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Contents

4 Drew Gilpin Faust
Song in a Weary Throat: Memoir of an American Pilgrimage
by Paul Murray, with an introduction by Patricia Bell Scott

8 Regina Marler
Rene Magritte: The Fifth Season an exhibition at
the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, May 19–October 28, 2018
Catalog of the exhibition edited by Caitlin Haskell

14 Christopher R. Browning
The Suffocation of Democracy

17 Stacy Schiff
A Life of My Own by Claire Tomalin

20 Jacob Weisberg
Antisocial Media: How Facebook Disconnects Us and Undermines Democracy
by Siva Vaidhyanathan

Ten Arguments for Deleting Your Social Media Accounts Right Now by Jaron Lanier

24 Geoffrey O’Brien
Jacques Becker a series of films at Film Forum, New York City, August 1–16, 2018

27 Jeffrey Yang
Poem

28 Heather Ann Thompson
The Trials of Nina McCALL: Sex, Surveillance, and the Decades-Long Government Plan to Imprison “Promiscuous” Women by Scott Wasserman Stern

30 Adam Thirlwell
Berlin Alexanderplatz by Alfred Döblin, translated from the German and with an afterward by Michael Hofmann

32 Vona Groarke
Poem

33 James Gleick
The Perfectionists: How Precision Engineers Created the Modern World
by Simon Winchester

35 Madeleine Schwartz
A View of the Empire at Sunset by Caryl Phillips

37 David Oshinsky
Damnation Island: Poor, Sick, Mad and Criminal in 19th-Century New York
by Stacy Horn

44 Francine Prose
Insane: America’s Criminal Treatment of Mental Illness by Alisa Roth

54 Letters from
Readers, contributors, and the editorial staff of The New York Review

55 CONTRIBUTORS

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CAPTURED MOMENTS

Joshua Jelly-Schapiro: Chris Offli, Caged in Paradise
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Murray Waas: Mike Pence, Star Witness
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Catching Up to Pauli Murray

Song in a Weary Throat: Memoir of an American Pilgrim
by Pauli Murray, with an introduction by Patricia Bell-Scott. Liveright, 587 pp., $22.95 (paper)

Drew Gilpin Faust

Pauli Murray’s autobiography, Song in a Weary Throat, first appeared in 1987, two years after her death. A young law professor, Pat Williams—today better known as the distinguished legal scholar, Nation columnist, and MacArthur “genius award” winner Patricia Williams—reviewed it respectfully for The New York Times. Yet she found Murray’s hopefulness in the face of her multiple failures and rejections contained within a certain pathos. “The militance of Williams—reviewed it respectfully for The New York Times, March 29, 1987; Jonathan Yardley, “Faith and Song in a Weary Throat: Pauli Murray, with her life in a new generational reality—the election of a black president, the candidacy of a woman, the shocking refusal to give up her seat to a white passenger precipitated the Montgomery Bus Boycott. While she was a student at Howard Law School, Murray organized successful lunch counter sit-ins in Washington D.C., in 1943 and 1944, seventeen years before the legendary Greensboro protests of 1960. these circumstances, the rejection of her application to the University of North Carolina for graduate study in sociology seemed to her intolerable. “We of the younger generation,” she wrote to UNC president Frank Graham to explain her decision to drop out of the university, “have made our part in the struggle for human freedom. Murray’s family celebrated was both black and indigenous escape by “passing,” but some endured, and some fled the South, as I did later. Some found themselves unemployable because of economic depression and the rise of fascism abroad were “breeding a new militancy in younger Negroes like me,” Murray noted, and strengthening hopes and demands for change. As she grew older, the oppressive power of segregation’s repressive power of segregation’s oppressive power of segregation’s racial climate of the early twentieth century. As a result, we not only must look anew at the issues of race, gender, and sexuality that defined Pauli Murray’s life. Since 1985, a steady scholarly interest in her has generated a growing body of research in the voluminous collection of her papers that she bequeathed to the Schlesinger Library at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study. As a result, we not only must consider her life in a new generational perspective, we also know a great deal more about that life itself; we can now see the autobiographer’s strategic silences and omissions.

Murray has come to seem not the dated gentlewoman of Patricia Williams’s review but rather a prophetic voice. Her words and actions on behalf of all Americans—black and white—and the ways that made both her experience and her narrative about it take on new meaning and importance


2 Murray, Dark Testament and Other Poems (Liveright, 2018), p. 65.

As the complexities, Murray explained, prevented her from “developing a blan ket hatred of all white people,” but rather the tightening of Jim Crow built up “silence” to “a constant challenge to her own self-esteem.” “I was not entirely free from the prevalent idea that I must prove myself worthy of the rights that white individuals took for granted.” Reports of Lynchings and other racial violence were regular shocks, but the pervasive pressure of countervailing violence created the systematic hold of segregation.

Murray and her family sought to avoid circumstances that challenged their “dignity and pride.” Pauli Murray—called by Jonathan Yardley and the Jim Crow streetcar drivers; she declined to go to the movies and sit in the “pelican” gallery. “But racism took its toll.” Each of us had to deal with it as best we could. Some were ultimately destroyed, some led crippled lives, some endured, and some fled. But as I did later. Some found themselves unemployable because of economic depression and the rise of fascism abroad were “breeding a new militancy in younger Negroes like me.” Murray noted, and strengthening hopes and demands for change. As she grew older, the oppressive power of segregation’s repressive power of segregation’s oppressive power of segregation’s racial climate of the early twentieth century. As a result, we not only must look anew at the issues of race, gender, and sexuality that defined Pauli Murray’s life. Since 1985, a steady scholarly interest in her has generated a growing body of research in the voluminous collection of her papers that she bequeathed to the Schlesinger Library at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study. As a result, we not only must consider her life in a new generational perspective, we also know a great deal more about that life itself; we can now see the autobiographer’s strategic silences and omissions.

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The New York Review

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bus home to Durham for Easter when the driver demanded that she and the friend accompanying her sit in broken seats in the colored section rather than in the many seats available toward the front. She objected. Murray had been reading about Gandhi and nonviolence and endeavored to adhere to the Gandhian principle of equal treatment and was taken to jail. The case attracted considerable attention, including from the highest levels of the legal profession.

Murray remained uncertain whether writing or law would enable her to fight Jim Crow more effectively. Worries about earning a living, however, led her to consider the possibility of writing a book program at the University of Iowa, and in 1941 she entered Howard Law School. Excelling as she acquired the legal tools for combating segregation, but in Howard’s overwhelmingly male environment, she was faced with another corrosive form of discrimination. It was at Howard, she wrote, “where I first began to consider the twin of the evil of discrimination—sex bias, which I quickly labeled Jane Crow.” Gender inequity compounded racial injustice, deepening the sense of isolation and marginalization.

