of the United States. He earned worldwide respect for Spain through firmness and fairness."

ENSEMBLE MEMBER 5. Donald Trump said:

> (*Video projection of photos of Trump speechifying. Hip hop beats and then sound of falling bomb added to Jimi Hendrix's "National Anthem"*)

TRUMP. "We will make America strong again. We will make America proud again. We will make America safe again. And we will make America great again!"

> (*Sound of exploding bomb. Screen flashes white and total blackout. Music continues with lower volume as background to rap and then mix of Jimi Hendrix's "Anthem." Text is divided among actors, some individual, some spoken together. As they speak their phrases, actors briefly illuminate their faces with flashlights. They stand close to the scrim so their shadows are huge behind them*)

ENSEMBLE. (*Rap song. Actors divide speaking phrases*)
Ceaseless horror / endless pain.
Over and over / again and again.
Limitless hatred / bottomless fear,
So near / it's everywhere,

ALL. Right here.

> (*Music louder. For 8 beats the music gets louder and the actors flick their flashlights on their faces as they move from the scrim downstage towards the audience as threatening zombies. Boing sound of flexitone cues actors. Music volume gets lower*)

The monster's hungry / it's coming to feast,
On your heart / on your soul / the ravenous beast,
Is famished / you're finished / diminished / hope's vanished,
Your prayers are extinguished / your dreams are all banished.

> (*Music louder. For 8 beats the music gets louder and the actors flick their flashlights on their faces as they move further downstage towards the audience as threatening zombies. Boing sound. Music lower*)

You've relinquished what distinguished you from bestial creatures,
Humanity / sanity / all humane features,

Lost in egotistical grandiosity / heretical pomposity,
Hysterical atrocity / hypocritical religiosity.

(*Music louder. Again, for 8 beats the music gets louder and the actors flick their flashlights on their faces as they move still further downstage towards the audience as threatening zombies. Boing sound. Music lower*)

The monster you fear, drags you down to its level,
And now, how you revel in being a devil,
Lost in this holocaust / schemin' / and dreamin',
Now you are the monster /

ALL. You are the demon.

(*Music louder. Zombies reach audience. Musical climax of Hendrix mix: "of the land of the free …" Sounds of bombs dropping and exploding. "… home of the brave" sound of machine guns. Zombies are splattered horrifically. Actors exit in blackout. Lights up. Video projection of fascist dictator figurines, then souvenir crucifix and lollipops*)

LOLA. (To audience) The gift shop didn't have any Franco action figures, but I got a fabulous Crucifix paperweight, and some "Valley of the Fallen" lollipops.

ALHAMBRA (2016), written and directed by Fred Curchack, was produced at UT Dallas in April 2017.

A video of the April 8, 2017 performance is published online:
vimeo.com/216976530/ba71530772

From the press release:

Two couples take a dream vacation through Spain's art, architecture, poetry, music and dance, and the wonders and horrors of its Christian/Muslim/Jewish/Gypsy history. *ALHAMBRA* is a hysterical - historical - tragical - comical - phantasmagorical - theatrical spectacle with comedy, rap, and mind-boggling video effects. The play confronts our current global/national situation in the mirror of Spain from medieval times to now. Viewer discretion advised due to mature subject matter, the use of strobe lights, and hellfire. A

Hearing the Howl Beneath the Hardscape

Sinkholes, Hell Portals, and Earth-mouths

Katie Fisher

Early on the morning of May 12, 2016, "a portal to hell," as one neighbor called it, opened on Woodland Terrace outside St Thomas' Church in Charlton, southeast London. The void partially swallowed a parked minivan, leaving it dangling by the front end with room to spare for another vehicle.[1] In the Bronx, New York, on July 18, 2022, a sinkhole on Radcliff Avenue swallowed a parked white van, dropping it 20 feet deep into the pit. The hole measured 15 feet wide and 58 feet long. It was the second major "hellmouth," as one resident called it, on the same street within a year. The first had opened during Hurricane Ida in August 2021.[2] On Poydras Street in New Orleans, Louisiana, a massive hole opened in front of City Hall on the evening of January 11, 2024, and eventually swallowed the front end of a woman's car while she was on her way to the symphony.[3]

In the Dusit district of Bangkok, Thailand, on September 24, 2025 the land gave way between the Vajira Hospital and Samsen Police Station (Figure 1). The sinkhole continued to open for two days, before stabilizing at approximately 131 feet wide and 164 feet deep. The void sucked three cars and the entire road into the soil flow.[4] On the afternoon of September 13, 2025, a sinkhole opened on a residential street in the Iztapalapa borough of Mexico City (Figure 2). The back wheel of a Jarritos soda delivery truck snagged on the asphalt. Eventually the entire truck slipped backwards into the approximately 26 feet deep, 39 feet long, and 23 feet wide rupture where it rested vertically for over 20 hours before it could be removed with a crane.[5]

I take in these scenes on my screens. People stand at the void edge in Bangkok as the ground falls away from beneath their feet. I pull my phone close to my face and watch again. I know the ending—the land slips away as they run back to stable ground, and I

1 Lianne Kolirin, "Car Swallowed by Sinkhole After London's Rainy Day," *The Times*, May 12, 2016, https://www.thetimes.com/uk/crime/article/car-swallowed-by-sinkhole-after-londons-rainy-day-6dn8pdb3n.

2 Tracie Strahan, "Video Shows Moment NYC Sinkhole Swallows Entire Van," *NBC New York*, July 19, 2022, https://www.nbcnewyork.com/news/local/bronx-sinkhole-swallows-entire-van/3780290/.

3 "Massive Hole Swallows Car on Poydras Street," *WWL Louisiana*, January 12, 2024, https://www.wwltv.com/article/traffic/a-massive-hole-on-poydras-street-nearly-swallows-car/289-68550972a-eab9-4e4a-a1d2-f7e9c89b3851.

4 The Associated Press, "Bangkok Road Collapse Creates Sinkhole, Disrupting Traffic and Prompting Evacuations," *NBC News*, September 24, 2025, https://www.nbcnews.com/world/asia/bangkok-road-collapse-creates-sinkhole-rcna233358.

5 MND Staff, "Sinkhole Swallows Jarritos Delivery Truck in Mexico City," *Mexico News Daily*, September 15, 2025, https://mexiconewsdaily.com/news/sinkhole-swallows-jarritos-delivery-truck-in-mexico-city/.



Figure 1. Road subsidence between Vajira Hospital and Samsen Police Station, Bangkok, Thailand on September 24, 2025. Photo: Creative Commons/Wikimedia.

scrub the timeline backwards pulling the soil up. I witness their witnessing again. "Move!" I say to my screen like watching a horror movie in 30-second clips. Only the scream line. Sinkhole swallows van. Hellmouth swallows road. Portal to hell opens outside church. Desiccated wetland cracks open and engulfs a fruit-flavored carbonated soft drink delivery truck. Dry land drinking soda and vehicle. The rupture clip ruptures inside of me too. It rips through my sense of stability, and I think of StephenAndrew777's YouTube comment confession, "I am quite afeared of sinkholes as I am rather heavy, and I will be tiptoeing to and from the beer store from now on."[6] Stephen and I both feel the precarity of our own weight on the earth and the risk of collapse pulling us under.

The United States Geological Survey (USGS) defines these kinds of land ruptures opening in city hardscapes (the paved, impermeable surfaces of roads and sidewalks) built on drained wetland systems as human-induced. The phenomenon is not related to the underlying rock formation or conditions within the landscape composition. Instead, land-use and water management practices, such as the diversion of the natural water-drainage patterns, cause this form of land ripping.[7]

In modern cities, built on the premise of human-dictated environments, a thin slab of asphalt or concrete coats the ground. Because of this veil, humans rarely notice when the soil shifts and vacates the area under the slab, visually blocked by the reinforcement until the final moment before collapse. The symphony of the surface-level city, with its perpetual motion, carries on without a thought to the risk of traversing an opening to the underworld while delivering fruit-flavored soda, walking to the subway, or parking next to a church. When the void underneath becomes too great and the slab gives out, a rupture in the surface of the city hardscape opens. The sinkholes detailed above follow the same pattern.

In London, heavy rainfall and an aging sewer system rushing through old underground chalk mine voids triggered the portal to hell. A sewer collapsed beneath the street during heavy rain and flash flooding, opening the hellmouth of New York. Likewise, a persistent water main leak, actively undergoing repairs, caused the car-and-woman-eating earth void of New Orleans—a chronic problem location for over ten years. The Bangkok soil flow followed the water paths of a burst underground water pipe, and slid into the cracked construction of the Purple Line subway extension. A failed eight-foot concrete water collector caused the soda-truck-swallowing rupture in Mexico City, one breach in an archaic drainage network cracked by land subsidence from forced desiccation of the wetlands.

When the breach opens in each of these locations, city officials encircle it with orange caution cones, thick plastic barricades, and men in hard hats wearing high-vis vests. If the hole is large enough, a few city workers will drop in using suspension cables and harnesses to investigate the damage to city services. The site transitions into a spectacle, and then quickly into a construction zone. Municipal officials pull out the public-facing figures among them to stand in front of the cameras and reassure the public of the stability of the land they walk on, drive over, and buy. Their jobs depend on the confidence of the tax base to continue performing city on top of the concrete or asphalt layer coating the earth.

This scene plays out in near perfect reflection from Mexico City, to London, to Bangkok. Across continents, landscapes, elevations, cultures, and languages. Artificial

6 StephenAndrew777, YouTube comment on Euronews, "Sinkhole Swallows Van, Bronx NY," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eoLsKgk6hf4.

7 "Sinkholes," Water Science School, United States Geological Survey, last modified June 9, 2018, accessed August 1, 2023, https://www.usgs.gov/special-topics/water-science-school/science/sinkholes.



Figure 2. A Jarritos soda delivery truck in Iztapalapa, Mexico City, snagged on the asphalt and then fell backwards into the earth rupture on September 13, 2025. Still frame from official municipal video documentation (@Alc_Iztapalapa).

sinkholes open at various points in time and are quickly closed by city maintenance efforts, making it hard to see the connection between the re-occurring phenomenon and human development. Facing the anxiety of the land slipping out from under us, we turn to orange traffic cones, yellow caution tape, and people in hard hats to calm our anxieties. Such theatrics form the human aesthetic of rupture; they tell us what it is, what it means, and when it will be reversed. This aesthetic treats sinkholes as agents of swallowing—cars, trucks, roads, buildings, people, pets.

I search my screens for sinkholes in New Orleans and find a clip of a woman broadcasting live from a sinkhole that swallowed the front of a school bus. The bus was gone, presumably pulled to safety and driven away. She tells the camera that she dragged the orange traffic cone from down the street to block the pit.[8] I wonder why there is a shortage of cones and where the officials in hard hats are with their yellow tape. The pit that swallowed the woman and her car in downtown New Orleans had both cones and tape before it ate her. On the live broadcast, with her car front-first into the hole in the background, she confesses to thinking the boards and cones were guides.[9] The mouth to hell seems to be lined with plastic yellow tape. As the USGS and city officials all over the world acknowledge, these ruptures are caused by

8 FOX 8 Staff, "School Bus Gets Stuck in Sinkhole in Hollygrove," *FOX 8 Live*, January 9, 2024, https://www.fox8live.com/2024/01/09/school-bus-gets-stuck-large-pothole-hollygrove/.

9 "Massive Hole Swallows Car on Poydras Street," *WWL Louisiana*.

human actions. And yet, the fear that rises inside of me is not for the humans and their water main breaks, but for the land. For the moment the earth cracks open and swallows without warning. The fear is for the moment of encounter with an untamable agency beyond human control or warning.

The ruptures I witness opening on my screens leak inside of me, reach back and pull more stability from my edges. If the mouth of the beast is big enough for a Jarritos truck, how big is the beast? I search for more about the Bangkok sinkhole site and find a clip of men in hard hats holding a cardboard box with straws through the sides.[10] They attempt to explain what happened with the water pipes and the subway and the rains. But the hellmouth gapes open behind them and I remember the video of men in harnesses dropping into the rupture and I can't but laugh at their straws. If humans and our actions induce the rupture to the underland as the USGS tells me, I find clarity in the fear confessed by a Bronx resident on Facebook, "I'm actually scared of this happening in front of our house where that beautiful cone has been sitting for almost a year now over that hole."[11] The cone serves as a part of the human aesthetic of rupture, not the preventor of the phenomenon.

Human-induced cavities in the land exist as the direct result of economic systems that require the parceling up of land into a commodity for development. Diverting water and draining substrates was the first order of business for any further construction to be possible in a water-logged location. Investors had to stabilize the soils against natural rhythms of flooding, and pushed the water into the restricted flow patterns of drainage ditches and canals. Then came the concrete and asphalt layers to seal up the city from soil. Under the hardscape, the desiccated wetlands below London, New York, New Orleans, Bangkok, and Mexico City wither and contract as the body of the substrate shrivels like a mummy buried in a sarcophagus. With a hardshell physically and visually covering the shrinking, voids created by leaking pipes or stormwater drains can take many years before becoming large enough to appear on the surface.

The woman broadcasting live from a cone-less hellmouth in New Orleans felt compelled to drag the high-vis plastic marker down the street in her dress clothes because, without the cover of the human aesthetic, she was left with only the rupture—with a view into the mouth of a beast. News articles and live broadcasts coming from all corners of the world tell me that sinkholes swallow things. Eating car, and home, and person. But mouths open to speak as well as to eat. Stripping away the human aesthetic of rupture and seeking an ecological one instead, I wonder at what sort of communication could be happening as this land rips. Without the cone or the yellow plastic tape, we are left with what the media theorist Sean Cubitt calls the howl of nature.[12]

The portal to hell that opened outside St Thomas' Church in Charlton, London, opened on a street a stone's throw from Gilbert's Pit, a site riddled with medieval chalk-mine voids, known as deneholes, from which lime was extracted for agricultural use.[13] The Thames, which flows less than a half a mile to the north, once moved through marshland several times wider than it runs

10 Channel News Asia, "What Caused the Massive Sinkhole in Bangkok," Facebook video, September 25, 2025, https://www.facebook.com/ChannelNewsAsia/videos/what-caused-the-massive-sinkhole-in-bangkok/2171971826633267/; "Sinkhole Rescuers Narrowly Escape Death Seconds Before More Collapses," *The Sun*, YouTube video, September 25, 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fXwJ4-IbKOo.

11 Bronx resident, Facebook comment on News12 New Jersey, "Bronx Sinkhole" video, https://www.facebook.com/News12NJ/videos/bronx-sinkhole/1098042287483301/.

12 Sean Cubitt, *Finite Media: Environmental Implications of Digital Technologies* (Duke University Press, 2017), p. 179.

13 British Geological Survey, "Deneholes," https://www.bgs.ac.uk/geology-projects/sinkholes-research/deneholes-2/.

today. Beneath the contemporary street, heavy rains like those of 2016 still move through the water-bearing chalk formation—the geological body that once fed the marshland of the Thames before desiccation and development.[14]

In the Bronx, Radcliff Avenue was laid out in 1913 on the subdivided grounds of the former Morris Park Racecourse, itself built in 1889 on the Bear Swamp, the Bronx River wetland that had been progressively drained and filled as the city pushed northeast.[15] The street grid was stamped over the swamp, the racetrack, and then the swamp again, each layer adding distance between the asphalt surface and the water moving underneath it.[16]

In New Orleans, Poydras Street is one of the oldest roads in the city, first laid out in 1788 on the natural levee of the Mississippi—the highest and driest ground available. The infrastructure beneath the street was installed to manage a city built on the drained backswamp. Water pumps pull rainwater upward and out of terrain that sits below sea level. The water main below Poydras had a chronic leak with more than ten years of known failures at that site.[17]

Samsen Road in Bangkok runs parallel to the Chao Phraya River. Prior to the 1960s, this transportation corridor was a canal and part of the integrated flood management network. Beginning in the 1960s, the canals that had made Bangkok the Venice of the East were systematically filled in and paved over to make roads, eliminating the natural drainage system that had allowed the delta to absorb and move water for centuries.[18] Samsen Road follows the line of that older water city, and the soft alluvial clay beneath has sunk more than one meter in the worst-affected areas since large-scale groundwater extraction began in the 1950s.[19]

In Iztapalapa, Mexico City, the sinkhole opened in a borough built entirely on the bed of a lake that was forcibly drained beginning in the early seventeenth century, when Spanish colonial engineers destroyed the Aztec hydraulic infrastructure that had responded to the water fluctuation of the Mexico Valley for centuries. The drainage projects took over three hundred years to complete, and in their wake, Mexico City has sunk approximately ten meters in the last century as the former bed of Lake Texcoco desiccates and compresses. The failed concrete water collector that swallowed the Jarritos truck in 2025 was one crack in an archaic drainage network built to do the work that the lake once did on its own.[20]

The earth-mouths at each of these sites opened after centuries of interruption and destruction of the ecosystems that once made the locations desirable for human settlement. The rips in the land pull forgotten histories to the surface, and the surface into the past realities of the landscape. The rupture is not just a damaged spot in the city infrastructure;

14 W.V. Bartlett, "The River and Marsh at East Greenwich," *Transactions of the Greenwich and Lewisham Antiquarian Society* (lectures delivered January 1960 and December 1963), republished at https://greenwichpeninsulahistory.wordpress.com/2013/08/09/the-river-and-marsh-at-east-greenwich-w-v-bartlett-1960/.

15 "Bronx History at the Bronx Library Center: The Morris Park Racecourse," *The New York Public Library*, March 14, 2019, https://www.nypl.org/blog/2019/03/14/bronx-history-morris-park-racecourse.

16 NYC Parks Natural Resources Group, "Historical Wetlands of the Bronx River Watershed" [map], 2007, https://www.nycgovparks.org/sub_about/parks_divisions/nrg/bronx_river_epa/BxR_watersheds_wetlands_mapping/Historical_wetlands/map2_revised.pdf; Welikia Project, *Historical Ecology of New York City* [interactive map], New York Botanical Garden Urban Conservation Team, https://www.welikia.org/map-explorer#13.26/40.83974/-73.8701.

17 Richard Campanella, *Draining New Orleans: The 300-Year Quest to Dewater the Crescent City* (Louisiana State University Press, 2023), p. 73.

18 Kathleen E. Ahamed-Broadhurst, "Understanding Canals in Bangkok Using Historic Maps and GIS" (master's thesis, Harvard University, 2017), p. 42, https://dash.harvard.edu/entities/publication/ab878d4f-oddf-4463-9b2f-53ba35df275c.

19 N. Phien-wej, P.H. Giao, and P. Nutalaya, "Land Subsidence in Bangkok, Thailand," *Engineering Geology* 82, no. 4 (2006): 187–201.

20 Barbara Mundy, *The Death of Aztec Tenochtitlan, the Life of Mexico City* (University of Texas Press, 2015).



Figure 3. Unopened earth-mouth on Cristóbal Colón, in Mexico City on February 1, 2024. Photo: Katie Fisher.



Katie Fisher looking into an active sinkhole, gaged with cones and boards, in New Orleans on November 6, 2025. Photo: Abbie Powers.

it is a moment of ecological communication. From a human perspective, sinkholes open quickly and with little to no warning. From the ecological perspective, however, landscapes that took millennia to braid together as healthy wetlands systems took only centuries to unwind the stability of the soil beneath. By the time the mouth opens to speak a response, the human view has moved on by multiple generations and nearly forgotten what the landscape looked like prior to the concrete, asphalt, and buried water pipes. No living human remembers the full flow width of the Thames, the Bronx River wetland, the unaltered natural levee of the Mississippi, the full Chao Phraya River system without canals, or the floating city of Tenochtitlan. Grasping the ecological aesthetic of rupture requires a different scale of time, pace of movement, and syntax of meaning.

Walking down Cristóbal Colón on the west of Alameda Central in Mexico City, I spot a missing corner of a sidewalk tile and turn on my phone light to check the hole and reassure myself (Figure 3). The light casts down from the street level and into a cavern. The sides catch the dull yellow hue, but the bottom never tells the color back to me and I'm bent over a hellmouth straining to adjust my eyes to the underworld. Failing to find the floor, I feel the ancient Texcoco lakebed pulling at me from below. The boundary between myself and the constant fluctuation of the natural world held by a thin slab of sidewalk tile. One rainstorm away from catastrophic failure. An earth-mouth not yet cracked open, it mumbles its grammar to me, and I think back through its 500 years of desiccation, dismemberment, and development. The earth-mouth calls me into its shift of scales that mark not days but eons. I witness this earth-mouth not on my screen but with the light of my phone. Pulling my head up to acknowledge the snag I've become in the crowd. I stand up in shock and silence. I wonder when this earth-mouth will speak, and what it will take for the humans of Mexico City, of London, of Bangkok, of New Orleans, of New York, to hear the howl of nature. A

Crossing Borders, Resisting Rupture

Storytelling in Geetanjali Shree's *Tomb of Sand*

Shivika Mathur

Shree, Geetanjali. *Tomb of Sand: A Novel*.
Translated by Daisy Rockwell.
HarperVia, 2021. 624pp., $30 cloth.

In her Booker Prize acceptance speech, Geetanjali Shree describes her 2018 novel, *Tomb of Sand*, as "an elegy for the world we inhabit, a laughing elegy that retains hope in the face of impending doom." Translated by Daisy Rockwell from the Hindi original, *Ret Samadhi, Tomb of Sand* catapulted to global recognition for being the first Indian-language book to win the Booker International Prize in 2022.[1] This novel draws from a deep reservoir of Indian heritage, culture, folklore, social customs, practices, the volatile Partition history of the Indian subcontinent, as well as its rich literary traditions. Divided into three parts and an epilogue, it is about an elderly woman, referred to as Ma (Hindi designation for mother), an octogenarian who has recently lost her husband and sunk into depression despite a large brood of children and grandchildren showering "bucketloads of compassion" on her. Unbeknown to her family, Ma suddenly rises from her state of *samadhi* (a Hindi expression for a meditative trance) holding a cane. Through the imagery surrounding the cane, magically conjuring rainbow butterflies in a dreamlike haze, the novel transforms the cane into a symbol of agency and resistance, strengthening Ma's determination to cross all the boundaries that have held her dreams and desires hostage. In course of time, Ma becomes an embodiment of rebuttal, healing her internal ruptures through small but culturally powerful acts of dissent whereby the "tale of a dying woman evolves into a story about her thriving and flourishing." The novel is "soaked up in the stuff" but also anchored in empathy and resilience.

1 "Why *Tomb of Sand* Won the 2022 International Booker Prize and Why You Should Read It." *The Booker Prizes*. May 27, 2022. thebookerprizes.com/the-booker-library/features/why-tomb-of-sand-won-the-2022-international-booker-prize-and-why-you

Ma's defiance grows over time, emerging from small acts such as turning her back literally and metaphorically towards her family, leaving the eldest son's house and staying with her self-willed daughter, harboring motherly affection for a transgender person, and finally, going to Pakistan without a visa. These acts unfold within the framework of emotional healing that entails transgressions- physical, metaphorical, emotional, societal. The novel ends with Ma's death right after she unites with her first husband, Anwar in Pakistan. In the following pages, this essay will explore in detail the symbolic and narrative elements of the novel that mediate between rupture, resilience and freedom.

The narrative opens with a metafictional acknowledgment of the endless possibilities of storytelling— "A tale tells itself. It can be complete but also incomplete, the way all tales are." The narrative includes the "stirring and whisperings that float on the wind" along with the past boiling forth into the present and bringing "steam, embers, and smoke" and in doing so it opens the readers to the liberatory force of storytelling. When the narrator muses that every story is a story of partition—"love, romance longing courage pain in separation bloodshed…lost souls flitting about in the ether," it acknowledges not just the layered complexity of life but also of storytelling. In the third part of the novel comes a brief but powerful perspective from the playful narrator on the role of literature in times of despair: "…Literature has a scent, a soupcon, a je ne sais quoi, all its own." Realties seep into literature hoping for redemption, hoping of blossoming of "green patches of shoots and leaves" "amongst the rubble of destruction." "The world is in dire need of literature because literature is a source of hope and life."

In the episode of the recently widowed Ma crossing the territorial borders in search of her first husband in Pakistan, the novel connects the looming past of Partition to the vagaries of modern India, and highlights Ma's rebellion against the conventions associated with widowhood. In its juxtaposition of personal lives full of humdrum conventions with national historical traumatic events, the novel takes a long view of rupture as a state of continued negotiation with life. The novel affirms that anything worth pursuing necessitates crossing borders, upsetting boundaries, shaking the customs, cultures and practices that have rigidly shaped a group of lives. As Ma forges "a path toward the forbidden," it appears to her daughter "as though she'd removed all her layers, one by one, wife, mother, aunt, this that, now at last she was simply herself, laid bare apart, her own, untouched by thoughts and concerns of any other. At eighty, Ma had turned selfish… Ma rising again contrary to the expectations of all."

The walls, windows and doors in this story emerge as regimes that steer the course of human lives. The narrator is quick to introduce the wall playing "a special role in our story." The wall becomes a conduit for Ma's defiance. It sieves out "everyone's dishonor, rage, comprehension." Ma slides towards the wall every day till "her back became the wall itself, keeping at bay those who came to coax and cajole." While Ma refuses to get up from

her bed saying Nyooo, nyooo" like a stuck record to every passerby, it gradually snowballs from endless No, no, Nyoooo, noooo…to "Now, I'll rise anew." The walls and doors are also personified to denote mindsets and customs that travel with their inhabitants and structure new spaces. As Ma's eldest son braces for retirement and impending relocation, Ma's sudden departure from his house denotes her refusal to be bound by the walls that harbor patriarchal values or feudal mindsets. As Ma's journey of transgressions is peeled layer by layer, one learns that "A path opens with no. Freedom is made of no." Ma's symbolic passing over the wall paves her way to crossing borders. The novel conceptualizes a border as connective instead of divisive—"A border is a horizon. Where two worlds meet. And embrace." Ma's three-page-long soliloquy on the border, beginning with, "Border? Do you know what a border is?" during her confrontation with the border police in Pakistan, culminates in the narrative emphasis that "a border is not created to be removed. It is meant to illuminate both sides."

Tomb of Sand draws from a deep reservoir of Indian heritage, culture, folklore, social customs, practices, the volatile Partition history of the Indian subcontinent, as well as its rich literary traditions.

Much "like musical notes that go in several directions in a single raga," the novel captures the polyphony of *dhwani* (Hindi for sound) in the form of the rhythmic intermingling of human and bird sounds, expressions in Hindi, Urdu and English; sounds of mundane routine, the bickering of a multi-generational family—all of which build the milieu of the novel. The novel's translator, Daisy Rockwell, defines *Dhwani* as "an echo, a vibration, a resonance…alliteration and assonance…a mystical reverberation" that could be accidental or deliberate. The sounds of routine acquire a new meaning in Ma's life as her story begins to dwell in her liberal daughter Beti's house. Her breathing, laughter and giggling, snoring, slurping, lip smacking, yawning, fluttering of the shawl, the jingle jangle of her bangles result in a curious role reversal. The mother starts to become more of a daughter to her *Beti*, discarding the societal expectations of widowhood in the process.

The narrative voice slides in time and again to remind the readers that understanding is to "displace meaning" and not establish meaning. The pace and essence of the narrative is its "dollop of the unfathomable and a dash of the riddle" that delights in its own existence. Referring to this novel, Frank Wynn, a Booker judge, notes that, "in its linguistic contortions

it evokes *Don Quixote*, in its discursive digressions it is reminiscent of *Tristram Shandy*, in its sense of the magical there are echoes of Jorge Luis Borges and Gabriel Garcia Marquez—yet the voices, the story, the novel are unique." The novel captures moods, and as it declares the boundless possibilities of a tale, it also immediately changes gears to introduce the circularity of this story and its binding elements—"There were two women and one death"—and proceeds with enthusiasm—"So there's no harm in starting the story right here, that is, the way we're doing it right now." And even after the narrative zooms into the life of one of the two women in a chaotic household, it digresses into back stories, long tedious descriptions of a single mood, a single event, or chapters with a single sentence, even a two-word telegram. The narrator doubles up as different characters and also addresses the reader. The narrator hops between pages claiming new roles and functions— "But I'm not here to talk about myself. This isn't my story…I'm not even a character. And yet—the page is a stage!" to "I take a bow and leave these pages. Whatever comes next won't be said by me." The narrator bids adieu in the final pages of the novel by leaping out of the window, "filled with longing," looking at "plethora of new stories and characters" waiting to take shape.

The novel, in its translated version, retains the local flavor of a joint middle-class family in suburban north India whose members coexist grudgingly in spite of each other's hypocrisies. The array of characters is introduced by their familial roles and social identifiers instead of actual names, casting satire on how individual identity gets subsumed in the vortex of social expectations. There is Bade (meaning eldest)—Ma's eldest son and a retired Government officer who holds a typical patriarchal haughtiness; his wife, the Bahu (meaning daughter-in-law) oscillates between compliance and subtle inconsequential rebellion—wearing a pair of Reeboks, for instance, as a flight to freedom. There is Beti (meaning daughter)—Ma's daughter and Bade's sibling who represents the "free spirit of the new age," writes "totally incomprehensible books" and gives interviews on "women's consciousness, sexuality, the female orgasm, what gibberish, good God." While her lifestyle is not legitimized by her family, she finds mild acceptance after she is invited to the President's house. Ma herself is introduced through several names, coming through the perspectives of different characters. She is called Ma, Amma, Granny, Mata-ji, or Baji, Granny Chill, Kalpataru—The Wishing Tree. It is only after she returns to her place of birth in Pakistan that we discover Ma's real name—Chandraprabha Devi. Amidst all this, Ma's relation with Rosie, the transgender character, stands out. Rosie's relation with Ma goes back to the harrowing experience of escape during the Partition of India. From Beti's perspective, Rosie is described in metaphors of duality. She represents the futility of drawing straight lines, border, boundaries, neat outlines or categories. She is both Rosie, who calls Ma Baji, as well as Raza the tailor, who addresses Ma as Mataji. While everyone calls her Rosie Bua, she is a body that defies the legitimacy of borders— "Flowing this way and that."

The novel employs a range of narrative styles where stories are nested within each other, yet retains a sense of incompleteness. For example, one does not know about Rosie's past in pre-partitioned India, or about the incidents that led to Anwar's paralysis. We never learn whether Anwar the junior officer accepts Ma as his mother, or whatever happened to Bade and Bahu in their post-retirement apartment, or about the statue of Buddha that represented Chandraprabha's life with Anwar but was finally confiscated by Pakistan. One does not what lessons Beti learns out of her Ma's daring act of unearthing her first family. Through an elliptical and layered narrative form, the novel sustains interpretive openness. Ma's grand odyssey to Pakistan and her reconciliation with her past complicates the notions of home and belonging in the face of disruption. This confusion finds expression in the scene where Shree brings together stalwarts of Partition literature and their iconic characters at the Wagah border. This scene brings to life writers such as Krishna Sobti, Saadat Hasan Manto, Khushwant Singh, and Intizar Hussain, among others who have shaped narratives on the Partition of India. These figures and their iconic characters appear as if they are stepping out of their texts, assembled in a literary afterlife causing them to wonder where they belong and blurring the boundaries of fiction, history, non-fiction, fantasy and the act of writing itself.

The Booker Prize committee recognized Shree's *Tomb of Sand* as "An urgent yet engaging protest against the destructive impact of borders, whether between religions, countries or genders." *Tomb of Sand* truly crosses the boundaries of artistic expression, and its value lies in its thematic, symbolic and narrative richness that takes the readers through a maze of emotions, engaging with unhealed wounds of personal and historical, individual and collective ruptures and finding new ways of living. ▲

The Concentric Circles of Memory

Mehak Burza

Mark Celinscak and Mehnaz Afridi, eds. *Global Approaches to the Holocaust: Memory, History, and Representation*. University of Nebraska Press, 312pp., $35 paper.

Celinscak and Afridi's book constitute a significant and timely intervention in contemporary Holocaust studies that reflects the field's increasing engagement with global perspectives. While Holocaust scholarship has traditionally remained anchored within a predominantly European framework, this volume seeks to recalibrate that orientation by foregrounding the diverse ways in which the Holocaust is remembered, interpreted, and mobilized across a wide array of cultural and geopolitical contexts. Rather than treating the Holocaust as a geographically contained European event, the volume positions it as a phenomenon whose memory, interpretation, and ethical implications extend far beyond its original spatial and temporal boundaries. In doing so, the collection not only broadens the geographical scope of the field, but also underscores the fluidity of its interpretive frameworks.

Organized into three thematic sections on memory, history, and representation, the volume offers a structured yet capacious framework for examining the Holocaust beyond its conventional boundaries. Each section engages a distinct dimension of scholarly inquiry while collectively reinforcing the editors' central premise: that the Holocaust functions not merely as a historical event, but as a globally circulating point of reference through which societies negotiate questions of identity, morality, and historical responsibility.

The editors' introduction, "Series of Concentric Circles," provides a particularly strong conceptual foundation for the volume. Drawing on the work of scholars such as Alvin Rosenfeld and Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider, Celinscak and Afridi advance the argument that Holocaust memory has expanded outward in successive layers, much like concentric circles, radiating from its European epicenter to encompass global audiences, institutions, and narratives. This metaphor is not merely illustrative; rather, it functions as an organizing principle that shapes the intellectual architecture of the collection. At its core, the introduction advances the claim that an event so deeply embedded in European history can be meaningfully remembered across diverse cultural, national, and geographic contexts.

Importantly, the introduction also challenges conventional boundaries of Holocaust historiography by expanding both its spatial and temporal parameters, suggesting that the Holocaust should not be confined to Europe between 1941 and 1945, but instead understood in relation to prewar developments, global wartime experiences, and postwar memory cultures. References to sites of remembrance in locations such as Japan, as well as transnational narratives like those of Chiune Sugihara, the Japanese diplomat in Lithuania who helped thousands of Jewish refugees escape Europe, and the *MS St. Louis*, whose 900 refugee passengers were refused entry to Cuba, the U.S. and Canada in 1939, underscore how Holocaust memory circulates globally and acquires new meanings across different contexts. In this sense, the introduction does more than frame the volume—it actively reconfigures the contours of Holocaust studies itself.

The section on "Memory" exemplifies this global approach by foregrounding the constructed and contingent nature of Holocaust remembrance. Rather than positing memory as a stable or universally transmitted phenomenon, the contributors demonstrate how it is actively mediated through local histories, political exigencies, and through cultural narratives. Shirli Gilbert's chapter on South Africa highlights the intersections between Holocaust memory and the legacy of apartheid, demonstrating how different histories of oppression can inform one another without collapsing into equivalence. Similarly, Roni Mikel-Arieli's discussion of Mauritius situates Holocaust memory within the island's colonial and postcolonial history, emphasizing the entanglement of Jewish displacement with broader narratives of slavery and imperial violence.

The chapter on Japan, by Rotem Kowner and Ran Zwigenberg, is illustrative of the editors' "concentric circles" model. By examining how the Holocaust is remembered through figures such as Sugihara, the authors show how global memory is often mediated through local narratives that emphasize moral action and humanitarianism. This reflects a broader pattern identified in the introduction: Holocaust memory is not simply transferred from one context to another but is actively reshaped in ways that resonate with local histories and values.

The Holocaust functions not merely as a historical event, but as a globally circulating point of reference through which societies negotiate questions of identity, morality, and historical responsibility.

The Latin American case studies further reinforce this argument. Emmanuel Kahan and Yael Siman's comparative analysis of Argentina and Mexico explores how national actors and institutions shape Holocaust memory, while Nancy Nicholls Lopeandía's analysis of Chile compellingly illustrates how Holocaust memory is reconfigured through the lens of state violence, as testimonial narratives intersect with the legacy of dictatorship and are reshaped within new historical and political contexts. Collectively, these essays underscore the editors' claim that memory is dynamic, constructed, and deeply embedded in specific social and political contexts.

The section on "History" extends the volume's analytical reach by situating the Holocaust within a broader global historical framework. Aomar Boum's chapter on North African musical traditions stands out for its methodological innovation, using cultural forms as alternative archives of Holocaust experience. This approach aligns with the editors' call to broaden the sources and methods through which the Holocaust is studied. Other contributions in this section focus on refugee policies and international responses, highlighting the global dimensions of the Holocaust as a historical event. Bonnie M. Harris's chapter on President Manuel Quezon's role in providing refuge to Jews in the Philippines introduces a lesser known but significant episode that complicates dominant narratives of inaction. Rebecca Erbelding's discussion of Fort Ontario and American refugee debates, along with Paul R. Bartrop's examination of Jewish refugee migration to Australia, reveal the limitations and contradictions of national policies during this period. Richard Menkis's reexamination of Canadian responses and Daniela Gleizer's analysis of Mexican immigration policy further emphasize the importance of situating the Holocaust within a global context of migration, state policy, and moral decision-making. Taken together, this section offers a compelling comparative framework that elucidates a spectrum of responses, from humanitarian intervention to bureaucratic exclusion, thereby situating the Holocaust within a complex web of global decision-making processes.

The section on "Representation" turns to questions of pedagogy, narrative construction, and public history. The essays in this section highlight the challenges of teaching and representing the Holocaust in regions where it is

not part of national history. Discussions of Holocaust education in the Arab world, Australia, and New Zealand illustrate the ways in which pedagogy must be adapted to different cultural and political contexts, often in the face of denial, distortion, or limited awareness. Navras J. Aafreedi's chapter on South Asia addresses the challenges of denial and trivialization, while Mohammed S. Dajani Daoudi and Zeina M. Barakat explore analogous tensions within the Arab world. Contributions by Lorena Cardona González, Suzanne D. Rutland, and Ann Beaglehole further demonstrate how educational frameworks in Latin America and Australia respectively adapt Holocaust narratives to local pedagogical needs. Tali Nates's analysis of museum representation in post-apartheid South Africa underscores the role of public history in shaping collective memory. Her analysis further underscores how museum spaces function not merely as sites of remembrance, but as active civic institutions that cultivate ethical engagement and critical reflection on contemporary forms of injustice. While this section effectively highlights the ethical dimensions of representation, it also gestures toward an unresolved tension between universality and specificity; namely, the risk that the pedagogical expansion of Holocaust narratives may inadvertently obscure their historical particularity.

One of the volume's most significant strengths lies in its interdisciplinary approach. By bringing together perspectives from history, literary studies, cultural studies, and education, the book provides a multifaceted understanding of the Holocaust's global dimensions. This diversity reflects the complexity of the subject and aligns with the editors' broader aim of expanding the field beyond traditional disciplinary boundaries. The concluding sections and epilogue, which return to individual narratives and global experiences, effectively bring together the themes of memory, history, and representation. It ultimately invites readers to reconsider the Holocaust not as a closed historical episode, but as an evolving site of global memory and ethical reflection.

In conclusion, *Global Approaches to the Holocaust: Memory, History, and Representation* is an important and well-executed contribution to Holocaust scholarship. Its emphasis on global perspectives, interdisciplinary methods, and ethical engagement offers valuable insights for scholars, educators, and students alike. By navigating the delicate balance between historical specificity and global relevance, the book provides a nuanced and thought-provoking framework for understanding the Holocaust in an increasingly interconnected world.

Wilhelm Trübner's Romantic Ruins

"German-ness" in Crisis

Jacquelyn Delin McDonald

Today, the German painter Wilhelm Trübner is best known for his works in the collection of the Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin, or for his tongue-in-cheek dog paintings (Figure 1). However, he first gained prominence due to his involvement with the *Leibl-Kreis* (Leibl Circle), a group of young artists in southern Germany, who worked in a realist style under the guidance of the painter Wilhelm Leibl. Leibl had encountered the work of the realist Gustave Courbet at the Munich Glaspalast Exhibition of 1869, and then was introduced to Manet in Paris before returning to Munich. The group embraced realism's matter-of-fact approach, including both its subject matter and its tactile style, as a modern way of painting modern life. It would include, among others, Carl Schuch and Hans Thoma, as well as Trübner. From 1871 to 1873, they worked to produce stoic, everyday scenes of family members and friends and straightforward studies of interiors, landscapes, as well as depictions of labor. A dark palette, with visible brushwork to signal the artist's hand and presence via the wet-on-wet or *alla prima* technique, was also key to their output. This approach is exemplified by Trübner's *Auf dem Kanapee* (*On the Couch*, Figure 2).

Following the unification of Germany in 1871, the newly formed nation experienced growing political and cultural tensions under Prussian rule. Rapid modernization, the escalating *Kulturkampf* (culture war) between the state and the Catholic Church, and changing artistic priorities, all contributed to a period of uncertainty. After Leibl retired to the countryside, Trübner and other members of the circle experienced what the critic Julius Meier-Graefe later called a "time of aberration." Meier-Graefe's 1915 assessment provides insight into this moment:



Figure 1. Wilhelm Trübner, *Ave, Caesar*, morituri te salutant, 1877. Oil on wood, 45.5 x 37.5 cm. Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Nationalgalerie / Andres Kilger. Public domain. id.smb.museum/object/966252/



Figure 2. Wilhelm Trübner, *Auf dem Kanapee* (On the couch), 1872. Oil on canvas, 52 x 45 cm. Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Nationalgalerie / Jörg P. Anders. Public domain. id.smb.museum/object/961696/



Figure 3. Wilhelm Trübner, *Basement window in Heidelberg Castle*, 1871. Oil on canvas, 29.7 x 44.7 cm. Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus und Kunstbau München. Creative Commons. www.lenbachhaus.de

> *The later Trübner, who paints the luminous finely-toned landscapes, who has renewed the brilliant technique of his youth, the painter of the splendid pictures of horses and the strong portraits is, as he always was, one of our greatest artists. The days of aberration which find in the history of his copious production correspond to an interregnum in German art as a whole. He himself was in no greater danger than was the whole of our painting in the ten years adrift. But while many another fatally compromised himself, Trübner always gave us sincere documents that testify to his great abilities.*[1]

Most interestingly, Meier-Graefe describes the decade of the 1880s as an aberration, or perhaps a straying of sorts away from modernism, for both Trübner and "German art as a whole." With respect to Trübner's paintings of ruins, we can see that his view of the crisis seems to have been expressed as a deep desire to deal with the uncertainties of modernization by romanticizing the past.

For context, it is important that Trubner (1851- 1917) was born in Heidelberg, a small town located in what was then the Grand Duchy of Baden. Dominating the town is Heidelberg Castle, a landmark, rich in history, that would remain central to the artist's personal identity. Since its construction in the 12th century, the castle has witnessed centuries of warfare (and amazingly, been stuck by lightning twice). An enduring symbol of local and regional identity to this day, the ruins of the castle formed part of Trübner's earliest visual memories.

1 Meier- Gräefe, Julius. *Modern Art: Being a Contribution to a New System of Aesthetics, Vol. II*. Trans by Simmonds, Florence and Chrystal, George. Arno Press: New York, 1908, 169.