During her years in law school, Murray grew convinced that a more direct approach should replace the NAACP strategy of challenging segregation within the separate but equal terms established by Plessy v. Ferguson in 1896. Separate, she believed, was inherently inherently unequal. The Thirteenth and Fourteenth Amendments, she argued to her skeptical Howard classmates, could be used to end both race and sex discrimination. Murray’s senior seminar paper made the case for the direct assault on segregation that a decade later resulted in the triumph of Brown v. Board of Education. Her paper and its pathbreaking arguments served as a resource for Thurgood Marshall and his legal team as they prepared their historic case.

Murray’s collaboration and graduatio from Howard, Murray pursued a range of intellectual and activist projects, repeatedly finding herself facing hurdles because of her race and gender. After she acquired her master’s degree at Berkeley, served briefly as deputy attorney general of California, worked as a clerk for a mail carrier and a drugstore, and then through “amazing good fortune” was hired as an associate attorney at the prestigious white shoe firm Paul, Weiss, Rifkind, Wharton & Garrison, where she worked until she departed in 1960 to join the faculty of the Ghana Law School. Murray’s life was filled with juxtapositions of highs and lows. She celebrated the struggles she not only got her self to meet with in securing a law school teaching post. In 1967 she became the first black woman to be ordained in the Episcopal Church.

Murray’s deepening engagement with the church and with her spiritual life was driven by a devastating personal loss. She writes in Song of a Weary Throat of her intense bond with Irene Reed (1971), Ginsburg, then a volunteer attorney for the American Civil Liberties Union, successfully argued that the equal protection clause prohibited differential treatment based on sex. Ginsburg explicitly acknowledged Murray’s influence by naming her as a coauthor of her appellate brief.

In spite of a lifetime of achievements and the doctorate she received from Yale in 1965, Murray did not succeed in securing a law school teaching post. After a year as vice-president of Bennett College in Columbia, South Carolina, she joined the American Studies faculty at Brandeis. Her five years there represented the longest period she ever remained in a job. But motivated in part by her anger at the exclusion of women from positions of leadership in her beloved Episcopal Church, she entered General Theological Seminary at the age of sixty-three, once again determined not just to get mad but to get smart. In 1977 she became the first black woman to be ordained in the Episcopal Church.

The historian Rosalind Rosenberg’s recent biography, Jane Crow: The Life of Pauli Murray, the personal and public letters Murray wrote to one critical source of the marginalization Murray felt herself a hybrid—black and white, male and female—certainly engaged in the powerful identity-based social movements of her time, yet distanced from them by the complexity and secrecy of her understanding of herself. She denounced the sexism of the mainstream civil rights movement and the racism included as a speaker at the 1965 March on Washington, she noted with dismay. She broke with Betty Friedan and NOW over their failure to acknowledge that the category “woman” was not exclusively white. Fearing publicity to admit or discuss her struggles, she moved to pursue her own private life path that challenged the binary nature of gender and pointed the way toward both the medical and social response to gender identity, she nevertheless inspired others to do the same.

In 1979, Murray’s close friend, Robbie Short, was diagnosed with breast cancer. The two women were so closely tied together that Murray felt that her own cancer diagnosis in 1981 was a sign of the illness. She lived with cancer until her death in 1985. Murray’s last years, her distress brought her to the brink of physical and mental collapse, she spent time in psychiatric hospitals. She did not believe she was a lesbian; she was not attracted to women she wanted. She was determined to be a man and that she should have been a boy.

Although only the scarcest hints of her turmoil are mentioned in her published writings, a new research casts fresh light on the nature and meaning of the struggle that was her life. She felt herself a hybrid—black and white, male and female—certainly engaged in the powerful identity-based social movements of her time, yet distanced from them by the complexity and secrecy of her understanding of herself. She denounced the sexism of the mainstream civil rights movement and the racism included as a speaker at the 1965 March on Washington, she noted with dismay. She broke with Betty Friedan and NOW over their failure to acknowledge that the category “woman” was not exclusively white. Fearing publicity to admit or discuss her struggles, she moved to pursue her own private life path that challenged the binary nature of gender and pointed the way toward both the medical and social response to gender identity, she nevertheless inspired others to do the same.
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`Every Time I Look at It I Feel Ill’
Regina Marler

René Magritte: The Fifth Season
an exhibition at the
Catalog of the exhibition edited by Caitlin Haskell.
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art/DAAP/Distributed Art Publishers,
151 pp., $29.95

In October 1952, René Magritte’s New York dealer, Alexander Iolas, a champion of the Surrealists in the United States and elsewhere, wrote him in protest. He had recently unpacked Personne (1952), which is sometimes called Magritte’s hyper-trophic images, in which oversized objects appear to crowd their settings. In this case, a lasciviously painted tortoiseshell comb, a vivid blue-green glass, a gargantuan bar of soap, and other personal items dwarf a modest bedroom. The colors made him sick, Iolas reported. Had the painting been painted? He begged Magritte for an explanation:

I am so depressed that I cannot yet get used to it. It may be a masterpiece, but every time I look at it I feel ill…. It leaves me helpless, it puzzles me, it makes me feel confused and I don’t know if I like it.

One has to admire this freshness of perception in a man who also represented Max Ernst and was no stranger to disturbing imagery.1 Perhaps Iolas’s honesty disarmed Magritte. “Well, this is proof of the effectiveness of the picture,” he replied. “A picture which is really alive should make the spectator feel ill.”

The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art bought Personal Values in 1998, after the death of its most recent owner, Harry Torczyner, Magritte’s lawyer and friend. As the curator Caitlin Haskell explains in the excellent catalog for “René Magritte: The Fifth Season,” in 1998 the Museum acquired a loaned to the Musée Magritte in Brussels during SFMOMA’s two-year closure for expansion, but remained on her mind. She and her fellow curator Gary Garrels began to conceive a show “that would focus on the artist’s late work, from the period of our painting forward, and correct the misconception that it was, for better or worse, a return to his Surrealism of the 1920s and 1930s.”2

But this would mean revisiting—even attempting to rehabilitate—Magritte’s unpopular art from the 1940s: his bright, quirky “sunset surrealism” and the brutal, Fauve-inspired daubs he submitted in 1948 for his first solo exhibition in Paris. If these two bodies of work are viewed as they work a sustained one, conducted over five years, Magritte completed over a hundred examples of sunset Surrealism (a term derived from a postwar Belgian Surrealist manifesto, “Surrealism in Full Sunlight,” which was a rejection, in part, of the Paris Surrealists’ increasing interest in mysticism and the esoteric), and sunset works seem more likely to ask, “Is this a joke?” Together, the sunset and vache paintings present one of the most enduring mysteries—and the greatest curatorial challenge—of a career devoted to intellectual puzzles, visual gaps, and what Magritte described as his “systematic search for disturbing poetic effects.”