Figure 4. Wilhelm Trübner, *View from Heidelberg Castle*, 1873. Oil on canvas, 54 x 44 cm. © Kurpfälzisches Museum Heidelberg, Photo: K. Gattner

Two early paintings, created while the *Leibl-Kreis* was still active, show us Trübner's initial engagement with the site (Figures 3 and 4). Within the first work, *Basement Window in Heidelberg Castle*, Trübner works to show us a realist depiction of a seemingly forgotten window from the castle site. The lowest floor was likely only accessed by those helping with domestic duties in the castle, rather than the kings and elites who resided in the castle's upper-level chambers. The dark tonality and cropped view associate this work with the realist tendencies shared by Courbet, Manet, and the *Leibl-Kreis*, while the vegetation around the windowpanes shows nature overcoming the structure.

In the *View from the Heidelberg Castle* from 1873, the artist takes a different slant, playing with light and including a human figure in a preserved part of the site. The open windows allow for a view of the village, but the visitor's back obliterates the view of the



Figure 5. Wilhelm Trübner, *Heidelberg, Castle and View of the Plain from the East*, 1889. Oil on canvas, 50.3 x 70.3 cm. © Kurpfälzisches Museum Heidelberg, Photo: K. Gattner

landscape. In this piece, the focus is on the painting itself, with its visible brushwork, and we can begin to see the dark green gestural approach that Trübner will embrace with his later impressionist pieces. In these two interior views, the artist was admiring the unique beauty of each windowed room, and showing an 'everyday' perspective.

In 1878, Trübner worked in the Heidelberg Palace gallery, gaining artistic experience by studying and handling the Old Masters in the collection. His individual ties to the site help to explain the specific views he chose to paint, as well as his growing affinity to the historically layered site. Throughout the late 1870s and 1880s, he would primarily work in Munich, but he also traveled around Europe extensively, to Holland, Spain, Belgium, France and England. However, it seems that by the late 1880s, the artist better identified with his boyhood countryside, rather than Munich, and spent the majority of the year 1889 in Heidelberg. It was during this time that he produced many studies of the surrounding landscape; particularly of interest is the *View of Heidelberg Palace* from 1889 (Figure 5).

With the *View of Heidelberg Palace*, we see a dramatically different approach toward the subject, compared to his works from 1871 and 1873. The idealized, totalizing view shows a romanticized view of the past, rather than a realist, matter-of-fact look to the present. The artist represents the variation of the landscape through *plein-air* painting techniques, with bold color and the portrayal of light hitting the leaves in the foreground and the Neckar in the distance. Bold and identifiable brush strokes place dabs of colored form on the canvas. Interestingly, the impressionistic execution, despite its quick and decisive *alla prima* technique, allows for a romanticized, idealistic view of the ruins to suggest notions of permanence and timelessness. The artist's choice to depict the



Figure 6. Wilhelm Trübner, *Cäsar am Rubikon (Caesar at the Rubicon)*, c. 1880. Oil on canvas, 48.5 x 61.0 cm. Staatliche Kunsthalle Karlsruhe. Public domain. www.kunsthalle-karlsruhe.de

ruins of Heidelberg from a distance represents a perceived idealized German past, once transcendent, yet now unattainable. The castle and ruins become less a contemporary subject than a symbol of a romanticized German past, suggesting the fragility of personal and national identity of the period.

Trübner's works, especially of the ruins of the Heidelberg castle, hold special significance as a testament to the tragic self-awareness and dramatic experimentation of an artist who perceived a nascent nation in uncertainty and crisis. Later in his life, however, Trübner would primarily work on landscapes. At that point, he embraced an impressionistic approach, with large, mostly dark green canvases of equestrian and outdoor portraits. He would also publish two texts on the theory of art, teaching in Frankfurt and Karlsruhe. Notably, he also became involved in the Berlin Secession and later the Munich Secession, publicly challenging state-sponsored institutions. His affinity for all things "German," however, remained—dogs, history, sausages and romanticizing the past via ruins and the landscape—and is reflected in the title of one of his anecdotal dog portraits, *Caesar at the Rubicon* (Figure 6). It asks a timeless question: What does one do next in a moment of crisis? Should we stridently move forward, or pause and reflect on the romantic ideas of the past? Trubner's answer, in his engagement with ruins, is that in times of crisis, visions of the past are quite valuable, allowing for moments of contemplation to better understand our personal and cultural identity. ▲

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FOLIO

The Mushrooms of Plato's Cave

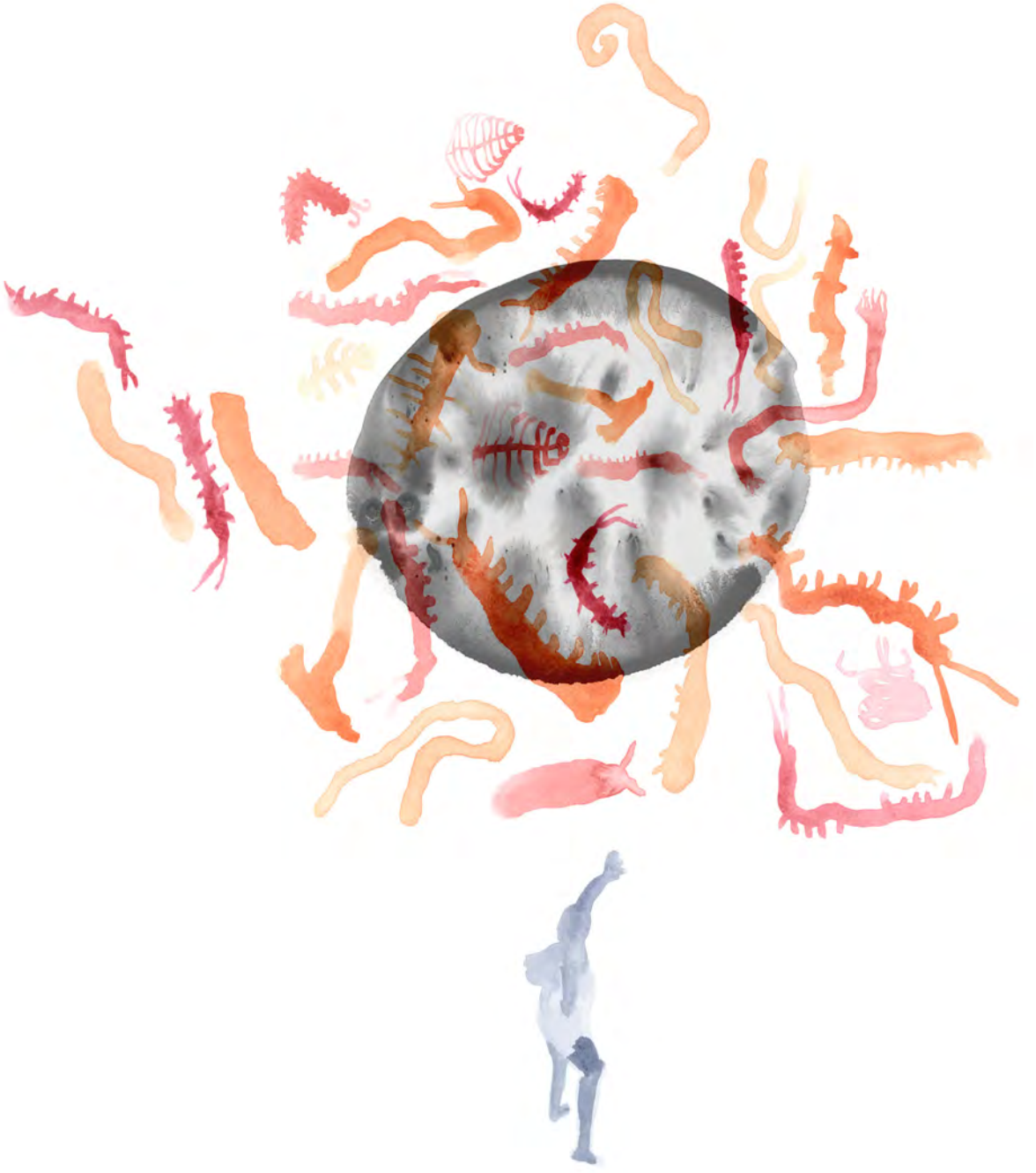
Francesca Brunetti

This project is about an illustrated, re-designed, posthuman, ecofeminist narrative of Plato's Myth of the Cave. Plato's Myth of the Cave has been interpreted by contemporary thinkers as emblematic of Plato's philosophy and western culture and its anthropocentric and domineering approach to reality. By using watercolor and digital painting in my project, I transform this myth into an alternative eco-feminist visual narrative. The protagonist of my transformed myth is a person who—instead of going up, in the direction of the sun and abstract thinking, as does the male prisoner in Plato's myth—goes down, underground, in a world populated by fungi, worms and bacteria. Through imagination and drawing, I create a visual description where the protagonist of my transformed Plato's myth discovers a way to relate to her material world that challenges traditional western anthropocentric approaches to reality. In my story traditional western ways of relating to existence—based on a self-centered understanding of the self, the division between body and mind, the understanding of matter as homogeneous and passive and the importance of rationality and control—are replaced with actions and feelings that promote the protagonist's embeddedness in her material world, her understanding of her interconnection with the elements composing reality, and the transformative potential of ecological joy. By exploring nature's agency and creativity, the protagonist of my myth gains energies and resources to understand and transform her material existence.

Selections from Francesca Brunetti, *The Mushrooms of Plato's Cave*, 2023. Watercolor and digital drawing.

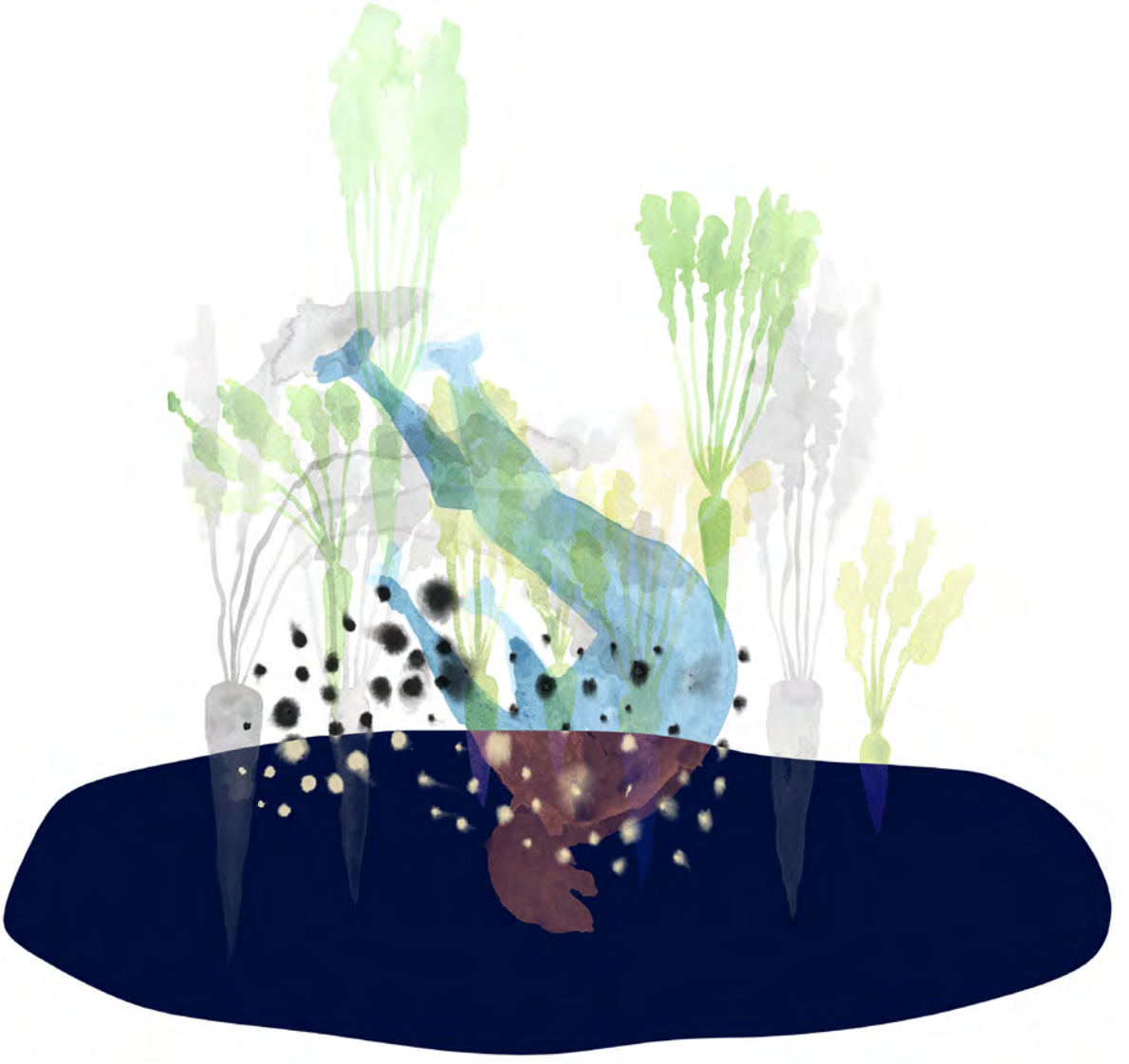














SCIENCES AND ARTS

Engineering That Inspires

Richard C. Benson

Introduction

Now at the end of a long career as an engineering educator and university administrator, I've given thought as to why my professional life evolved the way it did. In particular, why engineering, as opposed to some other worthy walk-of-life? I realize now that, as far back to my days as a toddler (I am 75 years old now) I was exposed to engineering marvels that inspired me to be like their creators … an engineer.

On December 5, 2025, the Jonsson School of Engineering and Computer Science at UT Dallas put on the "Artfully Engineered Exposition," showcasing the artistic talents of several dozen ECS faculty and staff members. Dean Stephanie Adams asked me to curate the exposition, which became a true labor of love.

Throughout the exposition, we were treated to impressive displays by our colleagues who have extraordinary talent as painters, sculptors, photographers, quilters, cross-stitchers, woodworkers, singers, dancers, musicians, composers, lyricists, and comedians. Even a latte artist displayed her talent, the results quickly consumed. I do hope that the exposition becomes an annual event for the Jonsson School.

A highlight for me was to play my trumpet in a newly formed 7-piece ensemble that we called the "Capstones." (Did you spot the pun? Not Cap·stones but Caps·tones.) It was the first time in nearly 50 years of marriage that my wife, Leslie, and I played music together. Leslie is an accomplished bassist.

For the occasion, I gave a lecture titled, "Artfully Engineered: Where Left Brain Meets Right Brain."[1] But there was one major difference between the exposition and the lecture. The exposition had its focus on the artistry of our ECS colleagues when, by and large, they were not doing their work as engineering educators or staffers. In other words, the artistry that they exhibited was outside their "day job." I expect that more than a few visitors to the exhibition were pleasantly surprised to discover that those "Left Brain" engineers had a smidgen of "Right Brain" artistic talent.

The essence of the "Artfully Engineered" lecture, however, was to present engineering as inherently beautiful, not something apart. Such is also the motivation of this article. Because of space constraints, instead of the more than 50 examples that I used in my December 5th lecture, I will present eight broadly selected examples of engineering marvels that have inspired me across the seven-going-on-eight decades of my life.

1 The lecture is published on YouTube by the UTD Geoscience Studio: "Artfully Engineered: where left brain meets right brain," March 13, 2026, www.youtube.com/watch?v=NuvYSfcLLyY. More details are in the UTD Geoscience Studio podcast, "An Accomplished Life: Dr. Richard Benson," Jan. 16, 2026, www.youtube.com/watch?v=EDvEeod8opc.

The 1950s: The Steam Engines of Blacksburg, Virginia.

My journey of inspiration begins in Blacksburg, Virginia. As a very young boy in the 1950s, we would visit my grandparents who lived there. This was fifty years or so before I would return to Blacksburg to work at Virginia Tech. Across the street from my grandparents' house was a train station, into which would come some of the last steam engines in regular use. They brought coal, which would then be dropped through a trestle into dump trucks and carried to houses and businesses of the town. Virginia Tech still operates a coal-fired power plant.

Those engines were big, they smelled, and they were loud. They assaulted the senses, but in the most glorious way. My grandfather told me that if I approached the train and made a downward-pulling motion with my arm, the engineer would toot back. And he would! I have said on many occasions that the mind-blowing imprint of that steam engine led me to become an engineer.

The steam engines that so mesmerized me were built for the Norfolk and Western Railway by the Baldwin Locomotive Works in the very early 1900s. They were class M 4-8-0, meaning they had four leading wheels, eight drive wheels, and no wheels under the cab. The M 4-8-0 engines were sometime nicknamed "Mastodons," which seems entirely appropriate for a huge "creature" that huffs and puffs, lumbers about, and seems thoroughly alive.

Norfolk and Western Engine 475 was retired from service in 1959, but then found new life in 1991 when it was restored by the Strasburg Rail Road. It currently makes runs on four miles of track in the heart of Amish Country in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. The photograph I have chosen for illustration shows the restored 475 at the East Strasburg Station (Figure 1).

In another inspiring example of engineered objects finding new life and new use, the railroad upon which those steam engines ran was converted to a very popular hiking and biking trail: the Huckleberry Trail. [2] That idyllic 6-mile path between Christiansburg and Blacksburg, Virginia, was one of my favorite places to go for a walk and collect my thoughts during my time at Virginia Tech.

2 For those familiar with Blacksburg, Virginia, my grandparents' house was on Clay Street, where the Blacksburg Police Station now is located. Across the street was the train station, where the Blacksburg Library now is located. Adjacent to the library is the terminus of the Huckleberry Trail, formerly the Huckleberry Line.

The 1960s: The Race to the Moon

Throughout my teenage years, the great race to the Moon was a compelling adventure. We all watched with awe as first the Mercury missions with one astronaut aboard, and then the Gemini missions with two astronauts aboard, and then finally the Apollo missions with three astronauts aboard, developed the capabilities needed for a successful journey to the Moon ... and return!

The nation's resolve was captured in an electrifying speech delivered by President John F. Kennedy at Rice University on September 2, 1962, in which he said:



Figure 1. Norfolk and Western Engine 475 at the East Strasburg Station in Strasburg, Pennsylvania, June 2, 2014. Photo: O484 on Wikimedia / Creative Commons.

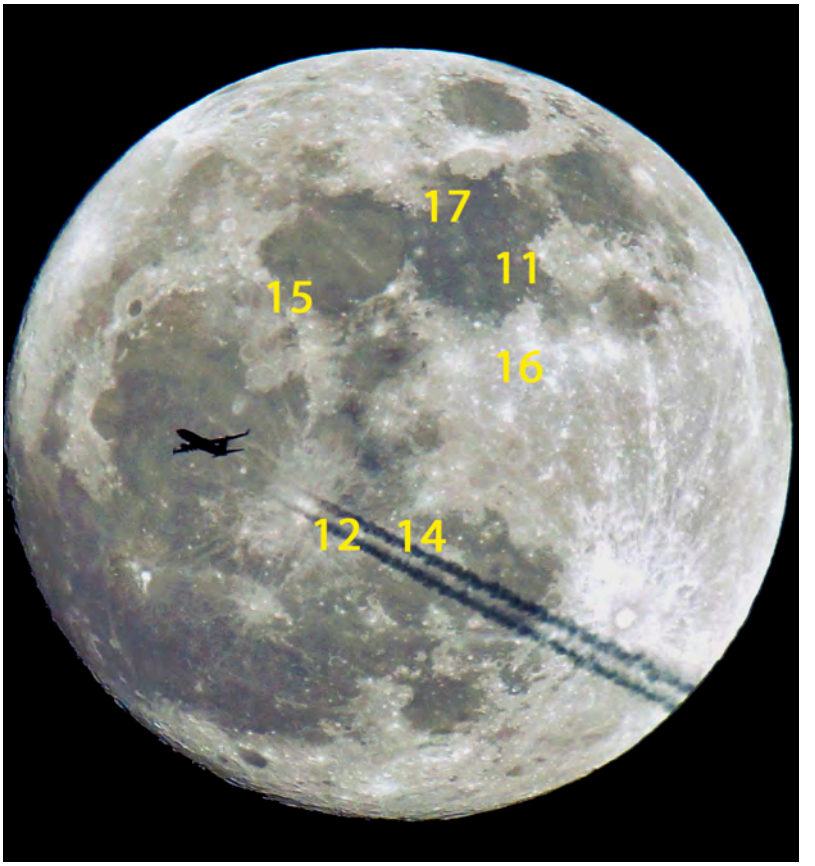


Figure 2. The six Apollo landing sites (11, 12, 14, 15, 16, 17) and the three fly-bys (8, 10, 13) marked on the full cold moon (the last full moon of the year) with a jet passing in front, December 21, 2018. Photo: Richard C. Benson

> We shall send to the moon 240,000 miles away, a giant rocket, more than 300 feet tall on an untried mission to an unknown celestial body, and then return it safely to Earth. … We choose to go to the moon in this decade and do the other things not because they are easy, but because they are hard.

And the nation made good on President Kennedy's promise with the Apollo 11 landing on the Sea of Tranquility on July 20, 1969—ever after known as "Moon Day." Throughout the decade there were many moments of triumph, and some of failure, the most heartbreaking being the capsule fire that took the lives of the Apollo 1 crew.

A particular moment of inspiration came with Apollo 8, the first mission to orbit the Moon, which thus became the first time that humans saw and photographed the far side of the Moon. On December 24, 1968—Christmas Eve—the three Apollo 8 crew members, Jim Lovell, Bill Anders, and Frank Borman, read from the Book of Genesis: "*In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth … .*"

Six more Moon landing missions took place, the last being over half a century ago, Apollo 17 in September 1972. Of course, Apollo 13—the "Houston, we have a problem" mission—became a fly-by instead of Moon landing. A "slingshot" around the Moon became the only means of bringing the crippled spacecraft back to the Earth.

I have marked the six Apollo landing sites and the three fly-bys on a picture of the "Full Cold Moon" of December 2018 (Figure 2). This image of the full moon—they all look rather alike—is distinguished by the fact that I captured a Boeing 767 jet passing in front just as I clicked the camera shutter.

I should note that there was a wonderful epilog to these early space missions. Christopher C. Kraft, Jr. was the head—and indeed the creator—of the Mission Control Center during the early Mercury and Gemini missions. He was sometimes referred to as the "eighth Mercury astronaut" as he became the face of the missions on many television broadcasts. Years later, when I became the dean of engineering at Virginia Tech, I was thrilled to discover that Chris Kraft was a VT graduate. He was the first alumnus that I made a point of travelling to meet (in Houston), and I found him to be an absolutely delightful man. In 2006, Kraft became the first recipient of NASA's Ambassador of Exploration Award. The accompanying trophy contained a small, encased piece of the Moon, about the size of a marble. Kraft, in turn, presented that trophy to Virginia Tech, where it is prominently displayed in the Engineering Dean's Office.

The 1970s: Stunning Advance in Computing Power

The 1970s were the years of my college education. I entered Princeton in the fall of 1969, spent a year at the University of Virginia for my master's degree in 1974, and completed my Ph.D. at Berkeley in the fall of 1977.

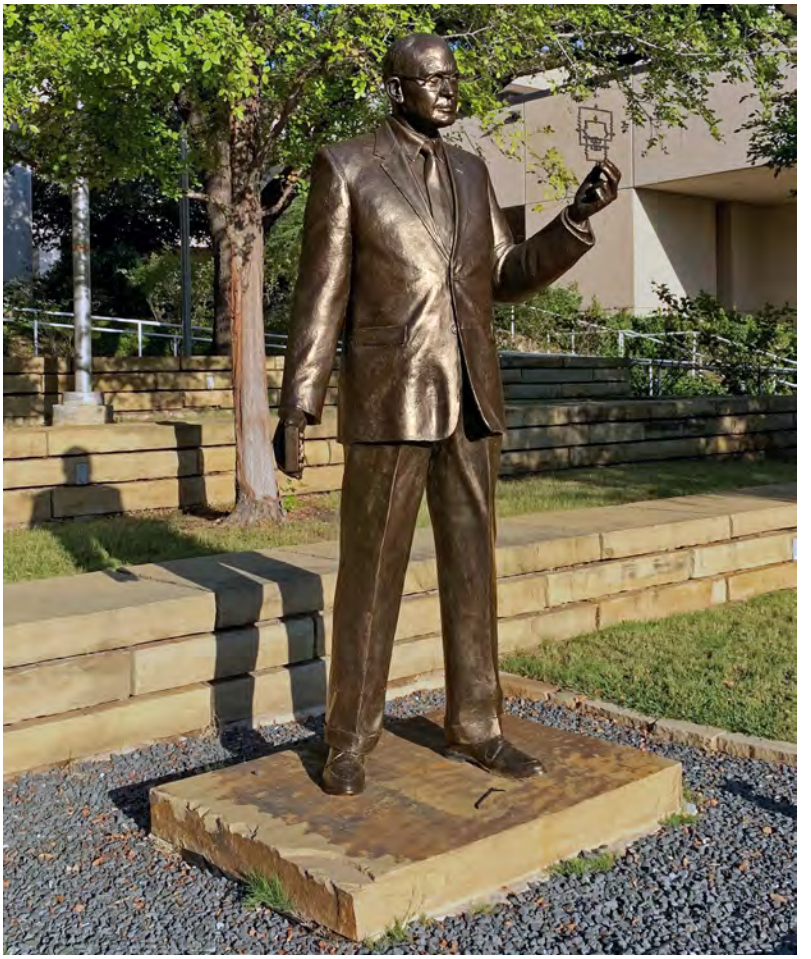


Figure 3. Statue of Jack Kilby on the UT Dallas campus, September 29, 2022. In the sculpture by Zenos Frudakis, Kilby holds the first, Nobel Prize-winning integrated circuit in his left hand, and the first Texas Instruments calculator in his right hand. Photo: Richard C. Benson

It was an exhilarating time to be at such wonderful universities and surrounded by so many brilliant individuals, including my fellow students. I loved hearing them think, even if—*especially if*—they were in fields far removed from my mechanical engineering major. It also didn't hurt that Princeton, with its classic Gothic architecture, and Virginia, with its Thomas Jefferson-designed grounds, were two of the most beautiful campuses in the world.

But this is an essay about amazing engineering, and here I take note that there was no greater decade than the 1970s for the advancement of computing. In the late 1960s I had summer jobs at an R&D lab at Picatinny Arsenal in New Jersey, where one of my assignments was to perform rather tedious calculations for the engineers of the lab. This I did on a Monroe Calculator. This was a device, resembling a large typewriter, that added and divided—*all mechanically*.

When I decamped for Princeton in 1969, my father, forever the best engineer in the Benson Family, gave me his slide rule. *It was a beauty!* A Keuffel & Esser Log Log Duplex Decitrig model. I used it throughout all my undergraduate studies. I still have it.

Then, at the start of my master's studies at the University of Virginia in 1973, I saw my first scientific calculator. It was a Texas Instruments SR-50. *It was a marvel!* About the size of a paperback book, it could calculate sines, cosines, natural logs, fractional powers, and much, much more. Wow! It is little surprise that K&E made its last slide rule on July 11, 1976, which it then donated to the Smithsonian.

Another leap forward came in 1974 at UC-Berkeley when I saw my first programmable calculator, a Hewlett Packard HP 65. *It was awesome!* I used a successor model, the HP 11C, through most of my research active years. I still have an HP 11C, of sorts. It is an app on my iPhone. In every way, the app mimics the original HP 11C, except it is now much faster.

A most interesting epilog to this story plays out at UT Dallas around 2021. A great friend of the university, Harlan Crow, offered to commission a statue of an inspirational figure for the campus. But Mr. Crow had two conditions: first, the stature must be lifelike, and second, it must be of a person who inspires through their brilliance. It didn't take long to settle on Jack Kilby, the TI engineer extraordinaire and Nobel laureate who invented the first integrated circuit. In the campus statue Kilby holds a copy of that first integrated circuit in his left hand, and in his right hand, he holds the very first handheld calculator, the TI "Cal-Tech" (Figure 3).

The 1980s: In the Shadow of the Erie Canal

There is a special category of engineering marvels that predate the invention of great earth-moving equipment powered by steam, gasoline, electricity, and other sources of energy. I think of them as being built by hand and hoof, i.e. human and animal labor, with perhaps a bit of hydropower achieved by tapping a nearby river.

Among such marvels that I have photographed are the Great Pyramid of Giza, built around 2570 BC, and the tallest structure in the world for an astonishing 3,792 years; the Badaling Section of the Great Wall of China, built over millennia from as early as the 8th century BC with substantial additions in the Ming Dynasty of the 16th century; and the Caesarea Aqueduct, built by the Romans in the time of Herod the Great, 22 to 10 BC, in what was then the Kingdom of Judea.

The example that I would like to focus upon is more recent and closer to home—quite literally so. In the 1980s and early 1990s, while working for the University of Rochester, my family and I lived in Pittsford, New York, just east of Rochester. In particular, we lived in an area known as Bushnell's Basin along the Erie Canal.

The Canal had been built between 1817 and 1825, connecting Lake Erie in the west to the Hudson River in the east. It was an astonishing

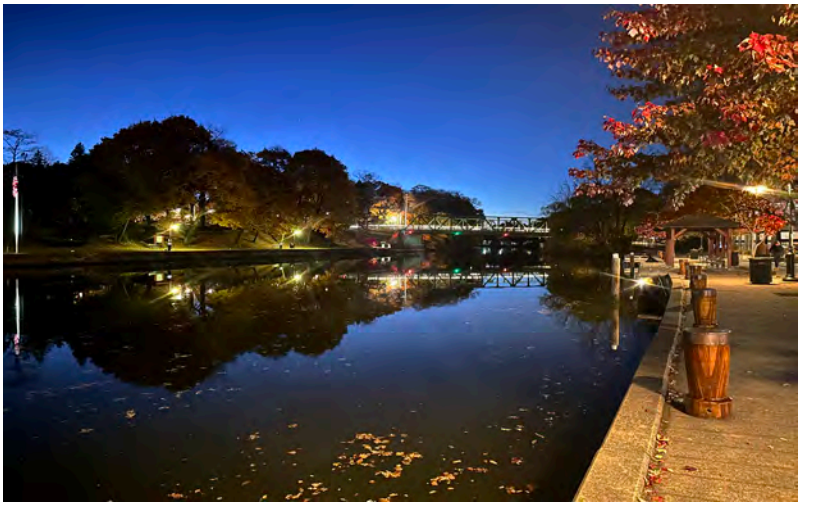


Figure 4: Autumn evening on the Erie Canal at Schoen Place in Pittsford, New York, October 24, 2024. Photo: Richard C. Benson

engineering feat to build a 363-mile waterway, with no greater tools than pickaxes and shovels, and maybe some black powder for blasting.

A particular challenge was to get the canal to cross Bushnell's Basin, which was a rather deep cut in the land formed by Irondequoit Creek. In the space of a mile, the canal would have to be locked down about 70 feet, only to have to raise it right back up again. Further complicating the construction was the lack of a water supply of a high enough elevation to refill the potential locks on the west side of Bushnell's Basin.

To solve this problem, engineer James Geddes designed a "Great Embankment" to go directly across the basin. A team of mostly Irish immigrants built up the new land bridge with rock and soil brought in from surrounding areas. Nine-hundred 20-foot pilings were used to stabilize the land. A culvert was built underneath to allow the Irondequoit Creek to continue on its natural path. Shortly after completion, the Marquis de Lafayette traveled the Erie Canal and is quoted at having expressed amazement that in places, the canal "pursued an aerial route."

Indeed, the Erie Canal at Bushnell's Basin is amazing, and I got to call it home. At the edge of my yard was Irondequoit Creek, and beyond that was the rise of the Great Embankment. And every now and then, I would look up to see a boat passing by. In essence, I lived adjacent to a beautiful 363-mile waterfront park, along which I could hike, bike, or ski throughout the year.

The photo I have used for illustration shows a lovely stopping-point along the canal, Schoen Place (Figure 4). It is on the western edge of the Great Embankment. And, yes, Schoen Place was named for a German immigrant, John Schoen, whose last name was anglicized from Schön, the German word for beautiful. How appropriate!

The 1990s: A Bridge is a Thing of Beauty

In this section devoted to beautiful bridges, I will allow myself a bit of license in noting that not *every* bridge described was seen and traversed by me in the 1990s. Rather, it is a convenient place to take stock of these engineering marvels that have fascinated me throughout my life.

A beautifully designed bridge has the perhaps unexpected attribute that it often enhances the beauty of its surrounding environment. Think of the Bixby Bridge or the Golden Gate Bridge, both on California State Route 1.

The late 1800s saw major advances in bridge design because of advances in understanding how to build structures that were both strong and relatively lightweight. Great examples are the iron truss bridges of Gustaf Eiffel and contemporaries. (Eiffel's skill in ironwork is, of course, most famously exhibited in his design of the Eiffel Tower in Paris.) A particularly beautiful display of his skill is the Maria Pia Railroad Bridge, which spans the Douro River, connecting Porto and Vila Nova de Gaia, Portugal. Built in 1877, it was the longest single-arch span in the world at the time. Nine years later and one kilometer up the Douro River, a protégé of Eiffel's, Théophile Seyrig, took the title with the beautiful Dom Luis I Bridge.

Special mention must be made of the Brooklyn Bridge. Designed by the great German engineer, John Roebling (who died before construction began) the bridge was made possible by Roebling's then-novel mastery of cable suspension. This was used to lift the roadway *from above* and then transfer the load to massive towers on opposite ends of the bridge. Building those towers took a terrible toll in human life. Many workers suffered from so-called "caisson's disease," which we now know as the bends. This resulted from working in highly pressurized containers, i.e. caissons, at the bottom of the East River, and then rising too quickly to the surface. Such was the fate of chief engineer, Washington Roebling, son of John. After Washington's incapacitation, his wife, Emily Warren Roebling, took over the chief engineer's role, in all but title, and completed the project in 1883.

Two other stupendously long bridges have fascinated me since childhood. I remember reading about Henry Flagler's railroad bridge of 1912 in a *Weekly Reader*. The bridge ran for 113 miles, connecting 40 Florida Keys, from Key Largo to Key West. Today, the rebuilt bridge is now a part of U.S. Route 1. I am also awestruck by the Chesapeake Bay Bridge-Tunnel, which connects Virginia's Tidewater Region and Eastern Shore. It is 17.8 miles long, has two high-span bridges, two mile-long underwater tunnels, and four artificial islands.

I'll close this section with a look at the Bridge over the New River Gorge in West Virginia (Figure 5). Every third Saturday in October is declared to be "Bridge Day" when pedestrians can stroll the bridge, the third tallest in the U.S., and watch hang-gliders, bungee jumpers, rappelers, and more. The image of the bridge was chosen for the reverse of the West Virginia quarter.



Figure 5. The New River Gorge Bridge near Fayetteville, West Virginia, May 10, 2015. Inset: West Virginia state quarter. Photo: Richard C. Benson



Figure 6. The Little Black Church, Búðir, Iceland, September 8, 2024. Photo: Richard C. Benson

The 2000s: Places of Worship are Awesome

As in the previous section, I will take some license and make observations on places of worship that I have seen and photographed, but not all of them will be from the decade of the 2000s. I start by noting that churches, cathedrals, temples, mosques, etc. are most purposefully designed to put the congregant or visitor in awe.

Consider some of the great cathedrals of the 12th and 13th centuries. Construction began on the Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris in 1163, Saint Patrick's Cathedral in Dublin in 1191, and the Cologne Cathedral in Köln in 1248. These enormously tall buildings are in many ways more impressive from the *inside* than the outside. By mastering the use of arches, buttresses, shells (doubly-curved, in contrast to an arch) the ceiling could be placed *many* stories above the floor. Natural light would come through stained-glass windows, themselves works of art.

Other senses can be brought into play. Outside of the Sensoji Buddhist Temple in the Asakusa District of Tokyo is an incense burner called a Jokoro. The purpose is for the visitor to waft the smoke over their heads in order to clear their minds. At the Byodo-In Buddhist Temple in Oahu, Hawaii, there is a bell that visitors can ring. As with the Jokoro, the purpose of the bell is to use the lingering reverberations to clear one's mind and bring peace.

In so many of these places of worship, an organ and/or a carillon plays a central role. The Catedral de Murcia in Murcia, Spain has a 4,000-pipe organ, and a campanile with 25 bells, each one named. The acoustically lively interior of the Murcia Cathedral creates a fabulous environment for the organ but makes it difficult to follow what a speaker is saying. Most, I expect, would find that an acceptable tradeoff.

In many places of worship, people are honored. At the Saint Louis Cathedral in New Orleans, King Louis IX of France is depicted in a stained-glass window. Similarly, the Cathedral of Saint Francis of Assisi in Santa Fe depicts its namesake in a stained-glass window. Statues in Dublin's Saint Patrick's Cathedral include holy figures, like Saint Patrick, but also citizens of the city, including the author Jonathan Swift and the brewer, Benjamin Lee Guiness.

By contrast, Islamic mosques—I have visited three in Cairo and others elsewhere—do *not* depict the human form, the purpose being to discourage idolatry. Rather, beautiful, intricate designs are created through geometric patterns, floral images and calligraphy.

To finish this section, I will mention the exquisitely simple Little Black Church in Budir, Iceland (Figure 6). No carillon, no flying buttresses, but nevertheless a mesmerizing sight. The church is painted with pitch, similar to the coatings used on the hulls of ships, which helps protect from the harsh seaside elements. The church is literally pitch-black.

The 2010s: Signature Engineering at Virginia Tech

The Virginia Tech campus is a beautiful place. As with my prior employer, Penn State, Virginia Tech is a land grant university. The "A&Ms," with their historical focus on "Agriculture and Mechanics," tend to do an especially good job with landscape architecture. Thus, we find one of the most extensive and beautiful groves of elm trees at Penn State, and a campus at Virginia Tech that *Condé Nast Traveler* described in 2025 as one of the most beautiful in the United States. Further, Virginia Tech, in the heart of the Blue Ridge Mountains, has a setting that I have heard described by more than one national reporter as "achingly beautiful."

The architecture of Virginia Tech is also striking. By resolution of the Board of Visitors, every major building must be in a collegiate Gothic style and clad in "Hokie Stone," which is a limestone quarried nearby in Southwest Virginia. This is illustrated here by Goodwin Hall, which opened in 2014 (Figure 7). As an interesting side note, our UT Dallas colleague Calvin Jamison was a member of the BOV when the "Hokie Stone" resolution was passed in 2010. Securing funding for the "Signature Engineering Building"—which was the working title for Goodwin Hall before its naming—was a major focus of my eleven years as dean of the Virginia Tech College of Engineering. It required a coordinated, team effort of college personnel working with the Virginia Legislature, prospective donors, and other university personnel to make a reality.

More important than the funding for the building was its design. It would be home to three of the college's departments: Chemical Engineering, Mechanical Engineering, and Engineering Education. UT Dallas' dean of engineering, Stephanie Adams, once had her office in Goodwin Hall, when she served as the head of the Department of Engineering Education.

I also wanted the Signature Engineering Building to be a "living laboratory." By that, I don't mean a place where laboratories were located—you'll find that everywhere—but rather a place where the building *itself* was instrumented for measurement and analysis. I had been inspired by a visit to the University of Colorado, Boulder, where I toured the Integrated Teaching and Learning Laboratory (ITLL). There I saw utility lines, wiring, etc., deliberately exposed so that CU engineering students could use the building for experimentation.

We gave Goodwin Hall easily accessed instrumentation, similar to the ITLL, but with one marvelous new twist. Two mechanical engineering faculty members, Pablo Tarazaga and Mary Kasarda, had the brilliant idea to embed 241 accelerometers throughout the building so that it would have exceptional sensitivity to all structural dynamics. If someone walked softly down the third-floor corridor on the south side of Goodwin Hall, the building knew. If a minor temblor passed through the New River Valley, the building knew. If the cannon went off at Lane Stadium after a Virginia Tech touchdown, the building knew. And, thus, by design and extension, Virginia Tech students knew. I'd call that beautiful engineering.



Figure 7. Goodwin Hall at Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, Virginia.
May 16, 2016. Photo: Richard C. Benson



Figure 8. The Edith and Peter O'Donnell Jr. Athenaeum, UT Dallas,
June 11, 2026. Photo: Richard C. Benson

The 2020s: The Beautiful UT Dallas Campus

I come, at last, to my final act as a university administrator. It was my privilege to serve as president of The University of Texas at Dallas from 2016 to 2025. As members of the campus community know, UT Dallas has a history unlike any other major American university. Founded in 1961 by leaders of Texas Instruments, the small, private Graduate Research Center of the Southwest, eventually was made a part of The University of Texas System in 1969. Thus was born The University of Texas at Dallas.

Explosive growth followed, with undergraduate programs added in 1975, the first freshmen arriving in 1990, and the first residence halls built in 2008. Throughout, the university made its reputation through the excellence of its STEM programs—Science, Technology, Engineering, Math and Management. (We have two Ms at UT Dallas.) Alas, UT Dallas also made its reputation as a rather stark campus, with concrete everywhere and hardly a tree to be seen.

This all started to change dramatically in 2008 when led by President David Daniel and Vice President Calvin Jamison, and with generous funding from Margaret McDermott, ground was broken on the Campus Landscape Enhancement Project. The world's most renowned landscape architect, Peter Walker, did the design. The beautiful magnolia trees and pools along the Margaret McDermott Mall are now the defining elements of UT Dallas' transformation into one of the nation's most beautiful campuses.

In my 2016 inauguration address, I declared that we would put the A for Arts into STEM to make UT Dallas a STEAM university … and we did! In addition to the programmatic elements, such as the founding of the Bass School of Arts, Humanities, and Technology, we have developed a new arts and performance district. Known collectively as the Edith and Peter O'Donnell Jr. Athenaeum, the district follows from the vision of several giants in UT Dallas history, most notably Rick Brettell, founding director of the Edith O'Donnell Institute for Art History, and Hobson Wildenthal, UT Dallas' long-serving provost. Through their efforts, the university acquired the exquisite Crow Museum of Asian Art, which is the centerpiece of the first building of the Athenaeum (Figure 8). Phase I opened in 2024. The Dallas Museum of Art also maintains a presence in Phase I.

Phase II of the Athenaeum will be devoted to the performing arts. It is under construction now, and, when opened in 2027, will feature a 680-seat concert hall. Phase III is in preliminary design and will, like Phase I, be devoted to displaying UT Dallas' growing collection of art objects.

In my last year as UT Dallas president, I was often asked what I thought my legacy would be. While I am proud of the many UTD advancements on my "watch," the most enduring legacy will be UT Dallas' rise to prominence in the arts.