The eldest of three boys, René was born in 1898 in Lessines, Belgium, to Léopold Magritte, a petit-bourgeois merchant, and his depressive wife, Régina, whom Léopold locked in the bed-room each evening for her own safety. One night she escaped from their home in Châtale and drowned herself in the River Sambre. Magritte was thirteen.

Much has been made of a family legend, now discredited, that he watched while his mother’s body was recovered from the water three weeks later, her damp nightgown clinging to her face. The source, it was said, of the shrouded woman of “The Lovers” (1928) and other paintings.3 Magritte’s own deadpan description of the suicide seems designed to discourage inquiry: “In 1912, his mother Régina is tired of life. She throws herself into the Sambre.”

We know little about Magritte’s childhood. He wrote engagingly about his art and ideas but shared only a handful of early reminiscences. In a 1938 lecture delivered in Antwerp, “La Ligne de Vie” (Lifeline), he recalled staying with his grandmother and aunt in Soignies, a small provincial town, where he played with a girl in the old village can be seen in William E. Jones’s exhibition, see David Sylvester’s “The Silence of the World” (Menil Foundation/H. N. Abrams, 1992).4


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We visited the underground vaults, whose heavy iron door we could lift up, and we would come up into the light, where a painter from the capital was painting in a very picturesque avenue in the cemetery with its broken stone pillars strewn over the dead leaves. The art of painting then seemed to me to be vaguely magical, and the painter gifted with superior powers.

His family’s rising fortunes can be surmised from the houses they rented and the second home Magritte’s father built in Châtelet, with its stylish Art Nouveau façade: exactly the kind of frippery at which the young Magritte would turn up his nose. At twelve, he started taking painting lessons with a local schoolmaster. Some early paintings in an Impressionist style survive. Despite Léopold’s mercantile focus, he was Mesens’s middle brother, Raymond, a businessman, who would also help support René by buying his paintings) and in 1916 sent him to Brussels to enroll in the Académie Royale des Beaux-Arts.

When not indulging his passion for detective fiction—particularly the Fan-tômas books and films, in which the villain of disguises vanishes by time and again as the inspector closes in on him—Magritte occasionally attended his art classes. More importantly, he met the friends who would coalesce into the Belgian avant-garde: among them the painters Paul Delvaux and Pierre-Louis Floquet, the architect Victor Bourgeois and his brother Pierre, with whom Magritte shared a studio, and E. L. T. Mesens, a musician, later an art dealer who would help organize the 1936 Surrealist exhib-ition, and run the London Gallery with Roland Penrose.

As World War I (and the German occupation of Belgium) ended, the pent-up energy among these writers and artists released itself in a flood of new journals, exhibitions, galleries, manifestos, and alliances. Finally, they could see the revolutionary art that was surfacing in the rest of Europe dur-ing and after the war. Pro- and anti-Dada factions emerged in Brussels. Magritte had once tried writing detective novels under a pseudonym, and now he began to write fantastic and cryptic poems to his friends’ journals and to his own short-lived Dada prospectus, Esophsage, which he coedited with Mesens, and declared, “We refuse under any circumstance to explain precisely what people won’t understand.” No second issue of Esosophe appeared.

Ravenous for new ideas, Magritte cycled through Modernist painting styles. A lecture on De Stijl pulled him briefly toward geometric abstraction. Pierre Boeuf, a follower of Italian Futurism; “in a veritable frenzy,” as Magritte recalled, he turned out Futurist canvases and wrote to Marinetti for further guidance. He began traveling to Paris in 1920, soaking up Cubism and the remains of Fauvism.

These experiments—and the exhaust-ion of working what he called “idiotic jobs: posters and drawings for advertising”—prepared him for his pivotal encounter with Dadaism. In 1922 the poet Marcel Lecomte came to see Magritte and Mesens a reproduction of Giorgio de Chirico’s The Song of Love (1914), a composition of seemingly
unrelated objects—a green ball, a rubber glove, and a plaster cast from the head of the Apollo Belvedere—against a wall in what looks like an arid piazza. A locomotive steams across the horizon. Magritte could “not hold back his tears.” He spoke and wrote about this “exceptional meeting” many times: “It was one of the most moving moments of my life: my eyes saw thought for the first time.”

De Chirico’s importance to the Surrealists would be hard to overstate, but by the time Magritte discovered The Song of Love, de Chirico had cast aside what he called his “metaphysical” paintings and was advocating a return to classical tradition. He had painted The Song of Love near the end of a four-year residence in Paris. Soon after the war broke out, he returned to Italy to work for the army, produce ponderous academic paintings, and thumb his nose at modern art.

Yet his earlier works were waiting at the Paul Guillaume gallery in Paris, ready to slay the Surrealists. A chance encounter with these paintings. He saluted de Chirico in the first Surrealist Manifesto (1924) and introduced his work to Tristan Tzara and others, who must have marveled that even the titles of de Chirico’s prewar paintings—The Enigma of the Hour, The Disquieting Muses, The Nostalgia of the Infinite—prefigured the language and obsessions of Surrealism.

When de Chirico returned to Paris in 1926, he was celebrated as a hero. But the Surrealists were puzzled—insulted, even—by de Chirico’s overworked neoclassical paintings of the 1920s, which seemed a repudiation of their shared ideals. After one dispariting studio visit, Breton burst out obscenely against de Chirico, and the break was complete by 1926, the year before Magritte’s first intellectual encounter with these paintings. He had dreamed of a neurasthenic hand rising from behind a wall window a hovering bird. The tentative brushwork is immature, but the title and other elements suggest that everything was in place for the stylistic breakthroughs of 1926–1927, the period in which his rounded, realistic form, his flat brushwork, and his repeating motifs emerge, and he began to marry his ideas with his execution. “When it came it was sudden,” he recalled, explaining his stylistic shift. “When you have an idea you must choose an eagle, a rock and some eggs, and you must paint them in a correct, precise way, but not in a manière, in any special technique.” Even in Magritte’s works, he continued, there was the possibility of the same topic of conversation for him. When the Magritte scholar Sarah Whitfield asked his widow if she could view paintings in person that she had already seen in reproductions, she was surprised and amused. She had clearly adopted his view that the material qualities of paintings were irrelevant, and that to study his application of paint or the thread count of his canvases was to miss the point to a comical degree. (Katrina Rush’s fascinating catalog essay, “The Act of Painting Is Hidden,” belies this assumption.)

Magritte was not so committed to reproduction that he overlooked the sales value of paintings by his hand. He freely copied his own works (especially those of Alexander Iolas) and painted variants of favorite images throughout the years—at one point producing about sixty small copies for an American collector—though he did not go as far as de Chirico, who back-dated his copies of his early metaphysical work, essentially forging himself. Among its other pleasures, “The Fifth Season” of the Paris Surrealist circle is a tribute to the variants of Magritte’s paintings.

In July 1927, Van Hecke gave Magritte his first-person exhibition at Galerie Pierre in Brussels. The show flopped, but on a handshake agreement with Van Hecke to represent Magritte’s future work, Georgette and her husband, the poet Louis Scutenaire, and later Scutenaire’s art dealer Camille Goemans, the poet Paul Nougé, the writer and theorist texts, collaborate with friends (especially Paul Nougé, who is often referred to as the Breton of Belgium), and work freelance. Among Magritte’s Paris writings were dreams, evocations of romantic encounter and romantic accounts of dreaming. “It is a victory when a man finds a dream that is good enough for his dreams,” he wrote in “Personal Experience,” published after his death by Marcel Mariën. He had dreamed of a woman on a bicycle and of a man unzipping his trousers in the street, “like some- how terrified him. On waking, he realized that he had seen the woman in life the day before, but he resisted prob- ing the source of the blue silk: “I cannot bring myself to take away the magic it still has, nor to rank it with objects that you have only to touch or look at once.”

The twelfth and final issue of La Révolution surrealiste, dated December 15, 1929, records the brief embrace of Magritte and the Paris Surrealists. The Parisian “incompatible mon- tage of the Surrealists—for once, with Magritte—surrounding an image of his, and Magritte’s aphorisms, “Les Mots et les images” (Words and Images), a sort of primer of his semiotic explorations. “No object is so tied to its name that we cannot find another one that suits it better,” he began, beside a sketch of a label: “Le canon” (The cannon). But the night before this issue was published, Breton had picked a fight with René and Georgette and made a public scene in their hotel room. The idyll was over. Magritte had joined the distinguished list of those exiled by Breton from Surrealism, among them Tristan Tzara, Antonin Artaud, Louis Douchet, and the writer Irene Hamoir, who would become the leading female figure of the period in which his rounded, realistic form, his flat brushwork, and his repeating motifs emerge, and he began to marry his ideas with his execution. “When it came it was sudden,” he recalled, explaining his stylistic shift. “When you have an idea you must choose an eagle, a rock and some eggs, and you must paint them in a correct, precise way, but not in a manière, in any special technique.” Even in Magritte’s works, he continued, there was the possibility of the same topic of conversation for him. When the Magritte scholar Sarah Whitfield asked his widow if she could view paintings in person that she had already seen in reproductions, she was surprised and amused. She had clearly adopted his view that the material qualities of his paintings were irrelevant, and that to study his application of paint or the thread count of his canvases was to miss...

For a philosopher who worked in paint, clearly the central element was the idea, not its execution: “For me it’s not a question of painting but of thinking.” This must have been a frequent of Magritte’s style could appear in the 1930s beside the work of Dalí, for example, or in relation to Abstract Expressionism.

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The Suffocation of Democracy
Christopher R. Browning

As a historian specializing in the Holocaust, Nazi Germany, and Europe in the 1920s, I have been repeatedly asked about the degree to which the current situation in the United States resembles the interwar period in Germany and Europe. I would note several troubling similarities and one important but equally troubling difference.

In the 1920s, the US pursued isolationism, rejected participation in international organizations like the League of Nations. America First was America alone, except for financial agreements like the Dawes and Young Plans aimed at ensuring that our “free-loading” former allies could pay back their war loans. At the same time, high tariffs crippled international trade, making the repayment of those loans especially difficult. The country witnessed an increase in income disparity and a concentration of wealth at the top, and both Congress and the courts eschewed regulations to protect against the self-inflicted calamities of free enterprise run amok. The government also adopted a highly restrictive immigration policy aimed at preserving the hegemony of white Anglo-Saxon Protestants against an influx of Catholic and Jewish immigrants. (Various measures barring Asian immigration had already been implemented between 1882 and 1917.) These policies left the country unable to respond constructively to either the Great Depression or the rise of fascism, the growing threat to peace, and the refugee crisis of the 1930s.

Today, President Trump seems intent on withdrawing the US from the entire post–World War II structure of international cooperation. (A sequence of chancellors who ruled Germany and Jew, Léon Blum, led many on the left. The Catholic parties (Populair in Italy, Zentrum in Germany), liberal moderates, Social Democrats, and Communists did not cooperate effectively in defense of democracy. In Germany this reached the absurd extreme of the Communists underestimating the Nazis as a transitory challenge while the Social Democrats—dubbed “red fascists”—as the true long-term threat to Communist triumph. By 1936 the democratic forces in France and Spain had learned the painful lesson of not uniting against the fascist threat, and even Stalin reversed his ill-fated policy and instructed the Communists to join democrats in Popular Front electoral alliances. In France the prospect of a Popular Front victory and a new government headed by—horror of horrors—a Socialist led by Blum would have put them on the right to proclaim, “Better Hitler than Blum.” Better the victory of Frenchmen emulating the Nazi dictator and his iron fist than that of Russian capitalists who could destroy the Rhine than preserving French democracy at home and French independence abroad under a Jewish Socialist. The Nazis as a transitory challenge to the Nazis led to the complete inversion of previous political orientations. Both Mussolini and Hitler came to power because the Communists underestimating them as a transitory challenge while the Social Democrats—dubbed “red fascists”—as the true long-term threat to Communist triumph.)

14 The New York Review

I nte r n a t i o n a l  a n c h o r y  p r o d u c e d  W o r l d  W a r I,  t h e  B o l s h e v i k  R e v o l u t i o n,  t h e  G r e a t  D e p r e s s i o n,  t h e  H o l o c a u s t,  a n d  t h e  H o l o c a u s t,  p r e c i s e l y  t h e  s o r t  o f  d i s a s t e r s  t h a t  t h e  p o s t – W o r l d  W a r  I I  i n t e r n a t i o n a l  s y s t e m  h a s  f o r  s e v e n  d e c a d e s  r e m a r k a b l e l y  a v o i d e d.