Final Thought

From steam engines to a great STEAM university, I have lived a life surrounded by great beauty. Beauty in the natural world, of course—and another one of my photographic interests—but also a beauty born of the creativity of engineers. To all those designers of bridges, canals, aqueducts, trains, rockets, computers, art galleries, concert halls, musical instruments, and places of worship, thank you! I have not finished visiting your inspirational works of art. A

The Curious Case of a Roman God on a U.S. Coin

Robert J. Stern

Coins capture how the nation that made them wants to present itself to other nations and its own people. In this way, they provide unique insights. Because the United States has evolved tremendously over its 250-year history, it is not surprising that its coinage has evolved with it. This essay explores a remarkable episode in this evolution by focusing on the obverses of coins introduced between 1907 and 1916, ending with one of the most curious of all U.S. coins: the Mercury dime of 1916-1945.[1]

Since the first United States coins were minted in 1792, the country's coinage has gone through three main representational stages, which overlapped with each other in time. The first stage focused on representing American aspirations by depicting a woman to represent liberty; this episode lasted 115 years.[2] The second, largely built on the Lady Liberty theme but with some interesting exceptions, began in 1907 and ended in 1948. The third stage emphasized profiles of U.S. presidents on coins, beginning in 1909 and continuing today. Of these, the second stage was by far the most creative, and is the focus of this essay; it was triggered by one of the U.S.'s most energetic presidents, Theodore Roosevelt (1858-1919).

Roosevelt, in office from 1901 to 1909, was one of the most consequential presidents, earning a place with Washington, Jefferson and Lincoln on Mount Rushmore. Among his many initiatives was a keen interest in transforming and invigorating U.S. coins in the early 1900s. To Roosevelt, a country's coins should reflect its principles and status. He admired Ancient Greek coins, such as the Athenian Owl Tetradrachm, and wondered why the coins of his own country couldn't reflect such a great level of artistry (Figure 1). One day, after visiting the Smithsonian Institution's collection of Ancient Greek coinage, Roosevelt was inspired to send a letter to Treasury Secretary Leslie Shaw that ultimately ushered in a new age of American coinage:

> *I think our coinage is artistically of atrocious hideousness. Would it be possible, without asking permission of Congress, to employ a man like Saint-Gaudens to give us a coinage that would have some beauty?*[3]

1 The obverses (heads) of coins, more so than their reverses (tails), capture this evolution, and so are emphasized here.

2 Much of this evolution is captured in two earlier essays in this journal: Robert J. Stern, "The First Motto on United States Coins: 'Liberty – Parent of Science and Industry,'" *Athenaeum Review* 4 (summer 2020), pp. 109-115, athenaeumreview.org/essay/the-first-motto-on-united-states-coins-liberty-parent-of-science-and-industry, and Robert J. Stern, "The Evolution and Extinction of Lady Liberty," *Atheneum Review* 6 (summer 2021), pp. 69-80, athenaeumreview.org/essay/the-evolution-and-extinction-of-lady-liberty.

3 December 27, 1904; www.theodorerooseveltcenter.org/digital-library/0190583.



Figure 1. *Left*: Silver tetradrachm coin depicting the owl of Athena (c. 480–420 BC). The inscription "ΑΘΕ" is an abbreviation of ΑΘΗΝΑΙΩΝ, which may be translated as "of the Athenians". *Center and right*: Medallion for 1905 inauguration of President Theodore Roosevelt, designed by Augustus Saint-Gaudens. Notice use of Roman numerals for the year, like that of the 1907 $20 gold coin. Saint-Gaudens' design of this medallion helped trigger the 1907-1916 transformation of US coins. Photos: Smithsonian Institution and Wikimedia/ Creative Commons.



Figure 2. Top: Saint-Gaudens' $20 gold piece, obverse (left) and reverse (right). Bottom, from left to right: 1859 Indian head penny, 1907 $10 gold coin (Eagle),1908 $5 gold coin (Half Eagle), and 1908 $2.5 gold coin (Quarter Eagle). Notice the change in faces from young Caucasian woman on earlier designs to Native Americans on later coins. Photos: Wikipedia/ Creative Commons.

Enter Augustus Saint-Gaudens (1848-1907), an Irish immigrant, Roosevelt family friend and accomplished sculptor who would go on to design the ten- and twenty-dollar gold pieces (Figure 1). Roosevelt had been very pleased with Saint-Gaudens' efforts on his 1905 inauguration medallion and admired many of his sculptures (Figure 1). During a dinner at the White House in 1905, he asked Saint-Gaudens if he would be interested in creating new U.S. coins. The sculptor agreed to craft designs for the one-cent coin and the ten-dollar (eagle) and twenty-dollar (double eagle) gold coins. To avoid seeking Congressional approval, Roosevelt planned to get the designs approved by the U.S. mint before Congress reconvened in December 1907. Unfortunately, Saint-Gaudens was slowly dying of colon cancer, hindering progress. The one-cent project was abandoned and Saint-Gaudens concentrated on the gold coins. After Saint-Gaudens died in November 1907, his assistant Henry Hering finished the project, the same month that the new gold coins were released.

This was only the beginning of Roosevelt's plan, and it had mixed results, largely because of the sculptor's declining health. The twenty-dollar gold coin was hailed by Roosevelt and others as a masterpiece, and is widely regarded today as one of the most beautiful American coins ever made (Figure 2). A full figure representing Liberty strides toward the viewer, the torch of liberty raised in her right hand and the olive branch of peace grasped in her left. Wind blows her long hair and her robes billow. One sandaled foot rests on a rock while the sun rises over the Capitol dome behind her. The reverse shows an eagle in flight over a blazing sun. The beautiful Double Eagle may be the sculptor's best work, all the more remarkable because he made it as he painfully neared the end of his life.

In contrast, the ten-dollar gold coin was a hideous throwback, especially the obverse, dominated by the face of a young Caucasian woman in a feathered headdress with "Liberty" emblazoned on it. Although this was designed by the dying Saint-Gaudens, it is a derivative re-creation of the 1859 U.S. cent, where a similar young Caucasian woman posed as a Native American in a headdress (Figure 2). The symbology of this design is hard to mistake today—the Caucasian replacing the Native American in the numismatic equivalent of vaudeville's blackface. One wonders what a healthy Saint-Gaudens would have created.

As the revolution started by Roosevelt and Saint-Gaudens continued, Boston sculptor Bela Lyon Pratt redesigned the five-dollar (half eagle) and two-and-a-half-dollar (quarter eagle) gold coins, which appeared in 1908 (Figure 2). Superficially, these look like the ten-dollar coin, but a closer look shows that the young woman has been replaced by an unmistakable Native American. These coins shocked some people. In 1970, Cornelius Vermeule dismissed complaints made in 1908 that the Indian was too thin: "the Indian is far from emaciated, and the coins show more imagination and daring of design than almost any other issue in American history."

What made the designers of these coins change whose head the feathered headdress rested on? Guilt may be part of the answer. It is noteworthy that the new ten-dollar coin entered circulation on November 4, 1907, a few days before the 46th state, Oklahoma, was admitted to the Union on November 16. Oklahoma had been Indian Territory, where Native Americans were sequestered after being uprooted from other parts of the U.S., but even this territory had been largely usurped by the white man. The more authentic profile appeared in 1908, not long after Indian Territory was no more. Did the conscious or subconscious recognition that U.S. treatment of Native Americans was deeply wrong motivate Pratt to represent them for the first time on a coin?

The U.S. numismatic revolution continued in 1909 with the one-cent coin, the last of the three coins that Roosevelt and Saint-Gaudens



Figure 3. The 1913 Indian head/buffalo 5 cent piece. The phrase "In God We Trust" is notably missing. Photos: Wikimedia/ Creative Commons.

had discussed at their dinner. This was also the first coin honoring a president: the Lincoln penny. Roosevelt, who ended his presidency that year, considered Lincoln to be the savior of the Union and the greatest Republican president. He ordered the new coin to be designed by New York medalist Victor David Brenner, and produced to commemorate Lincoln's 100th birthday in 1909. The last Lincoln penny was minted in 2025, a run of 116 years, by far the longest tenure of any U.S. coin.

Next came the stunning redesign of the five-cent piece by the American sculptor James Earle Fraser, put into circulation in 1913. It is sometimes called the Indian Head or Buffalo nickel and was uniquely realistic, with an obverse featuring a right-facing profile of an unmistakable Native American wearing pigtails and two feathers (Figure 3). Compare this profile with those of Native Americans on the half Eagle and quarter Eagle; I find Fraser's to be vastly better (Figure 2 and 3). The reverse featured an American Bison, or buffalo, standing in profile.

This was the only coin that acknowledged the native people and the wildlife that had been all but obliterated by the young nation's westward expansion, and can be seen as an expression of nostalgia or apology. The dire plight of Native Americans has already been mentioned, and the buffalo also suffered terribly at the hands of the growing nation. This majestic animal was almost wiped out by wanton "sport" killings by Caucasians, with its population reaching a nadir in the late 19th century of less than 1000 individuals. This is the only twentieth-century coin to lack the phrase "In God We Trust," a very appropriate omission on a coin featuring the two greatest victims of U.S. westward expansion.

The coinage transformation was almost completed in 1916 with the introduction of the Walking Liberty half-dollar, the Standing Liberty quarter dollar and the Mercury dime (Figure 4).[4] The dime and half dollar were designed by Adolf Weinman (1870-1952) whereas the quarter dollar was the work of

4 The coinage transformation finished with the introduction of the "Peace" silver dollar in 1921 but this design, featuring a bust of a young woman with a spiked crown, is anticlimactic, largely a throwback to 19th century U.S. designs. The one interesting innovation is the word "Peace" on the reverse, acknowledging the end of World War I.



Figure 4. The 1916 silver coins, obverse on left, reverse on right. "Walking Liberty" half dollar (top), "Standing Liberty" quarter dollar (center) and "Mercury" dime (bottom). Photos: Wikimedia/Creative Commons.

Hermon Atkins MacNeil (1866-1947). Let's discuss the new fifty-cent piece first, because it was clearly inspired by Saint-Gaudens' double eagle. Weinman was a German immigrant who worked for Saint-Gaudens for nine years, so he knew the sculptor's work intimately. He knew that Saint-Gaudens had been inspired by the work of French medalist Louis-Oscar Roty (1846-1911), especially the latter's soft modeling, flowing figures, integrated lettering, and rejection of neoclassical stiffness. Roty's pioneering design "*La Semeuse*" (the sower) went into circulation on the fifty-centime and one- and two-franc coins in 1897 and 1898, just before Roosevelt became president and started discussing beautifying U.S. coins with Saint-Gaudens (Figure 5). Saint-Gaudens followed Roty's lead and Weinman did so, too.

The coins in Figure 5 can be viewed as three studies of a draped young woman vigorously striding across a landscape, her arms and hands in motion. They make up a perhaps unintended joint study by three accomplished sculptor-medalists. In 1897, Roty's *La Semeuse* is walking away from us. Ten years later, St. Gaudens' Lady Liberty is walking at us or standing before us. Nine years after that, Weinman's Walking Liberty is striding across in front of us. Three different and beautiful views of a strong young woman outdoors, made by three outstanding artists over two decades—remarkable!

Which of these three coins do you prefer? All are beautiful; in all three, the young women are in natural settings, with the rising or setting sun low in the sky. In all three, the women are draped in loose robes that in the two American versions seem dangerously long. Roty's and Weinman's women wear identical Liberty or Phrygian caps; Roty's and St. Gaudens' versions highlight their long hair, blowing in a strong wind.[5] I think Weinman's Walking Liberty half dollar is the best of the three; do you agree?

Giving Roty credit for having stunningly executed his inspiration, let's compare the two American versions. Both sport sandals and olive branches, but the torch is gone from Weinman's version. Instead, her outstretched right arm and two fingers beckon to someone or something unseen. Her hair is much shorter, hidden beneath her cap. She is clothed in the U.S. flag, its stars billowing behind while the striped part of the flag serves as her robe. Weinman's reverse is also stunning, with a fierce, rampant eagle striding across a rocky mountain perch, adorned by a stunted pine tree; eagle wings unfolding in preparation for flight (Figure 4). This is by far the best representation of the American Eagle on any U.S. coin or other official representation.

Considered together, both sides of Weinman's half dollar make a confident, assertive statement about how the United States regarded itself as an increasingly powerful nation, poised to dominate the world in the 20th century. This and Saint-Gaudens' prequel are the only American coins to use art to predict the nation's trajectory, all the more remarkable because the prediction came true, and because these two are the most inspired and most beautiful of all U.S. coins.

MacNeil's quarter dollar suffers by comparison with Weinman's masterpiece. Its imagery is militaristic, albeit defensive. Lady Liberty in very loose robes faces right (heraldic east) in the direction of the European war, and her shield (with the U.S. seal) faces right as well. She holds an olive branch as she strides through an opening in a low wall. MacNeil explained that this depicted the nation "stepping forward in… the defense of peace as her ultimate goal," an obvious reference to U.S. attitudes about World War I, which it would enter the following year.

This brings us to Weinman's ten-cent piece, the coin of this essay's title (Figure 4). The obverse features a young person—who could be male or female—wearing a Phrygian cap that sprouts wings. This is a radical new

5 See Stern, "The Evolution and Extinction of Lady Liberty," for a discussion of this cap's significance.



Figure 5. Evolution of Weinman's Walking Liberty half dollar. Left to right: Charlotte Ragot, model posing for "*La Semeuse*"; Roty's 1897 1-franc coin "*La Semeuse*"; Saint-Gaudens' 1907 $20 gold coin; Weinman's 1916 half-dollar. Photos: Wikimedia/ Creative Commons



Figure 6. Mercury and fasces. From left to right: Mercury portrayed on a bronze Roman coin (215–211 BC); Mercurius by Artus Quellinus the Elder, mid-17th century (note wings on head like those on Weinman's dime (Figure 5); rostrum and well of US House of Representatives, flanked by two fasces, symbols of government and power; close-up of one of the congressional fasces; detail of fasces on reverse of Weinman's dime. Photos: Wikimedia/Creative Commons

representation of Liberty, never envisaged before. According to Vermeule, Weinman considered the winged cap to symbolize "liberty of thought."[6] But the similarity of the image on the dime to the Roman god Mercury (the Greek god Hermes) is compelling, all the more so because wings appear in no other representation of Liberty, and wings on the god's ankles or head are invariable identifiers of Mercury (compare Figures 5 and 6).

Mercury was the Roman god of commerce, communication, travelers, and trickery—none of these are obviously related to Liberty, so Weinman's choice is puzzling. But on second thought, maybe they are partial synonyms for Liberty. The Founding Fathers knew that commerce is a central aspect of liberty; that's why our nation's motto on the first U.S. coins in 1792 was "Liberty: Parent of Science and Industry."[7] Communication is also central to Liberty, as made clear by the Constitution's First Amendment: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances." Travel—the freedom to move, to go freely—is also clearly implicit in Liberty.

6 Vermeule, C. (1971) *Numismatic Art in America*. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press

7 See Stern, "The First Motto on United States Coins: 'Liberty – Parent of Science and Industry.'"

Commerce, communication and travel are obviously shared interests of Lady Liberty and Mercury, but what about trickery? Liberty likes to present herself as stern, sober, and immune to shenanigans—but the truth is, she has a soft spot for trickery. From revolutionaries pretending to be Mohawks at the Boston Tea Party to late-night TV hosts ridiculing politicians, humor, satire and trickery have always been part of liberty. Comedy is liberty's pressure valve: satire pricks pomposity, parody deflates tyrants, and a well-timed hoax can expose truths that solemn speeches cannot. Of course, deception can also shackle freedom when it becomes disinformation—but in its mischievous, truth-revealing form, trickery inspires the jester, licensed to mock kings, puncture dogma, and remind the powerful that their high perches wobble on banana peels. So maybe, given his fourfold job description Mercury is an appropriate representation of Liberty?

Mercury is not the only Roman reference on Weinman's dime. The reverse features the Roman symbol of government and law, the fasces. This is a bound bundle of wooden rods, often including an axe with its blade emerging. It was originally a symbol of the pre-Roman Etruscan civilization: the bundling of thin, easily broken rods tied into a thick column becomes much harder to break, symbolizing the strength of nations. The term "fascism" is derived from it because Mussolini's party called themselves "*fascisti*" after the symbol, beginning in 1919. Today we link the symbol with the ideology of fascism, but there was no such connotation in 1916 when Weinman designed his dime. In fact, the Founding Fathers had consciously cultivated an association with Republican Rome during the nation's early years. The fasces displayed behind the Speaker's podium in the House of Representatives are an enduring symbol of that association, a visual representation of the original national slogan "E Pluribus Unum" (Out of many, one; Figure 6). Weinman adopted this symbol for the reverse of his dime.

I hope you have enjoyed and learned from this essay. I am nostalgic for the coins of this era, especially the high level of representational art they depict. For better or worse, coins and even paper currency are almost obsolete, increasingly replaced by credit cards, Apple Pay and Venmo. This may be a good thing, because US coins unimaginatively celebrate the U.S. presidency, with a different famous deceased president on the obverse of each denomination. But it is good to contemplate a time, not so long ago, when coins were much more important and when more creative representations of our nation graced them. A

Know Self

Buddhist Lessons from an American Museum

Robert E. Gordon

Realms of the Dharma: Buddhist Art Across Asia
May 11, 2025 to July 12, 2026
Los Angeles County Museum of Art

Realms of the Dharma takes its viewers on an aesthetic journey through time and space. It is a terrestrial trek—from South and Southeast Asia to Nepal, Tibet, China, Korea, and Japan—that has metaphysical implications. The exhibition's wide-ranging scope succeeds in illuminating the diversity of Buddhist artistic expression in Asia. Museumgoers learn that "Buddhism" does not denote a singular belief system, but rather a variety of cultural traditions, religious expressions, and spiritual paths. The beautifully crafted environment houses some of the most striking artworks the religion has to offer. Its spatial and luminescent arrangements showcase the various Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, mandalas, and objects large and small from LACMA's permanent collection (with some loans) in an exquisite fashion. The rooms are as full of life and beauty as they are spacious and erudite, inviting one to contemplate, speculate, and even venerate. Within its curated setting, the exhibition both "thinks and dreams at the same time," as Lokesh Chandra once wrote about the relationship between time, space, and architecture.[1]

In this regard, I would like to explore what else the exhibition is telling or doing to us. Museums are institutions of power as well as knowledge. And the strength of the show ultimately rests on the ideas its artifacts aesthetically communicate. For because the exhibition is something presented to the public for viewing, and not simply an illustrated academic paper, we should consider what the general public might take away from the given experience. How can the average American viewer understand the images, terms, and faces they encounter while walking through the exhibit?

1 Lokesh Chandra, *Cultural Horizons of India: Studies in Tantra and Buddhism, Art and Archaeology, Language and Literature, Vol. 1*, ed. Tara Chandrika (New Delhi: International Academy of Indian Culture and Aditya Prakashan, 1990), 9.



Figure 1. Eleven-Headed Avalokiteshvara, 16th century. Central Tibet. Gilt brass inlaid with turquoise and other gemstones; cold gold paste and paint, 30 1/4 x 14 3/4 x 6 7/16 in. (76.8 x 37.46 x 16.35 cm). Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Gift of Harry Kahn, photo © Museum Associates/LACMA

The question is a relevant one, in my experience. When teaching Asian art in the university, I notice a pointed ambivalence towards Buddhist art and the religion's precepts. Some students definitely take an interest, but many others balk at Buddhist concepts such as no-self, cessation, and emptiness. The bodhisattva ideal— particularly the multi-armed versions—often seem too strange or uncouth (some have even told me "evil") to those unfamiliar with the religion's visual history (Figure 1).

While an Asian viewer within the exhibition might feel nostalgic or comforted by the art and objects from their homeland, an uninitiated Westerner is likely to feel bewildered, like a wanderer on an exotic and mysterious expedition. Wall inscriptions help make the experience less esoteric. Yet, these textual islets primarily provide historical context rather than any spiritual insight into the religion.[2] Recognizable terms like karma, rebirth, and nirvana greet viewers as they enter the show. But phrases such as "cultivating mindfulness of the illusion of duality" and "the merging of a sentient being with the void out of which reality emerges" roll off the unsuspecting mind like the water of the flowing river so often used in Buddhist thought as a metaphor for the transience of all phenomena.

Thus, it might be helpful to the Western personality to learn why such an exhibition, as "something presented to the public for viewing," is perfectly in keeping with Buddhism's goal to provide a path to the cessation of karmic rebirth (*nirvana*). This is because, as the essayist and historian of ideas Pankaj Mishra puts it, "The Buddha was, broadly speaking, an empiricist."[3] As best as we can tell from the religion's earliest extant writings, the Buddha ("the Awakened One") was a pragmatist, much as most Americans are generally considered to be. His goal was to improve the lives of those he encountered through his ideas: "He had spoken...of ordinary human experience: of how neither the individual self nor the world is stable, and how human individuals could achieve liberation, nirvana, by freeing themselves from greed, hatred and delusion."[4]

An empiricist takes observation and experience as a primary way to acquire knowledge. While experiencing the various artworks throughout LACMA's exhibition, one cannot help but observe the multiplicity of human figures on display. Buddhist practitioners have relied heavily on the human figure in their artworks since the beginning of the Common Era. In the first instance, therefore, the artifacts tell us that Buddhism is about being human: the human ability to be mindful of our actions and aware of the Buddha's spiritual message.

Whereas Bodhisattvas ("Enlightened Beings"), with their elaborate headdresses and bangles, are meant to appear somewhat otherworldly, images of the Buddha often represent him as humble, human, and of this world as we are (Figure 2). Such depictions of the Buddha show us, through bodily illustration, how meditation can help *us* find transcendental awareness. They tell us that this is something *we* can do as fellow humans, that we too can be Buddhas. In other words, Buddhism tells us something about ourselves.