In threatening trade wars with allies and adversaries alike, Trump justifies increased tariffs on our allies on the specious pretext that countries like Canada are a threat to our national security. He combines his constant disparagement of our democratic allies with open admiration of authoritarianists. His naive and narcissistic confidence in his own powers of personal diplomacy and his faith in a handshake with the likes of Vladimir Putin and Kim Jong-un recall the hapless Neville Chamberlain (a man in every other regard a different from Trump). Fortunately the US is so embedded in the international order it created after 1945, and the Republican Party and its business supporters are sufficiently alarmed over the threat to free trade, that Trump has not yet completed his agenda of withdrawal, though he has made astounding progress in a very short time.

A second aspect of the interwar period with all too many similarities to our current situation is the waning of the Weimar Republic. Paul von Hindenburg, elected president of Germany in 1925, was endowed by the Weimar Constitution with various emergency powers to defend German democracy should it be in dire peril. Instead of German President Paul von Hindenburg and Chancellor Adolf Hitler on their way to a youth rally at the Lustgarten, Berlin, May 1933

Obama’s first term provoked Democrats to scrap the filibuster for all but Supreme Court nominations. Then McConnell’s unprecedented blocking of the Merrick Garland nomination required him in turn to scrap the filibuster for Supreme Court nominations in order to complete the “steal” of Antonin Scalia’s seat and confirm Neil Gorsuch. The extreme politicization of the judicial nomination process is once again on display in the current Kavanaugh hearings.

One can predict that henceforth no significant judicial appointments will be made when the presidency and the Senate are not controlled by the same party. McConnell and our dysfunctional Congress have now ensured an increasingly dysfunctional and disrespected judiciary, and the constitutional balance of powers among the three branches of government is in peril.

Whatever secret reservations McConnell and other traditional Republican leaders have about Trump’s character, governing style, and possible criminality, they openly rejoice in the payoff they have received from their alliance with him and his base: huge tax cuts for the wealthy, financial and environmental deregulation, the nominations of two conservative Supreme Court justices (so far) and a host of other conservative judicial appointments, and a significant reduction in government-sponsored health care (though not yet the total abolition of Obamacare they hope for). Like Hitler’s conservative allies, McConnell and the Republicans have prided themselves on the early returns on their investment in Trump. The combination of Trump’s abasement before Putin in Helsinki, the shameful separation of families at the border, and the level of US asylum law (to say nothing of basic humanitarian principles and the GOP’s relentless claim to be the defender of family values”), and most recently Mueller’s implication of Trump in criminal violations of campaign finance laws has not shaken the fealty of the Republican old guard, so there is little in the way of the intransigent and incriminating report from Special Counsel Robert Mueller will rupture the alliance.

But the potential impact of the Mueller report does suggest yet another eerie similarity to the interwar period—how the toxic divisions in domestic politics led to the complete involvement of the US in international rivalries in which he is the dominant player and “wins,” overlaps as zero-sum rivalries in which he is the gravedigger, using these powers first and then of parliamentary assembly and then of parliamentary government with authoritarian and installed him as chancellor. The Nazis then proceeded far beyond the destruction of democratic norms and then to a youth rally at the Lustgarten, Berlin, May 1933

The suffocation of democracy is Mitch McConnell. He staked the hyperpolarization of American politics to make the Obama presidency as dysfunctional and paralyzed as he possibly could. As with parliamentary gridlock in Weimar, congressional gridlock in the US has diminished respect for democratic norms, allowing McConnell to trample them even more. Nowhere is this vicious circle clearer than in the obliteration of traditional precedents concerning judicial appointments. Systematic obstruction of nominations in is Mitch McConnell. He staked the hyperpolarization of American politics to make the Obama presidency as dysfunctional and paralyzed as he possibly could. As with parliamentary gridlock in Weimar, congressional gridlock in the US has diminished respect for democratic norms, allowing McConnell to trample them even more. Nowhere is this vicious circle clearer than in the obliteration of traditional precedents concerning judicial appointments. Systematic obstruction of nominations in
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extent of Russian meddling makes the claim that it had no effect totally implausible, many Republicans will retreat, either implicitly or explicitly, to the third line of defense: “Better Putin than Hillary.” There seems to be nothing for which the demonization of Hillary Clinton does not serve as sufficient justification, and the notion that a Trump presidency indebted to Putin is far preferable to the nightmare of a Clinton victory will signal the final Republican repudiation to illiberalism at home and subservience to an authoritarian abroad.

Such similarities, both actual and foreseeable, must not obscure a significant difference between the interwar democratic decline and our current situation. In his 1935 novel *Hang on Here*, Sinclair Lewis portrayed a Nazi-style takeover in the US, in which paramilitary forces of the newly elected populist president seize power by arresting many members of Congress and setting up a dictatorship replete with all-powerful local commissars, concentration camps, summary courts, and strict censorship, as well as the incarceration of all political opponents who do not succeed in fleeing over the Canadian border. Invoking the Nazi example was understandable then, and several aspects of democratic decline in the interwar period seem eerily similar to current trends, as I have noted. But the Nazi dictatorship, war, and genocide forced the flight of democrats. We are not yet at that stage. Democratic democracy are not proving very useful for understanding the direction in which we are moving today. I would argue that current trends reflect a significant divergence from the dictatorships of the 1930s.

The fascist movements of that time prided themselves on being overtly antidemocratic, and those that came to power in Italy and Germany boasted that their regimes were totalitarian. The most original revelation of the current trends is that the construction of overtly antidemocratic dictatorships aspiring to totalitarianism is unnecessary for holding power. Perhaps the most apt designation of this moment is the insidious term “illiberal democracy.” Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey, Putin in Russia, Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines, and Donald Trump in the US have all discovered that opposition parties can be left in existence and elections can be held in order to provide a fig leaf of democratic legitimacy, while in reality elections pose scant challenge to their power. Truly dangerous opposition leaders are neutralized or eliminated one way or another.

The flow of lies and other media is likewise unnecessary, since a flood of managed and fake news so pollutes the flow of information that fact-checking becomes irrelevant as shapers of public opinion. Once-independent judicial leaders are gradually disentangled through selective purging and the appointment of politically reliable lawyers and judges. Xenophobic nationalism is on the march (explicitly anti-immigrant white nationalism) as well as the prioritization of “law and order” over individual rights are also crucial to these regimes in mobilizing the popular support of their bases and stigmatizing their enemies.