Indeed, one need not be a monk or recluse to find such self knowledge. The esteemed Buddhist scholar Wapola Rāhula confirms that "However noble and pure Buddhism may be, it would be useless to the masses of mankind if they could not follow it in their daily life in the world of today." And that,

2 Maxwell Votey also makes this observation in his November 14, 2025 review, www.asianart.com/articles/votey/index.html

3 Pankaj Mishra, *An End to Suffering: The Buddha in the World* (New York: Picador, 2005), 28.

4 Ibid, 43-44.



Figure 2. Buddha Shakyamuni, 11th century. Nagapattinam, Tamil Nadu, India. Granulite, 29 1/2 x 14 1/2 x 17 in. (74.93 x 36.83 x 43.18 cm). Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Gift of Mr. Anthony A. Manheim, photo © Museum Associates/LACMA



Figure 3. Buddha Shakyamuni or the Jina Buddha Vairochana, c. 725-750. India, Jammu and Kashmir, Kashmir region. Brass inlaid with silver, 16 x 8 1/2 x 3 5/8 in. (40.64 x 21.59 x 9.2 cm). Los Angeles County Museum of Art, From the Nasli and Alice Heeramaneck Collection, Museum Associates Purchase, photo © Museum Associates/LACMA

The artifacts tell us that Buddhism is about being human: the human ability to be mindful of our actions and aware of the Buddha's spiritual message.

"There are numerous references in Buddhist literature to men and women living ordinary, normal family lives who successfully practiced what the Buddha taught, and realized Nirvāna."[5]

Other artworks show the Buddha preaching his Dharma: the truth and reality that all things are impermanent, even what we think of as permanent and everlasting, like our soul or self. In fact, according to Buddhist thought, what we call the soul or self does not really exist (a doctrine called *anatta*, or "no-self"). This Buddhist precept is probably the most difficult to understand and accept for those in the West, where the presumption of a clearly defined self (as in Descartes' philosophical conclusion, "I think, therefore I am,") is taken as dispositive fact.

Many people in the U.S. first encounter Buddhist thought through the martial arts, whether they know it or not, and therefore in my classes, I introduce the "no-self" concept using the film *Enter the Dragon* (1973). The movie is known for its incredible fighting sequences, and so viewers often miss the profound scene in the beginning where Bruce Lee answers a question from his teacher, who asks: "What are your thoughts when facing an opponent?" To which Lee's character answers, "There is no opponent...because the word 'I' does not exist." The statement comes across as an enigma, since observation verifies it is in fact spoken by someone who *does* exist.

Yet, Lee is teaching us a fundamental Buddhist tenet, just as the various figures do in the LACMA exhibition. Buddhism asks us to think deeply about what we take for granted as real, to "cultivate mindfulness of the illusion of duality." On this view, focusing on the self creates a false mental impression of its permanence that unduly separates things dualistically into "this versus that," which heightens desire and causes suffering (unhappiness, dissatisfaction, struggle). Buddhists believe that such illusory attachments constitute life's basic presupposition. In fact, the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism claim that life is full of suffering stemming from desire and attachment, a reality that can be overcome through various Buddhist practices (the Eight-Fold Path).

Lee goes on to tell his teacher "A good fight is like a small play, but played seriously." The fight here is a metaphor for our struggles against suffering, while "the play" is symbolic of the dramatic action/practices we must earnestly engage in to combat it. This is in fact the purpose and meaning of the entire film/play and its dramatic fighting scenes! Lee says, "a good martial artist" (that is, the Buddhist practitioner) "is not tense but ready, not sleeping, but not dreaming, ready for whatever may come." Here, then, Lee describes precisely what meditation and mindfulness entails. Whether in the filmic, martial, or plastic arts, Buddhist representation exists to illustrate and teach us to free ourselves from the "I" that does not exist. The human figures in the LACMA show—through their assorted poses, hand gestures, and smiles—exhort us to see the ultimate reality of existence the Buddha taught (*dharma*), and to reassure us that liberation from dissatisfaction is available to everyone, regardless of what realm we come from (Figure 3).

5 Walpola Rāhula, *What the Buddha Taught* (New York: Grove Press, 1974), 88-89.

Of course, the stated "realm" of the exhibition is Asia, where the religion began and continues to thrive. The "Great Circle of Buddhism," as leading Buddhist scholars articulate it, maps the religion's historic spread across South Asia and Eastern Eurasia via overland and maritime travel routes.[6] However, the empiricist in us cannot overlook the fact that the museum is located in North America, and that there is a growing Buddhist population emerging in the United States. Large Buddhist temple complexes have been constructed in California and elsewhere, such as the Odiyan Buddhist Retreat Center in Sonoma County, Fo Guang Shan's Hsi Lai Temple in Hacienda Heights, and Chuang Yen Monastery in New York State. Many large-scale Buddhist stupas, like the small votive example in the exhibition (Figure 4), exist and are being constructed all across the U.S., a great majority of which derive from the Tibetan diaspora. These reliquary monuments date back to the very beginnings of Buddhism's history, "which embodied the Buddha's presence and became a site for the visual elaboration of his biography and teachings," as the exhibition catalogue states.[7] Thus, their existence in the United States situates both the Buddha and Buddhist spirituality firmly within the North American continent, suggesting that The Great Circle of Buddhism is expanding in a meaningful way.

The contemporary status of the Buddhist religion and its art is a noticeable lacuna of the LACMA show, but an understandable one, since the exhibition's goal is to survey Asian Buddhism using its impressive collection of art and objects, of which only a small number date from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In terms of the present-day U.S., the popularity and sales associated with the annual Asia Week in New York City suggest that Asian artworks and artifacts in general retain an aesthetic and market appeal in the capitalist West. Historically, since the nineteenth century, the West has looked to the East as an ancient place of spiritual depth and wisdom as a counterpoise to industrialism and an overwhelming techno-scientific materialism. Today, Asian spiritual ideas permeate American culture: yoga, Zen, feng shui, the martial arts, the New Age Movement, and more. This foundation of Asian and Buddhist practices and ideas is part of the meta-sphere of the Los Angeles exhibition.

The point of the above analysis is to demonstrate that, like the Los Angeles exhibition itself, Buddhist art and its lessons have moved beyond the sphere of its Asian origination. The broken circle on the wall surrounding the show's title while entering its galleries tells me that the museum is aware of this as well. This is because Buddhism is a human phenomenon. Its spiritual precepts are applicable to everyone *as* humans. Indeed, the common theme of the artworks in the exhibition is the humanity it puts on display. The distinctive faces and personages one meets while walking through the exhibits—whether Tibetan, Korean, Chinese, Japanese, Thai, Indian, or others—tell us that arbitrary national and terrestrial designations do not matter, that something more fundamental is at work behind their observable forms.

For in the end, the message that the assorted artworks LACMA presents from across time and space transcends their corporeal solidity. In *Enter the Dragon*, after observing an exhibition of Lee's martial abilities, his teacher states, "I see your talents have now gone beyond the mere physical level. Your skills are now at the point of spiritual insight." The key for any museumgoer who visits the *Realms of Dharma* exhibition is to also try to discern the spiritual insights being communicated through its artworks—to come to truly know yourself beyond dualistic delusion by meditating on the Buddhist lessons being didactically and dramatically illustrated.

6 Buddhist Maritime Silk Road - New Media Art Exhibition, Fo Guang Shan Buddha Museum, Kaohsiung, Taiwan, www.fgsbmc.org.tw/maritime/en-bmsr.html

7 Stephen Little and Tushara Bindu Gude, *Realms of the Dharma: Buddhist Art Across Asia* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2025), 63.



Figure 4. Votive stupa, 2nd century. Pakistan, Gandhara region. Gray schist, 5 7/8 x 3 1/2 in. (14.92 x 8.89 cm). Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Indian Art Special Purpose Fund, photo © Museum Associates/LACMA



Figure 5. Pensive Bodhisattva, c. 200-300. Pakistan, Gandhara region. Gray schist, 22 x 11 x 6 1/4 in. (55.88 x 27.94 x 15.88 cm). Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Gift of Henry and Ruth Trubner in honor of the museum's twenty-fifth anniversary and to honor Dr. Pratapaditya Pal, photo © Museum Associates/LACMA

One of my favorite themes within Buddhist art is the Pensive Bodhisattva, a subject found across the different Asian traditions, particularly Korean (Figure 5). In the version on display in the exhibition, the enlightened being points to his mind, the site of enlightenment, as he contemplates and reflects. It is a metaphysical lesson in human form. A detail of this artwork is shown as the very first image in the exhibition catalogue, which lets us know what, where, and who the curators believe is the ultimate goal of the artifacts being presented for viewing. This transcendent being not only points to his mind—counseling us to be diligent in our thoughts and actions—but as a human ideal he is in fact pointing to any person who has taken the time to observe him. His physical human form is simply an artifice or pretense, just like the "I" to which we tend to cling but does not really exist.

The Pensive Bodhisattva is quite often associated with the Buddha Maitreya, the future Buddha to Come, as Buddhists believe that the historical Buddha of our time (Siddhartha Gautama) is just one of many Buddhas that emerge in different eons to teach humanity the Truth, Law, and Ultimate Reality (*dharma*). But as a representation of the future, the Pensive Bodhisattva communicates the potential enlightened future that we all have within us as sentient beings, as the wall inscription states at the entrance of the exhibition: the cessation of our inherent suffering, and the "merging of our being with the void out of which reality emerges" (*nirvana*). A

Not Just a Neutral Container

David Carrier

Marcel Duchamp
Museum of Modern Art, New York
April 12 to August 22, 2026

When MoMA presented a major Marcel Duchamp exhibition in 1973, the catalogue (as I remember well) noted that he had influenced many otherwise varied younger artists. In a belated response to his early readymades (which originally appeared in 1917, but only attracted attention in the 1960s), Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg found his work of singular importance. (Duchamp had died in 1968, having met and befriended the younger artists.) And it was possible to relate his dealings with commodification and artistic multiples to the concerns of Andy Warhol. That Warhol's first pop art exhibition, in L.A., came at the same moment as Duchamp's first museum retrospective, thus allowing the two artists to meet, seemed singularly suggestive timing. The era of Abstract Expressionism was over, and so we art writers were eager to discern what was coming next.

Now, however, the world has changed drastically, with a new focus on gender, race and multiculturalism; and those concerns have little, it seems, to do with Duchamp. And so, when I saw the MoMA announcement for this major retrospective, I wondered what there possibly was new to say about Duchamp. After all, he is another white male artist. Duchamp's oeuvre is established, his biography has been written, and his aesthetic has become an academic subject. His moment, so it seemed to me, had passed. Walking through this exhibition reinforced that worry. Once you have quickly glanced at a readymade, you've seen it—Duchamp is not Matisse, he is not concerned with contemplation. I understand, of course, that MoMA wants to introduce him to a new, young audience. But I was not excited until I read the conclusion of the catalogue essay, "Duchamp and the Museum."



Installation view of *Marcel Duchamp* on view at The Museum of Modern Art, New York, from April 12 through August 22, 2026. Photo by Jonathan Dorado © The Museum of Modern Art, New York



Installation view of *Marcel Duchamp* on view at The Museum of Modern Art, New York, from April 12 through August 22, 2026. Photo by Jonathan Dorado © The Museum of Modern Art, New York

A real showstopper, it changed everything. Often an outstanding catalogue illuminates an exhibition, revealing significant visual details that might otherwise go unnoticed. But I cannot recall a prior experience in which a catalogue essay transformed completely and almost instantly the way that I judged a large exhibition as happened to me sitting in the cafe at MoMA.

To explain why this essay is very important I need to quickly reconstruct Duchamp's now familiar basic concerns. By presenting banal utensils as works of art, the readymades raised a deep, not easy to resolve question: what is an artwork? Traditional definitions of art focused on representational or expressive qualities. A Nicolas Poussin represents its subject, and a Jackson Pollock abstraction is expressive. But a urinal or a bottle rack doesn't do that. And since they are not obviously distinctive in these ways, philosophers need to explain why these objects are artworks.

The urinal, a plumbing fixture, is physically identical with the readymade. And so what follows is that the physical qualities cannot make *Fountain* an artwork. We need to look, then, at its institutional setting. *Fountain* is an artwork because it is displayed in the museum, where it is compared to other, traditional works of art. That argument in familiar. But the catalogue introduces a number of subtle additional claims. Duchamp made copies of some readymades. So, too, with his authorization, did various curators. Because some of Duchamp's original readymades no longer exist, photographs had to be used to make replicas. And sometimes he signed these replicas. Also, copies were made when institutions wanted to own readymades. This last procedure, in particular, seems very strange. The Met cannot add some Pieros to its collection by having replicas made. A replica of a Piero della Francesca painting, however perfect visually, is just a forgery. But these replicas of the readymades that passed through Duchamp's hands or the curators were accepted as full fledged works of art, no questions asked. How far, then, can this process go? If you or I showed up at MoMA with a urinal, I don't think that plumbing fixture would be accepted as an artwork. But I am not sure how to explain why Arturo Schwartz or other curators could add readymades, while you or I cannot. What implicit rules govern this process? Only an ordained priest can conduct a mass. What authority, by analogy, permits some curators to identify readymades? That question is not easy to answer.

To understand what is going on, we need to take seriously the title of the MoMA essay, "Duchamp and the Museum." We value museums because they contain genuine original works of art. This is why the readymades were so challenging. We need to understand how those ordinary utilitarian artifacts could also (at the same time) be artworks. What the readymades achieved was

> destabilizing the very system of museum value, aesthetic autonomy, authenticity, and originality, and by engaging the industrialization of culture that was being, at the same time, denounced by artists and critics alike.

Traditionally, a painting was a unique object, made by applying a long sequence of brushstrokes of pigment. But the readymades, which are mechanically produced artifacts, break with that way of thinking. Urinals are mass-produced. And at the same time they can be works of art. The critical question then, if I understand this reconstruction of Duchamp's thinking, is to allow readymades to enter the museum while still preserving that structure of the art museum, which isolates artworks from the world at large.

> By confronting institutions with his replicas of replicas and editions of editions, Duchamp flooded the circuits of the museum, rerouting its definition of form and authenticity and authorship and value.

The aim of his radical rethinking of the very nature of art was thus to preserve the museum in our age of mechanical reproduction. His challenge to the museum, as the curators say in a concise summary of their thesis, is

> inseparable from his challenge to the very meaning and function of art. And his provocations and transformations took the modern museum as their arena.

I began this by asking why we need a new Duchamp exhibition. Now we are prepared to answer that question. We need this show because it has taken this long to understand the truly radical implications of Duchamp's visual thinking— to grasp the ways that his concern was to transform not only the nature of the artwork, but also the institutions that house artworks, art museums. The art museum is not just a neutral container for art, but a structure that is modified when new forms of art are introduced.

What then is to be done now? Answers to that question lie still in the future. But we can already see that MoMA, so it turns out, was right to think that there is indeed something new to say about Duchamp. ▲

Quotations are from the catalogue: *Marcel Duchamp*, by Matthew Affron, Michelle E. Kuo and Ann Temkin, with Danielle Cooke, Alexandra Drexelius, Helena Klevorn and Jullia Vázquez (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2026).



LITERARY LIVES

Arthur Schnitzler, Jordan Castro, and The Literature of Masculinity

Sean Hooks

Early this year, I came across a conversation between the novelists Jonathan Lethem and Ben Markovits. Now in his sixties and a venerated member of a cohort of American writers who grappled with masculinity via pop culture, genre-bending, comic books, and cartoons, Lethem was grouped with Michael Chabon and David Foster Wallace as defining members of Gen X lit, educated and autodidactic philosoph-fictionauts whose postmodern, metafictional works interrogate how cultural forces shape identity. Markovits, one of *Granta*'s best young British novelists in 2013 and a Booker Prize nominee in 2025, practiced historical fiction (about manhood) for much of his career, in works such as *The Syme Papers* (2004) and a trilogy inspired by the life of Lord Byron.[1] The two authors concurred that historical fiction is perceived as a backwater genre of middlebrow status. Markovits said, "Even though obviously the stuff that happens in the past is relevant today, it feels a little like an averting of your gaze."

I've been trying not to avert my gaze, to seriously parse ideas about masculinity in fiction, to think about the inclusion (or marginalization) of the male writer in our present-day literary scene. This banter amongst the chattering classes often imports the word "crisis," whether it's Mary Gaitskill expressing empathy for incels or David Szalay, the reigning Booker winner (for *Flesh*, a "book about maleness") giving a talk at the Dallas Museum of Art which promotes his having "wielded his astute handling of contemporary masculinity." *Flesh* also recently won the yearly *The Morning News* "Tournament of Books," in a closely contested vote over Australian writer Vijay Khurana's *The Passenger Seat*, a novel about two alienated small-town teen males who descend into ideological masculinity rituals on a road trip that turns into a murder spree (inspired by a 2019 murder spree in northern British Columbia). The jacket copy describes it as "a searing examination of male friendship and masculinity in an age of toxic loneliness." Khurana's fellow Aussie, director Justin Kurzel, chronicles male gunge and rot in films like *Nitram* and *Snowtown*, while masculinity in letters now goes incessantly amateur-litigation mode on Substack and other social platforms, where one of the most prominent of current-day practitioners of what some call "men's lit" is Jordan Castro.

1 Markovits' "Byron trilogy" is *Imposture* (2007), *A Quiet Adjustment* (2008), and *Childish Loves* (2011).

Proud mantle-taker of a strain of consternation that ranges from Alex Perez and his assertions that muscular writing about what it's like to be a male who isn't from a historically oppressed community (or one who is but doesn't let that define their story) gets short shrift in the publishing marketplace to literary movements like Dimes Square in NYC, publishing imprint Skyhorse Books, and websites skewing centrist or non-MAGA right, such as *Quillette*, *UnHerd*, *Tablet*, and *Compact*, Castro has released two novels in a genre one might call anti-autofiction. Both were published in hardback by indie presses, 2023's *The Novelist* from Soft Skull and 2025's *Muscle Man from Catapult*.

Scribes who magnetize attention are given plaudits for cultivating a "personality" in an increasingly technologized, dehumanized world where "creatives" are taught they must not only brand themselves but fight off the rising incursions of A.I. I've interacted in print with writers younger than myself—Brandon Taylor, Lauren Oyler, and Elvia Wilk—who have a knack for accruing clicks and actually get *reads* past just a headline or a first paragraph, whether through their published criticism or their socials posts. They might even be dubbed contrarian, a label Jordan Castro's two novels (he's also published two books of poetry from the experimental press Civil Coping Mechanisms, and was the editor of *New York Tyrant*, the lit mag put out by Tyrant Books) have attracted.

Castro's first, *The Novelist*, has been called, by Akosua Adasi writing in *Dirt*, a TikTok-era writer's attack on autofiction. Adasi compares Castro to Sally Rooney and Ottessa Moshfegh as hashtaggable contrarians, and *Muscle Man* is described on *The Atlantic*'s Threads page as "a new novel about a socially awkward, contrarian professor," a book "that helps explain the manosphere." But I don't hear the same tocsin that others seem to (*The Brooklyn Rail* finds it hilarious and brilliant while *Bookforum* acclaims it as "an impassioned jeremiad against contemporary mores"), and after much contemplation I find I'm not drawn to Castro's perceived audacity or uniqueness (*The Baffler* joins me as a dissenting voice, calling *Muscle Man*'s protagonist a cuck-coded Zarathustra and the book curiously weightless). I think about etymology when my college students use a certain word or phrase, and one I find myself regularly correcting is the difference between "methodical" and "meticulous." Castro's books have moments of methodical observational brilliance but are far more often merely meticulous (one might even say overly manscaped).

Castro's books have moments of methodical observational brilliance but are far more often merely meticulous.

"Methodical" is laudable. It takes the madness and arranges it, orders it, makes it digestible to others—along with Lethem, Markovits, Chabon, and Wallace, Richard Powers and David Mitchell are writers who incarnate this aspect of tough but cerebral masculine writing; and yes, women's literary writing can also be methodical, stoic, and brainy, as the works of Joyce Carol Oates, A.M. Homes, Dana Spiotta, Jennifer Egan, A.L. Kennedy, and Rachel Kushner leap to mind—but "meticulous" responds to the madness through fear. The Latin roots of "meticulous" are "dread" and "anxiety." When you're meticulous, you're arranging the items on your plate oh-so-fastidiously, because you're afraid that the goo from the carrots, corn, or beans might seep into the mashed potatoes or stain the sliced meat. You're desperate for control.

The second of Castro's books, the campus novel/gym novel mashup *Muscle Men*, disappointed me. It seems destined to become dated, a book that wants to be "of its moment" but will come to seem contrived, mired in a period of reactionary affect—cancel culture, virtue signaling, woke politics, post-pandemic male loneliness epidemic, land acknowledgment statements, body-hacking, handwringing over Rogan, men inhabiting spaces and places that used to be "theirs" now policed and overseen by a women-and-minorities-first surveillance culture waiting to gotcha them around every corner for their too hirsute and too handsy braggadocio, their "manspreading" or "mansplaining," or their baseline attractedness to female forms and their ambitions toward perfecting (or "looksmaxxing') their own.

> *In the lobby, Harold walked past racks of snacks and powders—protein, amino acids, some type of crackers, all branded with psychotic fonts with pointy edges and dripping letters—and out into the gym. He texted David, "Hah." The front of the gym was wide open, an uncluttered expanse of black flooring for calisthenics…Harold was pleased to see no men in that section. He often saw large men doing crunches and sit-ups like maniacs, drenched in sweat, grunting, hoping to get a chiseled midsection, when this was for the most part hopeless: the visibility of abs was almost exclusively dependent on one's body fat percentage.*

Castro's previous novel, cheekily titled *The Novelist*, is more provocative, but I still can't spare it from the judgment that it's more meticulous than methodical. A defecation-obsessed passage of twenty pages, mentioned in almost every review, impressed me in the moment for commitment to the bit, and it's a memorable one, but in the way a very long joke with a very simplistic punchline is memorable. It's not indelible. It feels like a novel that aimed for the Kaufmans (Andy and Charlie) but landed in the Pauls (Logan and Jake).

What tripped my mind to a solution, or at least a fairer way to analyze the masculinity-in-lit critical-take spectrum, was endeavoring to concoct a thesis regarding the value of the two-novel (so far) Castro canon while researching Stanley Kubrick's 1999 film *Eyes Wide Shut* (gender-in-art mainstay, maybe even rubicon) and its source text, Arthur Schnitzler's 1926 novella *Dream Story*. In my librarial explorations, I came across Schnitzler's early masterwork (and potential skeleton key/Rosetta Stone) *Lieutenant Gustl*. This is a slim volume, more a novelette or long story than Castro's books are, originally published as a feuilleton in 1900. It enthralled me.

Arthur Schnitzler was a rogue-bearded Austrian (Pitt/Chalamet-coiffed in his youth) who bridged the end of the nineteenth century and the opening of the twentieth, an author and playwright who inspired Max Ophüls and Tom Stoppard and Kubrick's eternally-gestated final film, who dissected bourgeois aspirations via old-school modernism. Not "big" modernism a la James Joyce or Thomas Mann, no, Schnitzler's the guy who compacted his modernism, who in his plays draws from Anton Chekhov, his fellow doctor/writer, and in his fiction, particularly the posthumously published *Late Fame*, fixates on the very issues with which Castro wrestles.

Check out that most banal point of entry, the Amazon.com description of *Late Fame*, and tell me this isn't a synthesis of Castro's diatribal output: "Eduard Saxberger is a quiet man who is getting on in years and has spent the better part of them working at a desk in an office. Once upon a time, however, he published a book of poetry." Might as well call it *The Poet* to pair with *The Novelist*, as *Late Fame*'s protagonist wants to be a somebody and obsesses over it. He's neither a family man nor a gooner, but an elderly civil servant, an ex-guy, a former dude, someone who his whole life was a thinker and overthinker, a man very much in his own head, a lamenter like *The Novelist*'s narrator.

That Castro narrator even muses in a highbrow Southern Europe-y way. "My old French press, a glass Bodum with a red plastic exterior, never had this problem: it never let any tea leaves, let alone many tea leaves, escape into the tea. My old French press, the Bodum, was perfect." He waxes poetic about pooping and iPhones, yerba mate and heroin, this ennui maven who's of course a nameless protagonist, an ever-distractible procrastinator, if one who drops the occasional chuckle-eliciting riposte: "Eric, following his liberal arts school ex-girlfriend, was so full of impotent hatred for the people in his life that he had no choice but to love 'the less fortunate'; then he could use 'the less fortunate' as a new bat to beat people over the head with, as opposed to his old bat of pure nihilism."

In *Muscle Man*, we're third-person, so the non-tenured professor Harold's internality as he impulsively absconds with an art student's backpack renders as:

> *What did it really amount to? he thought. Anyone with half a brain would do just as I have done. But no one at Shepherd had even half a brain. That was the problem. The college was teeming with a kind of less-than-half-brainedness, an anti-curiosity; no one went out in search of anything with stakes; no one had skin in the game.*

Harold lives inside his own head, keeps it one hundred on his victim mentality, and justifies his theft in pseudo-Raskolnikovian terms because the special snowflakes like himself, those "who aspired to something better than the drudgery of mediocrity" must have their allowable exceptionalism, and "every genius or near-genius had his excesses." Howard groups himself in that self-appointed lot, a man whose enemies are wastrels washed upon the shores of academia, rule followers and code endorsers constantly implying that he's a privileged white guy who should STFU. Harold seethes.

Schnitzler's Saxberger roils. He's not worried about Twitter and Insta, Tinder and Hinge, he's a tinderbox unhinged, a military man, not a muscle man, jittery and oppressed while obviously ensconced in (actual and thoroughgoing) Eurocentric privilege. He opens the novel grousing about his opera seats.

The book's first paragraph fits it as, "I wish I were sitting on the aisle! Steady, steady! Even oratorios end some time. Perhaps this one's very beautiful, and I'm just in the wrong mood. Well, why not? When I think that I came here for diversion…I should have given my ticket to Benedek. He likes this sort of thing. Plays violin. But in that case Kopetsky would have felt insulted." But even more than Saxberger's vanity and pretension, Lieutenant Gustl becomes my locus of contention with those complainers about the underappreciated "modern literary man" because Gustl is rant-as-person, or even character-as-rant.

In the hierarchy of Viennese capital-S Society, he's a middler. Or a tweener, to appropriate some sports lingo. Not quite a big-and-burly nor a slim-and-quick, and that lieutenant slot indicates a man hovering above the sergeant tier but tagged with a rank known for not quite getting one's stripes or chair or log or the big "C" on his uniform or the senior-officer status and full-on desk-with-corner-office, not a captain, of industry or of receiving his online apportionment of "aye aye"s, which unfortunately seems like the real goal of so many of the fellas griping about AWPs and MFAs and colophons and the obnoxiousness of the listmakers of "bad men" who call out as red flags males who dare to love masterpieces of prose by Nabokov and Salinger, verse by Bukowski and Larkin. Such online scolds are pretty darn obvious, agenda'd, and trite, though, I'll give the fellas that.

Lieutenant Gustl is a rip-roar, constructed in full as an interior monologue. There's a perfectly paced continuity reminiscent of our best minute-by-minute breakdowns of movies or TV episodes. Its first-person protagonist sees himself as an overcomer of slights, constantly self-affirming and self-excoriating both.

He dismisses a rival named Doschintzky as a socialist, impudent and insolent: "All the enemies of law and order are Socialists these days. They're a gang…. They'd like to do away with the whole army, but they never think of who could help them out if the Chinese ever invaded the country. Fools!" MAGA/Trump, anyone? Gustl (whose name is a diminutive, and its sound conjures the image of goose-stepping—both past and future, an iconic behavior of military menfolk from the region) remains, throughout the text, fixated on social standing, status, and whether he's being usurped and disrespected. As W.G. Sebald wrote of Schnitzler, "The enduring fascination of his work lies in the way it describes—with regret, but without pathos—the calamities occasioned by an ideal that becomes an *idée fixe*, and thereby does far more justice to actual social and psychological states." In the lingua franca of his day, Gustl's granular fixation isn't *The Novelist*'s ethics or *Muscle Man*'s spirituality, but honor.

Published as *Leutnant Gustl* and credited as the first work of German literature to deploy a stream-of-consciousness narrative, this micro-novel from late 1900 wasn't translated into English until 1926, the year of Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*. Originally translated as *None but the Brave*, *Lieutenant Gustl* opens not at the café or the bullfight, but at that concert, the oratorio (Gustl thought it was supposed to be a mass and then wishes it were *La traviata*, playing later in the week), with a Fraulein Walker doing the alto and a Fraulein Michalek the soprano, and not in sunny post-World War I Pamplona but in dark-und-chilly Vienna at the turn of the twentieth century.

The late 1920s have inherent to them modernity and modernism both, but that deceivingly brief two-decade span places *Lieutenant Gustl* in a much different register; an olde-world quality pervades, and the protagonist's fascination with duels and manhood, with cantatas and soloists, with trussed-up raiment and social behavior ("The fellow next to me is clapping as if he were crazy. Wonder if he really likes it as much as all that?"), with rigidly defined racial/ethnic classes (predominantly Jewishness, as anti-Semitism endured and overcome was a constant in Schnitzler's life and fiction), makes it even more reflexive than Hemingway's most readable full novel and even more un-self-censoring than Castro's anxiety-riddled exposés. Schnitzler presents us, by story's end, with a fully suicidal narrator so butthurt—to use one of our more sophomoric but honest modern terms—by his interaction with a local baker, that he unspools, undergoing a near psychic break from reality. His obsession with reputation and perception, and his fumbling to curtail an on-full-display insecurity, read today as the apex of the mountain Castro half climbs.

And Jordan may still get there. I see *Muscle Man* as a failed second novel, trying to bait controversy via its calculated-unlikability main character, a "beta" with a machismo fetish, but its neither vulgar nor scabrous enough to be truly transgressive, and repeating the whole-plot-occurs-in-one-day trope from the prior book feels gimmicky. *The Novelist* showed enough promise that I'm taking him seriously and looking forward to future works, but I for one think Castro would benefit from going *more* novelly, abandoning the Harmony Korine pose of subversiveness, the post-Palahniuk wiseacre act. Target instead something more substantive, the experimental-but-accessible vein seen not that long ago in works from across the pond like Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* or Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*; shoot for the encompassing braininess of Powers's *The Goldbug Variations* or the for-real masculinity crisis of Frederick Exley's *A Fan's Notes*; dwell within the minor-key masterpieces of American indie stalwarts like John Brandon or John Haskell for inspiration; angle for less of the winnowed cleverness (see Castro's half-executed essay about Ayn Rand in *The Paris Review*), less aping of alt-lit

and Bret Easton Ellis and trying to be the cool kid, the anti-heroic slacker. Trade spirit animal Nicholson Baker's debut (*The Mezzanine*) for Tom McCarthy's (*Remainder*). Keep the "I ain't no Ben Lerner," preserve the "I don't do wan husk autofiction," but don't become a *New Yorker* stan either. And stop thinking that writing about the internet will save you or make you unique.

I won't deem *Lieutenant Gustl* an "internet-anticipating text" or "blindingly prescient," but I couldn't stop thinking about Schnitzler's dead-on account of the modernist (and infinite) male's need to see himself as the center of his own life story as his link to Castro. The humanist impulse gets most mawkish when it attempts to contravene western individualism. The weakest parts of both David Wallace's and George Saunders's oeuvres, as seminal (hee-hee) as they are to any discussion of this masculinity-in-literature trope and its most self-aware manifestations, are when they tilt at the sentimental. Saunders, critical darling and beloved "nice guy" for decades, has gotten the most lacerating reviews of his garlanded career for his 2026 publication *Vigil*, a mini-novel oft-described as too forgiving, too deterministic in the philosophy-101 sense, too full of pablum, bromides about comforting each other because there is no such thing as free will anyhoo. And Wallace's 2005 Kenyon College graduation speech, "This is Water," has myriad material insights, but occasionally succumbs to that leaden weight sentiment, that, "Hey now, hey now, youngster" tone of beseeching, "Y'all graduating Midwest kiddoes, don't stick to that default setting of 'I'm the center of everything,' ya' hear now? Because perchance it is actually *you* who 'are the asshole,'" if you may allow me to allude to one of Reddit's most famous forums.

Especially in his first novel, Castro does make me laugh, and that's no small accomplishment. The deadening humorlessness of virtue literature and its practitioners is a greater problem for book lovers and the publishing industry in 2026 than whether or not a refusal to publish straight white males is a systematic discrimination, a systemic correction, or a synthetic form of comeuppance + reckoning + accountability + arbitrage + purgation + revenge, but Castro's books don't really fight the good fight because they don't ignite a frisson.

Schnitzler's Gustl makes me laugh but he also scares me. His arrogance and his desire to murder a civilian he considers inferior (one who has the temerity to stand up to him) recalls eerily the recent killings of both Charlie Kirk and Renee Good. And Gustl's narcissistic misery unfolds so damn *vividly* on the page. The microscopically described protagonists of Castro's novels live the way they do while the prose zooms in to 8K clarity as part of a larger *point*. They're not artless, but too often they're mouthpieces for an intellectual exercise.

Novelist, memoirist, and mentor Harry Crews, masculinism apogee and no stranger to the gym or the literature of men, comfortable writing about combat while adept as a beloved creative writing prof at the University of Florida, taught in his workshops that fiction writing with a point equaled propaganda. Crews was uninterested in writers trying to use literature to prove things. He valued embodied experience, not appropriating the arts to didactically argue in favor of ideas. And Crews's writing, if you've ever encountered it, has no lack of willingness to traffic in the grotesque, the discomfiting. He was a specificity-obsessed regionalist who with every book spelunked down into the most unflattering aspects of human behavior.

Unpalatable versus unflattering, then, is another distinction that kept flashing as I waded into Castro and Schnitzler. Castro's men are cringe, unpalatable in their narcissism, whereas Schnitzler's are composed unflatteringly and unerringly. Think of *Dream Story/Eyes Wide Shut* here for the comparison,

the humiliations endured by the doctor protagonist, Fridolin in the book and Bill Harford as portrayed by Tom Cruise in the flick. Schnitzler's texts have an abundance of intellect, but they don't have a point or a thesis or that vibe of "meta"-ness that Castro lacquers on rather thickly—decades after Philip Roth's various doppelgangers, shapeshifters, and impostors, *The Novelist*'s deployment of "Jordan Castro" as a famous novelist in a novel by Jordan Castro feels tired, even hackneyed.

In the lingua franca of his day, Gustl's granular fixation isn't *The Novelist*'s ethics or *Muscle Man*'s spirituality, but honor.

Lieutenant Gustl manages to be both more honest and to better immerse and evoke. You think and feel along with the lieutenant, his Costanza-like desire to get back at someone who slighted him: "I just stood there and took it as if someone had knocked me silly.... But I couldn't say word—couldn't do a thing. All I did was stand there—, quiet, absolutely quiet!... It's awful; it's unbearable; I must kill him on the spot, wherever I happen to meet him!... I let a swine like that get away with it!... He can tell everybody just exactly what he said to me!" Castro gets there periodically, he's not a total flop, but there's something self-conscious in it.

That stultified self-consciousness is annoyingly present in the prose of most "highly online" writers, even the best of them (Sally Rooney), and with someone like Patricia Lockwood, almost everything after her viral and career-making "Rape Joke" has been downright waylaid by that snippet-like approach, for my *centavos* anyway. In Schnitzler's terse and propulsive sentences there's an accrual of involvement, an awareness of immiseration. The reader stops seeing the distinction between actor and role; you're in it. As another masculinity scrutinizer, Robert Stone, put it: "There's only one subject for fiction or poetry or even a joke: how it is. In all the arts, the payoff is always the same: recognition. If it works, you say that's real, that's truth, that's life, that's the way things are. There it is." Perhaps even better (or at least more German) than fiction which awakens in the reader a frisson, with *Lieutenant Gustl* Schnitzler devised a book that makes the reader inhabit a gestalt.

Castro has some legitimately great parts, but he hasn't gotten there yet re: the sum. The commentary on navel gazing as mental illness floats too close to a literary style that is itself insular and undynamic, self-consciously trying to skewer self-consciousness. "Feeling self-conscious and adrenaline filled, like a novice bank robber backing away from the teller, I began changing my novel from present to past tense," is a line characteristic of Castro's titular novelist, who then waffles about his choice and quickly determines he's made his manuscript worse. It's too inside-baseball, too much someone live-narrating their NaNoWriMo (National Novel Writing Month) submission, with thrown-in references to being told to "Fuck off" via Gmail or a nod at LSD and other casual drug use as allusion to generational copium and addiction that reaches (for Thomas De Quincey, methinks, if Castro's interviews about his own struggles with sobriety and faith/Catholicism hold water) but doesn't grasp.

Schnitzler's short book bounds and glides. It has in its lines and scenes a sprezzatura, an earned confidence, not just a charismatic line or two (those lulz in Castro that are too often quickly forgotten). The whole of *Lieutenant Gustl* flows. It ribbons out, it swerves, it behaves like people you know even though it was conceived and executed 125 years ago.

Well, what's this?—Hey, there, Johann, bring me a glass of fresh water.... What's this?... Where?... Am I dreaming? My head. Oh, Good Lord.... I can't see straight!—I'm all dressed!—Where am I sitting?—Holy God, I've been sleeping! How could I have been sleeping? It's already growing light. How long have I been sleeping? I mustn't ask—must look at my watch—can't see a thing.... Where are my matches? Won't a single one of them light?... Three o'clock, and I'm to have my duel at four.—No, not a duel—a suicide! It has nothing to do with a duel; I must shoot myself because a baker called me a fathead.

You can hear the urgency, the immediacy, the self-loathing, the disgust, the absurdity. It's imaginative, and it's methodical and un-mimetic in its deconstruction of the mundane. Masculinity is its qualia, not its subject matter, not its locus of discourse, not something that its author is trying to take apart like a bored kid who unscrews the housing of an old-school alarm clock, to add a straightforward simile amidst these art-world, pomo words. *Lieutenant Gustl*'s dense and plosive paragraphs anticipate Thomas Bernhard's, whereas Castro's timidly recreate them or overtly allude to them—both its flap copy and *The Novelist* itself are preoccupied with Bernhard's monologic satire *Woodcutters*.

Is Castro "right" to skewer the resentful, wannabe-jacked academics? The screen addicted, ass-wiping obsessed, coffee-hardware fanatics? Sure. For prime cut social critique, cadge this graf from *The Novelist*:

Because of the way people process and interact with their political opinions now, their political opinions have become ruinously linked with their personalities to an unprecedented degree. Whereas before, it was uncouth to ask others who they voted for, or what they believed, now people process and interact with their political opinions immediately, in public, all the time, on a platform designed to addict them, so instead of thinking in any meaningful sense about what they think, feel, and believe, people are more or less always self-consciously performing, and becoming addicted to that performance... Now, people conflate their opinions with their personalities, and not only that, they conflate their opinions with that part of their personalities that specifically seeks to be liked.

Yes, hunting-and-gathering "likes" is a plague, as is fearmongering online and in the workplace, as is the corporatization of the arts, as is people who reduce their worldview to a lockstep liberal lawn sign or a neocon red ballcap; I just want to see it enacted via character and plot. Or perhaps the "essay film" is an outlet for Castro the farceur, and he'll cobble together some outré quasi-mockumentary inspired by Orson Welles's *F for Fake* and Jean-Luc Godard's *Two or Three Things I Know About Her* that soapboxes its irony-drizzled politics with sheer nerve and verve.

For now, though, I find more artful stimuli in the whip-smart minis fired from a fin de siècle Southern Europe navigated by a long-deceased provocateur, one who achieved posthumous (*really* late) fame and who chronicled the brutal banalities and random vulnerabilities borne by the everyman, the sorrowful or enraged male, his days wrought by (and fraught with) insecurity in the minute-to-minute worlds from which Schnitzler wrings so much. Castro's talent is distillation, but his books suffer from being the equivalent of the online commentariat put between endpapers. They aren't worlds, they're worldbuilding. A

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A Misfit Success

Jonathan Hartmann

Elizabeth McCracken, *A Long Game: Notes on Writing Fiction*.
Ecco, $21.60 paper.

Who's afraid of the big blank page?

As bestselling author Elizabeth McCracken observes, "craft" books explaining how to write fiction aim to reassure novice ink-slingers that they're on the right path, that they can crank out a novel resembling established authors' work. But writers' paths to stardom will vary, and they are notoriously reluctant to swallow advice. So why not make one's how-to-write book a DIY project, that is, a book written for the author herself?

> Any writer's ideal craft manual must be bespoke, like a suit, made to measure. Write a manifesto aimed only at your own work without worrying whether it applies to or offends anybody else in the world. Address, in your silent heart, punctuation, plot, character, all your picayune concerns and grandiose plans, all the things that make you want to be a writer. Make it living, an armor-clad list that might change. It will be dearer to you than any other guide.

Sounds great! A craft book offering its author self-help. But if all writers fear facing the blank page, can anyone make a craft book helping not only herself but the masses of fearful scribblers? McCracken scores by admitting from the start that she's not sure. *A Long Game* is the genuine article, dispensing writing advice not just for those wanting to emulate successful authors but for people who share her key traits—a love for humanity and a stubborn determination to be heard.

A Long Game both shows and tells; that is, it works as both memoir in its stories from McCracken's peripatetic life as librarian, scholar, and writing instructor; and craft-book in its quirky, pragmatic tips for aspiring writers. McCracken's canny metaphors tilt the world to offer you a new way of seeing:

> When I write, my own decisions are guided by delusion, heartfelt wishes, hubris, and a fondness for running jokes, not clarity, structural integrity, or literary merit. We are not meant to know what we're doing. Spiderwebs are sturdier, made as they are by engineers, but they're my inspiration, unadorned or jeweled with dew.

A Long Game paints its author as the misfit success—a high school oddball who invested in colorful oversized thrift-store apparel and vented into her writing—whose career proves that U-turns on the usual advice will suit many aspiring authors.

Over 30 years of publishing, McCracken has aimed high. Spawned by a Boston University professor and a BU editor, Elizabeth yearned to be celebrated on the printed page, to merit her own entry in *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations*. She pitched the first of her nine books, the 1993 short-story collection *Here's Your Hat What's Your Hurry*, from a public librarian's desk on Cape Cod. McCracken routinely mixes literary genres, as in her novel *The Hero of This Book* (2022), whose writer-protagonist straddles the Atlantic while eulogizing her mother. Her memoir, *An Exact Replica of a Figment of My Imagination* (2008), reviews her experience with two pregnancies. Her novels span Victorian New England (the 2018 *Bowlaway*) life with a colossus (*The Giant's House*, 1996), and early Hollywood (*Niagara Falls All Over Again* (2001)).

Writers of craft books are like parents fixing their children dinner: they must mix what's nourishing with what's entertaining. McCracken, who holds the James Michener Chair in fiction at UT Austin, shapes her literary repast by letting us in on the doubts that drive her work. She gladly tells us about the four books she abandoned unfinished, and admits to writing for attention: "the subtext of all my writing is *love me*."