Trump has shown unabashed admiration for these authoritarian leaders and great affinity for the major tenets of illiberal democracy. But others have pointed out in pithy fashion that Republicans begin with a systemic advantage in electing senators and representatives, because the Democratic Party’s constituency has become heavily concentrated in big states and big cities. By my calculation every currently serving Democratic senator represents roughly 3.65 million people; every Republican roughly 2.51 million. Put another way, the fifty senators from the twenty-five least populous (Citizens United v. FEC) in particular has greatly enhanced the ability of corporations and wealthy individuals to influence American politics. We are approaching the point when Democratic senators might still win state elections in the major blue states but become increasingly irrelevant in elections for the seats that make up Congress. Trump’s personal flaws and his tactic of appealing to a narrow base while energizing Democrats and alienating independent voters may lead to precisely what he wants: wave election needed to provide a congresional check on the administration as well as the capture of enough state governorships and legislatures to begin reversing emerging trends in gerrymandering and voter suppression. The elections of 2018 and 2020 will be vital in testing how far the electoral system has deteriorated.

Another area in which Trump has been the benefactor of long-term trends predating his presidency is the decline of organized labor. To consolidate his dictatorship, Hitler had to abolish the independent unions in Germany in a single blow. Trump faces no such problem. In the first three postwar decades, workers and management effectively shared the increased wealth produced by the growth in productivity. Since the 1970s that social contract has collapsed, union membership and influence have declined, wage growth has stagnated, and inequality in wealth has grown sharply. Governor Scott Walker’s triumph over public sector unions in Wisconsin and the recent Supreme Court decision striking down mandatory public sector union dues (Janus v. AFSCME) simply accelerate a process long underway. The increasingly un-even playing field caused by the rise in corporate influence and decline in union power, along with the legions of well-funded lobbyists, is another sign of the illiberal trend.

Alongside the erosion of an independent judiciary as a check on executive power, other hallmarks of illiberal democracy are the neutralization of a free press and the steady diminution of basic human rights. On these issues, often described as the guardrails of democracy against authoritarian encroachment, the Trump administration either has won or seems poised to win significant gains for illiberalism. Upon his appointment as chancellor, Hitler immediately created a new Ministry of People’s Enlightenment and Propaganda under Joseph Goebbels, who remained one of his closest political advisors.

In Trump’s presidency, those functions have effectively been privatized in the form of Fox News and Sean Hannity’s nightly phone calls to the president. This is the so-called “alternative facts” of the Trump version of events, and in turn Trump frequently finds inspiration for his tweets and comments in Jack Welch’s nightly prime-time news monitoring of Fox commentators and his late-night phone calls with Hannity. The result is the creation of a “Trump bubble” for his base to inhabit that is shielded from the perils of the US press. CNN, and MSNBC and readers of The Washington Post and The New York Times. The highly critical free media once the Supreme Court makes clear that being protected as a “sincerely held religious belief.” Chief Justice John Roberts’s decision declaring corporations to be “persons” under the Constitution (Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission) was understandable then, and even more likely through narrower rulings. Nothing remotely so horrific is on the horizon. The future has no need to be so dreary.

The very first legislation decreed by Hitler under the Enabling Act of 1933 (which suspended the legislative powers of the Reichstag) authorized the government to dismiss civil servants for suspected political unbelief and “non-Aryan” ancestry. Inequality before the law and legal discrimination were core features of the Nazi regime from the beginning. For the first time, arbitrary intrusions into people’s private choices about sexuality and reproduction. Persecution of male homosexuality was decriminalized, whereas in the deaths of some 10,000 gay men and the incarceration and even castration of many thousands more. Some 300,000–400,000 Germans deemed carriers of hereditary defects were forcibly sterilized; some 150,000 mentally and physically handicapped Germans considered “unworthy of life” were murdered. Children born to women bearing “impure” children were removed from their parents and rewarded for having large families; pregnant female foreign workers were sent back to their homes to prevent the birth of undesired children and loss of workdays.

Nothing remotely so horrific on the interwell of many rights and protections Americans can now enjoy is likely. Presumably marriage equality will survive, given the to American public opinion on that issue. But the right of businesses and individuals to discriminate against gays is likely to be broadly protected as a “sincerely held religious belief.” John Roberts’s favorite target, affirmative action, is likely to disappear under his who to end racial discrimination and discrimination. And a woman’s right to abortion will probably disappear in red states, either through an overtly right-leaning Roe v. Wade or more subtly through a series of rulings that fail to find any “undue burden” in draconian restrictions that in practice make abortion unavailable. And equal rights is likely to be eroded in red states through even more insidiously designed voter suppression laws and gerrymandering once the Supreme Court makes clear
that it will not intervene to curb such measures.

The domestic agenda of Trump's illiberal democracy falls considerably short of totalitarian dictatorship as exemplified by Mussolini and Hitler. But that is small comfort for those who hope and believe that the arc of history inevitably bends toward greater emancipation, equality, and freedom. Likewise, it is small comfort that in foreign policy Trump does not emulate the Hitlerian goals of wars of conquest and genocide, because the prospects for peace and stability are nevertheless seriously threatened. Escalating trade wars could easily tip the world economy into decline, and the Trump administration has set thresholds for peaceful settlements with Iran and North Korea that seem well beyond reach.

It is possible that Trump is engaged in excessive rhetorical posturing as a bargaining chip and will retreat to more moderate positions in both cases. But it is also possible that adversarial momentum will build, room for concessions will disappear, and he will plunge the country into serious economic or military conflicts as a captive of his own rhetoric. Historically, such confrontations and escalations have often escaped the control of leaders far more talented than Trump.

No matter how and when the Trump presidency ends, the specter of illiberalism will continue to haunt American politics. A highly politicized judiciary will remain, in which close Supreme Court decisions will be viewed by many as of dubious legitimacy, and future judicial appointments will be fiercely contested. The racial division, cultural conflict, and political polarization Trump has encouraged and intensified will be difficult to heal. Gerry-mandering, voter suppression, and uncontrolled campaign spending will continue to result in elections skewed in an unrepresentative and undemocratic direction. Growing income disparity will be extremely difficult to halt, much less reverse.

Finally, within several decades after Trump's presidency has ended, the looming effects of ecological disaster due to human-caused climate change—which Trump not only denies but is doing so much to accelerate—will be less escapable. Desertification of continental interiors, flooding of populous coastal areas, and increased frequency and intensity of extreme weather events, with concomitant shortages of fresh water and food, will set in motion both population flight and conflicts over scarce resources that dwarf the current fact of Central Africa and Syria. No wall will be high enough to shelter the US from these events. Trump is not Hitler and Trumpism is not Nazism, but regardless of how the Trump presidency concludes, this is a story unlikely to have a happy ending.

Making Herself the Subject

Stacy Schiff

A Life of My Own
by Claire Tomalin.
Penguin, 334 pp., $27.00

Asked in 2011 if there might be a memoir in her future, Claire Tomalin, the author of sterling biographies of Mary Wollstonecraft, Jane Austen, Samuel Pepys, and Charles Dickens, among others, demurred. She had lived for too long through her subjects. She retained little sense of herself. “I know it sounds pathetic,” she told her interviewer, “but I don’t know who I am.” It stood to reason. The biographer has devoted years to thinking with someone else’s mind. While she has lived any number of lives she has traveled each time as a stowaway. Better than most, she knows that we are strangers to ourselves, omniscient only when it comes to others.

Seven years later Tomalin has reconsidered. She claims to have been driven in part by curiosity. “What would I learn about myself?” she wonders. Might she finally come to know the author of her books? As for the other parts, score-settling, record-straightening, and self-aggrandizing plainly figure nowhere among them. Of a subject’s late-life confidences Tomalin years ago observed: “Few people like their past to be entirely and permanently obliterated.” Or as Diana Athill put it in a very different out-from-behind-the-curtain memoir, “one recoils instinctively at the prospect of being ‘deleted with one swipe of the great eraser.’”

Another thing about other people’s lives: they have plots. History, Tomalin has noted, “is always a matter of choice and control.” Her own past strikes her as surprisingly short on design. Rather she has been the subject of her time. “As powerless to resist as a migrating bird or a salmon swimming upstream.” Causes align only obliquely with effects. As she sees it, regular infidelities on her husband’s part drove her to “progress”—how many other writers would have resisted the word “succeed”—in her career. The more he left her in the lurch the more she realized independence was all. She would find her life’s work, she told her interviewer, “as powerless to resist as a migrating bird or a salmon swimming upstream.”

Tomalin begins with her parents, whom she introduces—the biographical instinct dies hard—by their Christian names. Émile Delavenay was French; the foreign last name bestowed on his daughter a kind of freedom, confers Tomalin, “because the English could not easily place me.” A brilliant son of the Haute-Savoie, Delavenay early on identified Great Britain as the promised land, having fallen in love with London at fifteen. He de- voted himself to English literature at the École Normale Supérieure, where his tutor duly informed him “that he loved with London at fifteen. He delineated life at a very early age. It was a decision that Tomalin has already cut us off at the pass. Early on she warns that her father will undergo a change in fortune that will “seem well beyond reach.” Change for the better was never a couple were destined to produce but “their daughter Marguerite.” She seems to distance herself from the family she has not yet joined, or instinctively to reach for safe biographical ground.

The marriage quickly unravelled. Émile found Muriel moody, irrational, jealous. He withdrew or raged; she blamed him “for turning her from a gentle and lovable creature into a

3The tutor made no mention of the opposite danger. “As a matter of practice it is good to be on your guard against an Englishman who speaks French perfectly; he is very likely to be a card-sharper or an attaché in the diplomatic service,” warned Somerset Maugham. Émile Delavenay enjoyed a long UNESCO career.
Tomalin is decidedly less pointed in her memoir. “My mother told me early,” writes Tomalin, “that whatever happens to you, however unhappy you may be, you can escape into a book.” Family life effectively ended when Tomalin was eight; her parents never spoke to each other again. Literature was the constant companion as she shuttled among schools, depending on which parent got his or her way: she knew the Wordsworth poem before she first laid eyes on daffodils. In her late teens, just before her Newnham College interview, a beloved headmaster rebuked her for having, after a small mishap, behaved “like a tragic opera heroine.” It was less a scolding than an inoculation. Tomalin brings to these pages the same equanimity she does to her other biographies and, at times, yet more restraint: no Tomalin subject would be left out later for a Cambridge visit, leaving his or her father with a discussion of real estate, calculated to restore marital harmony. The relationship with Nick was very much on-again, off-again. “Although I now knew I had at last found my vocation,” she writes, intensely happy, nearly forty, “I was angry, who covers up a beating for her so hard she required stitches.”

As her birthday approached in 1963, Tomalin was eight; her parents never spoke to each other again. Literature taught her well: her first thought was of the soapsuds make no appearance here, nor is Nick any longer the charming bolder who “fell for the office vamp.” Tomalin is less pointed in her memoir than in the short pieces that serve as connective tissue to her 1999 collection of criticism. (She is also less naughty; we no longer catch her, while employed by her publishers’ bodyguard, open Graham Greene’s mail.) She de- fers regularly to her diary, which effec- tively keeps the emotions at bay. “I wrote in my diary, ‘I think Nick will destroy me.’” She notes, veering into a discussion of real estate, calculated to restore marital harmony. The relation- ship with Nick was very much on-again, off-again. Tomalin writes to find herself the wife of a faithless husband, a role that offends for its utter banality. It does not help that Nick shows her a couple of letters written to her father in which he con- fided that “he had not been able to live with my mother and so understood why Nick could not live with me.” While it may have qualified as “male solidar-
Tomalin resigned abruptly from the Times in 1986, having come to blow with management. Here only she allows herself a sliver of score-settling: “I could not stomach Murdoch’s mixture of bullying and bribery,” she professes. She was fifty-three. It was, she would write later, “the end of my brilliant career.” In truth, the exemplary biographies still lay ahead. Early on she ventured to suggest that there might be an advantage to sharing a gender with one’s subject. Someone who had similarly bushwhacked her way through the male world, “taking a traditional female role, but also seeking male privileges,” might be expected to find Mansfield “less baffling than even the most understanding of men.” Having begun with largely invisible women, Tomalin would make her way, beginning with Pepsy, to colossal conspicuously.

The painter turns up in some corner of every portrait, but glimpses of Tomalin in her work are cues for special celebration. Of Austen in 1805, orphaned and without prospects, she writes, “These were not things you wrote down; if possible you did not allow yourself even to think about them.” In Samuel Pepys she mischievously sticks her head over the biographical parapet to describe her hero’s erotic bluster. Instead there had been unrealized adventures. But Pepys is confident that each one of those unseduced women would have been his had the circumstances only been different. “We don’t believe him, and he probably doesn’t really believe himself,” muses Tomalin, “but it looks good on the page and cheers him up.”