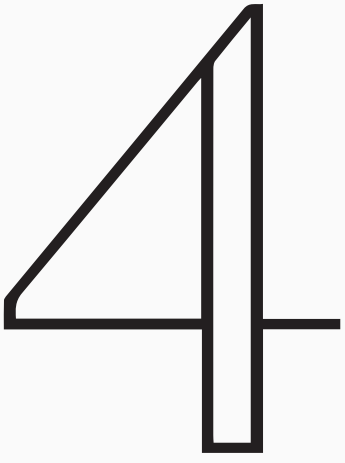
Authors-in-training, McCracken reminds us, come in all shapes and sizes. Writers aren't all tough, exactly. But they are resilient:

> Writing anything and expecting somebody else to read it is an act of hubris, but nothing good can be written without persistent doubts, one of the paradoxes of a writing life. I don't believe that I have ever taught anyone to write. Every writer in the end is an autodidact. It's a lifelong course of study, or should be. You must believe that you are the only person for this job, which is a fact.

Now cramming her work into late nights and UT Austin's semester breaks, McCracken "harness[es] the power of my own self-loathing" to accomplish a draft over a period of weeks or months. "*How mad will I be if I don't get this done? How much will I hate myself?*" Avoiding these feelings is as simple as putting in effort. McCracken entertains and inspires with her honest account of how writers' dread of facing the page, of reaching out to the snobbish, ignorant, demanding, or oblivious audiences out there, vanishes during the emotional experience of each writing session.

And besides her advice for misfit writers, she offers this universal truth:

> The first day of workshop, I tell my students that a writer has a mantra, and it's the same for everybody:
>
> I am a genius with much to learn. A



MUSICAL SPHERES

The Limitless Potentiality of Music

Ned Rorem's *Critical Affairs*

Daniel Asia

Ned Rorem, *Critical Affairs: A Composer's Journal*. George Braziller, 1970, 216pp. Kindle version, Open Road Media, 2013.

The Beatles' *Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* was released in 1967, and the Rolling Stones' *Sympathy for the Devil* in 1968. Woodstock, perhaps the crown jewel of the counterculture, took place in 1969. And in 1970, the forty-three-year-old Ned Rorem blithely published *Critical Affairs*. The book is about the state of the culture, ruminations on lost people and their treasures, music (specifically, his own music), and a diary of his recent year in Paris while looking at the state of his old friends and their decaying high cultural life. Does this have the least resonance for our own time? Indeed, it does. Rorem's comments seem as applicable today as they did then, which is to say that the difficulties he noticed then have only worsened. And his understanding of what it means to be a creative artist today–or if I must use that awful term, a "creative" –is just as relevant.

At the time of *Critical Affairs*'s publication, Rorem was already a well-known composer and writer. I place those descriptors in that order because, as he said in a 2002 interview: "I'm a composer who also writes, as opposed to a writer who also composes, and I wouldn't presume to say what's the most important or valuable thing." Tim Page, a Pulitzer Prize-winning music critic himself, is more a fan of Rorem's prose: "Even though I admire his compositions a lot," Page writes, "I would say that in some ways, the diaries and the criticism are the things which mean the most to me. The bracing thing about Ned is that even when you disagree with him, he gets you thinking — and I think that's one sign of a real master critic." I tend to agree with Page on this, but more on that later. Thus, I think it is fair to say that Rorem viewed his compositions as the most essential aspect of his artistic life, even though his diaries and essays received significant attention. While mostly composing during the triumph of Serialism in Europe and America, he remained a defiant tonalist and Francophile, firmly in the camp of figures such as Virgil Thomson and the American symphonists Aaron Copland,

William Schuman, Peter Mennin, Vincent Persichetti, and Leonard Bernstein.

Rorem was born in Richmond, Indiana, in 1923 and pursued musical studies at Northwestern University, the Curtis Institute, and Juilliard. He studied with notable figures like Bernard Wagenaar and Virgil Thomson, the latter of whom he worked for as a copyist. He lived abroad in Morocco, and he described himself as "upper middle-class, semi-bohemian, but with a strong Quaker emphasis."

I decided to look back at *Critical Affairs* just for the fun of it, not having read much of his other writing. In fact, I have listened to only a small part of his musical oeuvre, and I would not necessarily wish to hear a lot more. His compositions, I suspect, will be judged of their time; his writing may also be seen as topical. He is known for his tell-all writing, particularly in outing other gay composers, most notably Bernstein and Copland. Copland apparently did not mind, while it would seem that Bernstein did. Truthfulness is fine up to a point, isn't it? But some matters are better left alone, one thinks. While *Critical Affairs* does little of this lurid storytelling, it does make many telling points about music, the music business, and Rorem's view of his own music. I will focus on this.

Let's first look at those songs for which Rorem is most highly regarded. While I find them well-crafted and to the point—he decried repetition of text (well, there goes Bach and Beethoven!)—they are often dry and plain. The melodies themselves are frequently unmemorable. But then again, he did write so many of them, and singers did, and still do, seem to enjoy them. They are always exceedingly singable and not too challenging to learn. I wish he had tried for more. But then again, composers work in one of two ways. Some work slowly, fussing over every detail as they go along over every detail. And there are those who, seemingly, work very quickly either with or without "deep inspiration." The first group wishes for every work to be as close to perfection as possible. The latter assumes that some works will be better than others, and time will sort this out. I might put Beethoven, Brahms, and Stravinsky in the former group, and Mozart, Milhaud, and Rorem in the second group.

Remember, this does not say anything about the quality of these composers' entire outputs. It is only suggestive of the way they approached their writing, and maybe the way they made their living (i.e., fulfilling commissions at a certain speed to make a livelihood, as opposed to having a certain leisure if they had the means). Rorem apparently did not compose or write at a particular time, but it would certainly seem that he did one or the other every day, to be as prolific as he was. This suggests that he used composition and writing as complementary pursuits. If he did not feel like composing, he wrote, and vice versa. My guess is that he composed music with the fluidity of his writing style. Setting words will help with this, and I suspect this is why he liked to write songs. He could write them with unqualified speed and set a somewhat lower bar for them.

With respect to song, Rorem says that the genre is about the "marriage" of poetry and music. It is a "third entity of sometimes different and greater magnitude than either parent. When planning to write a song, I seek poems more for sound than meaning, more for shape than sentiment." I find this comment odd, but perhaps this is why his songs often seem superficial. How could they *not* be, if he is not engaging with the emotional content of the poem? A poem is almost always about some personal response to the world. How can a composer not hope to explicate

this in his musical response? In my view, the composer provides a musical "reading" of the poem in some shape or fashion; the composer brings his intuitive understanding of it as presented in the musical domain. Some enigmas may be allowed to remain. There can be numerous settings of the same poem, as long as they "work." The good composer makes this happen, and in so doing, creates a "marriage" that should be strong and continue through time.

Regarding the differences between a lyricist's relationship to his popular (or show) composer and that of a poet and a classical composer, Rorem states: "A lyricist is a collaborative craftsman. Poets' work ends with their poems." While Elizabeth Bishop did not particularly like how Rorem set, or the performance of, her *Visits to St Elizabeths*, he responds that it "succeeds more than many of my pieces, being often sung, loudly applauded, and singers say it 'feels good.'" Notice that he does not say he loves it or that it is one of his best works. His response is solely about external responses and nothing about his own. In a final comment about song, he says "Good poetry makes better songs. The further out the poet, the nearer must be his musician. I compose what I need to hear because nobody else is doing it. Yet I feel guilty about what I do best—setting words to music. Because it comes easily, meaning naturally, I feel I'm cheating." All of this is telling, as is a comment about his entire compositional output: "Of the forty hours I have thus far composed, I can bear to listen to twelve. Of the twelve, I am not ashamed of six. Of the six, I am proud of but one." Less than one hour of music that he claims as his own, after about thirty years of composing! This is an astonishing statement for a distinguished composer to utter.

Music has a mystery that words do not have: a limitless potentiality, something so personal it cannot quite be fathomed; so self-descriptive that it is akin to a fingerprint or snowflake–something unique in the universe.

Rorem decries rock music's adherents for their "Nowism," as if nothing in the past is worthy of their attention. He finds this boorish and obnoxious, not to mention illiterate. They truly know nothing, he writes, nor have they heard of anything. Have they heard of *The Rite of Spring*, or Bach's *St. Matthew's Passion*? And if they have heard of either, have they actually experienced, that is to say, listened to the music? This is as true now as it was then, but the situation has only gotten worse. Younger audiences are positively entranced with being part of the current stream of juvenilia in music. Taylor Swift is now a model of the genre. Her followers are in the billions, but what she does is not about music, but about the show. According to various sources, Swift's recent *Eras* tour hired a fleet of around 50 trucks to transport the equipment. While a course is taught about her

at Harvard, her music and lyrics are banal, tedious, and of negligible value. Rorem would have found all of this absurd.

Rorem claimed that "as a social phenomenon rock is ever more intriguing, though as musical experience, it is now virtually nil. Whereas *A Day in the Life* will remain a landmark in the literature of great song, *Sympathy for the Devil* is terrible music with terrible words, terribly performed." What about the fifty-five years since? What of Pink Floyd, The Carpenters, the Bee Gees, et al.? I suspect that Rorem found all of this music rather banal, as do I. And what of the totemic Mick Jagger and the recently deceased Ozzy Osbourne? About them, I believe that Rorem would have agreed with Roger Scruton's consistent take on this subject. Scruton thought that the lead singer in popular music is a totem or icon, a representative of a tribe or group, rather than a singular individual. He argued that the names of pop stars often function as symbolic identifiers for fan communities, rather than simply reflecting personal identities; that their musical, as opposed to performative, capabilities are non-existent, and that the music they sing is worthless. The phenomenon is entirely cultural and has nothing to do with the music *per se*. Music is about flow and motion for both Scruton and Rorem. It must move, and this is just what pop generally does *not* do. And together they understand most pop music as empty and contributing to a decline of musical and artistic culture.

In one sentence, Rorem encapsulates the two defining problems of our time: "Their patronizing of their elders is not hip, but old as youth itself, and about as intelligent as anti-Semitism." The silliness of the patronizing of elders remains a major problem in our youth culture. Only now it is the intelligentsia of the academy and media that goad on our "youth" to be patronizing, glib, and superficial in their cultural tastes. And their parents, who do not know much better—and who themselves might even wish to remain hip!–are no better. And in the outbreak of the plague of antisemitism after October 7th, 2023, our younger generation demonstrates their utter disregard for history and a moral deficiency of astounding scope.

Rorem's comments on music in general can often take a wonderful philosophical or poetic turn. Music is about making choices: "…music, like love, must be selective. But do not confuse love for music… (and) Inspiration is not provided, but emerges from solitude, while love…comes from the outside…If musical art has always reflected what we call the times without proposing solutions to the times' problems, it has also rendered the times...through what is generally conceded to be communicative beauty. Music cannot not be beautiful, even when ugly." (my emphasis). Beauty in this final comment is somewhat more akin to truth. There is always an element of beauty in truth, even if it is a bit brutal. One also thinks of the "elegance" that mathematicians seek in their equations. Consider Einstein's simple and elegant statement about what guides our universe: $E=mc^2$. Doesn't music tell us something equally wondrous about our world? Maybe this also explains why Einstein, even though rather bad at it, played the violin throughout his life.

Returning again to the relationship between words and music and why Rorem favors the latter modality: "If this paragraph is never completed but dissolves right now, will anyone (myself included) ever really care? However, if this afternoon I improvise a strand of melody, tomorrow and over the following days, that strand may lengthen and

continually double back upon itself to weave a slow carpet of music which never, never, never before existed. These words are anybody's. But the musical carpet, no matter how dreadful the pattern, is mine, and will remain always faithfully on the floor of my private room."

Words are thus ephemeral for him. Clearly, this is not so about the poetry he sets, particularly that of his favorite poet, Walt Whitman. Yet they seem to mean less to him than the music does. Music has a mystery that words do not have: a limitless potentiality, something so personal it cannot quite be fathomed; so self-descriptive that it is akin to a fingerprint or snowflake–something unique in the universe. The music is his alone, as it is for every composer, but who then must send it out into the world, if it is ever to realize its intention? Or perhaps like Bach's *Art of the Fugue*, it might just be a conversation between the composer and his sonic medium, or between him and God—any human realization of the composer's intentions be damned.

Finally, what then, or should be, the backdrop for a sane human existence? John Cage thought that sound and silence, or even actions, occurring over time are the definition of music. Thus, his "happenings" blur the distinction between music, performance art, and life itself. Rorem has no patience for music that blurs the distinction between life and the art of music. Music must retain its sacred quality connected to the artist's inner world.

Rorem equally condemns the serious, or classical, music world of his time. He finds the lionization of Pierre Boulez and the serial avant-garde, well, peculiar, as well as its analogue in American academia, of the serialist Milton Babbitt and his followers. Audiences generally don't like the music. But they are "told" by its adherents and marketeers that it is great, and thus they reluctantly listen. But on many levels, as demonstrated by music theorist Fred Lerdahl and linguist Ray Jackendoff's generative theory of tonal music, it really doesn't make any sense; it doesn't cohere as a language that the human ear can make sense of. And thus, contrary to Schoenberg's notion that schoolchildren would be whistling his tunes, this just hasn't, and never will, take place. He takes a shot at Lukas Foss, who never heard a new musical "style" he didn't embrace, and I suspect he hated Bernstein's *Mass*, which is all over the map stylistically. Now, it happens that Lukas wrote five wonderful symphonies for which he should be much better known. And Rorem liked Bernstein's early music, before he became "Lenny." Rorem is nothing if not judgmental, but then, any good composer should be. Most new music is bad music, and deserves to be called out.

If Rorem is hard on himself, as we have seen above, he is equally and justifiably so about all other music. Which is to say, he calls all genres to task: "The past four years have spawned ever fewer genuine works in any form; this, I feel, is due to the direct alliance of art with the New Left. If the state of the body and soul appears better for it, the state of music as a lasting social contribution is worse." This is even more true today, as considerations of new works by orchestras are no longer made on quality, but rather on the background of the composer. Newness, cross-genre, sound design, and multi-media are in, while the "older values" of harmony, melody, and counterpoint, development, and motion are definitely out. It is time for shock and awe, which might be useful in a military zone, but really doesn't work in a musical space. What applied in the 1950s applies to our present time. "The decade of the 1950s saw music's decline as a fine art, despite the rise of such distinguished craftsmen as Boulez.

Nobody but his colleagues cared much. How could people enjoy Boulez's complexities when John Cage's fun was guaranteed culture, as was the simplistic gorgeousness of Elvis Presley, who began to be sanctioned by the intelligentsia?" For our time, substitute the names of Ligeti (whose music has been vastly overrated), Mason Bates, the classical turntable player, and Taylor Swift, the billionaire queen of pop.

Since Rorem was a composer and a diarist, and sometimes a musical diarist, let me finish by recommending two recordings worthy of your attention.

Winter Pages was written in 1981. It is a work of intimate chamber music in twelve short movements, and not surprisingly, each about the length of a song. Lyrical and suave, it runs about thirty-six minutes in duration. About it, Rorem says: "The suite of twelve pieces is a diary of the season, each entry leading to the next, reworking the same concerns which nevertheless shift their mood according to the weather…My nonvocal works are songs without texts. Indeed, so firmly do I rely on the poor singer within me longing to get out that the music feels almost like verse without words."

Piano Album I and *Six Friends* can be heard on a Naxos CD performed with tenderness and elegance by pianist Carolyn Enger. Only two of these thirty-three miniatures are longer than two minutes. Written between 1978 and 2001, these small gems are delightfully piquant and can be sampled as you wish.

Critical Affairs is filled with ideas worthy of pondering. And so we have done just that. But it is his music, if anything, that I think Rorem would like to be remembered for. And even if that is only two or three hours of great music that might just stand the test of time, this would be no small feat. A

The Possibility of Finding the Light

Daniel Asia's Opera *The Tin Angel*

Jan Swafford

THE TIN ANGEL OPERA, A TESTAMENT TO THE POWER OF FRIENDSHIP and music in a dark world, is the culmination of a singular personal and creative journey by composer Daniel Asia and poet Paul Pines. It began in 1978 at MacDowell, an artist colony in the woods of New Hampshire, the kind of place where creativity is a simmering brew of works in progress, and where the denizens meld with others in their own and other disciplines in sometimes life-changing ways. Asia and Pines struck up a friendship marked by a chain of pieces that would emerge over the next 25 years before Pines's death in 2018. Says Asia: "We have gone through our lives together, checking in periodically, and gauging our development and understanding of life and our art through our artistic interaction."

Dan Asia and I go back further: we met as Yale composition students in 1975, and have been friends, colleagues, and mutual admirers since. The first things I noticed about Dan were a flair for instrumentation in his work, a gift that steadily deepened through his career, and a kind of chipper self-confidence that stood out among the mostly searching and uncertain atmosphere of grad school. We were all trying to get our acts together, find our voice, polish our craft, attract some attention. Dan was doing all that, but unlike most of us he was already determined to write music that would have a life outside the academy.

Thus his string of recordings includes pieces he created at Yale. Through his studies with notable composers—Jacob Druckman, Isang Yun, Gunther Schuller among others—and a flurry of creative sojourns and fellowships, he was steadily thinking as an artist in the world, rather than as a student. He ended up teaching and heading the composition department

at the music school of the University of Arizona for over 35 years. There he conducted new music and issued a string of recordings and works in a variety of media, including six pieces setting the poetry of Paul Pines.

Pines had a singular creative journey, much of it involved with jazz. He could not have known it, but his career and Asia's were on a journey that was going to culminate in *The Tin Angel*. He was born into a family of emigrants, his Russian Jewish mother paying her way through law school doing gigs with a jazz trio. After a stint with the Merchant Marine, Paul ended up in the East Village, where in 1973 he founded, in a former speakeasy at the corner of 2nd Street and Bowery, the jazz club Tin Palace. It lasted for a decade, Paul running it for the first six years. The place remains a legend, the building noted in the National Register of Historic Places. "At the start," Pines recalled, "the location was a no-man's land, a dangerous place to go. By the time The Tin Palace closed its doors ten years later, it had become a destination. The place was full of artists and writers… The fascination for me was the relationship between art and the underworld, the unconscious, a dark place in the psyche." A good deal of Pine's poetry and prose came out of that experience. He has been called "the poet of jazz," publishing thirteen collections of poetry, two novels, and a memoir. Alongside his literary work, he was a jazz promoter and a Jungian psychotherapist.

The poise and elegance of Asia's music evokes, throughout a story full of pain, the possibility of redemption, of finding the light.

One of the upshots of Paul's passion for jazz was his novel *The Tin Angel*, based on his years running the club. When he and Dan started looking for ideas toward an opera, they settled on the novel as their story and Paul got to work on the libretto. Dan: "*The Tin Angel Opera* captures and extends the elements that make the novel so powerful. In so doing, it marries the high drama of opera with the cutting-edge world of a Bowery jazz club, where a unique cast of characters plays out a dark story that becomes a call for redemption." Paul: "I felt that *The Tin Angel*…raised a timeless question: How do we, as individuals, and a species, make music out of love and loss, recognizing the light in the darkness that unites us?"

Those are the elements of the opera in a nutshell: people making their way through a dark and dangerous world, a gathering place of characters with their contrapuntal tragedies and dreams, all joined by music and the hope of redemption, a path toward the light.

The opera begins with a murder, and not the last one. The setting is the jazz club run by Pablo and Ponce called The Tin Angel, the club perennially on the brink. The first victim is Ponce, killed in a botched drug

deal when he was trying to get money to keep the club alive. This sets off a rich plot involving dealers, crooks, cops, and a Bahamian drug runner called Black Hattie. Dan calls it a "tragic comedy" that is also a murder mystery filled with characters, many of whom are capable of murder.

For Asia the opera is the culmination—to date—of a long, acclaimed, and steadily evolving output. The beautifully sung, acted, and designed June premiere, by Teatre Grattaciela at the La Mama Experimental Theatre Club in New York's Bowery, did justice to a powerful and kaleidoscopic score, which in turn does justice to Pines's poetic libretto:

> Notes that form when the room
> Is still in the memory of the space itself
> Something born from the smoke
> Something still something clear
> Something born in the night
> that melts through these walls
> to rise like prayer that fills the air
> with the roar of butterfly wings

The premiere was anchored by tenor Spencer Hamlin as club owner Pablo, soprano Victoria McGrath as his lover Maria, and mezzo Chantelle Grant as gangster Black Hattie. The performances were received by full houses, standing ovations, and appreciative reviews.[1] As another critic noted, the musical atmosphere is counterpoint to the darkness of the story, in the tradition of American operas by Aaron Copland and Samuel Barber. As Dan notes, this is "not a jazz opera, but an opera about jazz." Still, whispers of jazz are there in the rhythm, the atmosphere, wisps of familiar tunes as in the beginning, with its recall of the old standard, "You Don't Know What Love Is" amidst unsettled harmonies.

In the story there are deaths, ghosts, laughs, old wounds reopening, a search not only for a killer but for meaning. The program book summarizes: "*The Tin Angel*—once a place of loss—becomes a space for rebirth. In a final act of defiant beauty, music rises again as jazz, memory, and love merge in one last improvisation."

Dan Asia is a seasoned master of the orchestra, and that carries over into this reduction of the forces of a full band into an 11-player ensemble. Really, this is not a loss: although a full orchestra is always welcome, the intimacy of the forces in the premiere suited the intimacy of the story and the intimate struggles of the characters. It also lucidly conveys the sumptuous harmonic rhetoric of the score. In presenting this tale of darkness and fragile hope, the poise and elegance of Asia's music evokes, throughout a story full of pain, the possibility of redemption. ▲

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