It is unclear if self-exposure has cheered her or if after 331 pages Tomalin sees herself any more clearly. We certainly do. With the Mansfield came an echo of an earlier description of her charmed New Statesman years: “It was like having the best of a woman’s life,” Tomalin wrote her father, “and a man’s too.” She proves indomitable on both fronts, as brave as she is eloquent, sustained by comic opera, the heroine of her own life after all. One smiles anew at her description of Dickens, all charm and moxie, having perfected his “trick of putting aside agony and exhaustion and reappearing suddenly, like a clown from behind the curtain, full of energy, amazing everyone with his good humour and laughter, and his determination to get on with the chief work of his life.”

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The Autocracy App

Jacob Weisberg

1. Facebook is a company that has lost control—not of its business, which has suffered remarkably little from its series of unfortunate events since the 2016 election, but of its consequences. Its old slogan, “Move fast and break things,” was changed a few years ago to the less memorable “Move fast with stable infra.” Around the world, however, Facebook continues to break many things indeed.

In Myanmar, hatred whipped up on Facebook Messenger has driven ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya. In India, false child abduction rumors on Facebook’s WhatsApp service have incited mobs to lynch innocent victims. In the Philippines, Turkey, and other receding democracies, gangs of “patriotic trolls” use Facebook to spread disinformation in the name of propaganda.

Mark Zuckerberg now spends much of his time apologizing for data breaches, privacy violations, and the manipulation of Facebook users by Russian spies. This is not how it was supposed to be. A decade ago, Zuckerberg and the company’s chief operating officer, Sheryl Sandberg, championed Facebook as an agent of free expression, protest, and positive political change. To drive progress, Zuckerberg always argued, societies would have to get over their hang-ups about privacy, which he described as a dated concept and no longer the social norm. “If people share more, the world will become more open and connected,” he wrote in a 2010 Washington Post Op-Ed. This view served Facebook’s business model, which is based on users passively delivering personal data. That data is used to target advertising to them based on their interests, habits, and so forth. To increase its revenue, more than 98 percent of which comes from advertising, Facebook needs more users to spend more time on its site and surrender more information about themselves.

The import of a business model driven by addiction and surveillance became clearer in March, when The Observer of London and The New York Times jointly revealed that the political consulting firm Cambridge Analytica had obtained information about 50 million Facebook users in order to develop psychological profiles. That number has since risen to 87 million. Yet Zuckerberg and his company’s leadership seemingly incapable of imagining that their relentless pursuit of “openness and connection” has been socially destructive. With each apology, Zuckerberg’s history have lately been expressing remorse over their contributions and warning others to keep their children away from it. Sean Parker, the company’s first president, acknowledged last year that Facebook was designed to cultivate addiction. He explained that the “like” button and other features had been created in response to the question, “How do we consume as much of your time and conscious attention as possible?” Chamath Palihapitiya, a crucial figure in driving Facebook’s growth, said he feels “tremendous guilt” over his involvement in developing “tools that are ripping apart the social fabric of how society works.” Roger McNamee, an early investor and mentor to Zuckerberg, has become a full-time crusader for restraining a platform that he calls “tailor-made for abuse by bad actors.”

Perhaps even more damning are the recent actions of Brian Acton and Jan Koum, the founders of WhatsApp. Acton and Koum that he wouldn’t share its user data with other applications. Facebook told the European Commission, which approved the merger, that it had no way to match Facebook profiles with WhatsApp user IDs. Then, simply by matching phone numbers, it did just that. Pooling the data let Facebook recommend that WhatsApp users’ contacts become their Facebook friends. It also allowed it to monetize WhatsApp users by enabling advertisers to target them on Facebook. In 2017 the European Commission fined Facebook $122 million for its “misleading” statements about the takeover.

Acton has been less discreet than Koum about his feelings. Upon leaving Facebook, he donated $50 million to the Signal Foundation, which he now chairs. That organization supports Signal, a fully encrypted messaging app that competes with WhatsApp. Following the Cambridge Analytica revelations, he tweeted, “It is time. #defeatfacebook.”

2. The growing consensus is that Facebook’s power needs checking. Fewer agree on what its greatest harms are—and still fewer on what to do about them. When Mark Zuckerberg was summoned by Congress in April, the toughest questioning came from House Republicans that Facebook was censoring conservatives, in particular two African-American sisters in North Carolina who make pro-Trump videos and “white power” signs. Facebook’s policy team charged the two with promulgating content “unsafe to the community” and indicated that it would restrict it. Facebook subsequently said it had in error but has never explained how that happened, or how it decides that some opinions are “unsafe.”

The naturally more incensed about the twin issues of Russian interference in the 2016 election and the abuse of Facebook data by Cambridge Analytica in its work for Trump’s presidential campaign. The psychological profiles Cambridge Analytica created with this data may have been snake oil, and it’s not entirely clear what Facebook’s digital team made use of them in its voter targeting efforts. But the firm’s ability to access so many private profiles has, more than anything else, prompted the current backlash against Facebook. Cambridge Analytica stands as proxy for a range of the company’s other damage: its part in spreading fake news, undermining independent journalism, and suppressing dissent and fomenting ethnic hatred in authoritarian societies. One might also mention psychological harms such as the digital addiction Sean Parker described, the fracturing of attention that Tristan Harris campaigns against, and the loss of empathy Sherry Turkle has written about eloquently.

In Antisocial Media, Siva Vaidhyanathan argues that the core problem is the harm Facebook inflicts on democracies around the world. A professor of media studies at the University of Virginia, Vaidhyanathan is a disciple of Neil Postman, the author of Amusing Ourselves to Death. A staunch defender of post-internet tract, Postman wrote that Aldous Huxley, not Orwell, portrayed the dystopia most relevant to our age. The dangers modern societies face, Postman contends, are less censorship or repression than distraction and diversion, the replacement of civic engagement by perpetual entertainment.

Vaidhyanathan sees Facebook, a “pleasure machine” in which politics and entertainment merge, as the culmination of Postman’s Huxleyan nightmare. However, the pleasure that comes from absorption in social media is more complicated than the kind that television delivers. It encourages people to associate with those who share their views, creating filter bubbles and self-reinforcing feedback loops. Vaidhyanathan argues that by training its users to elevate feelings of agreement and belonging over truth, Facebook has created a gigantic “forum for tribalism.”

He describes Zuckerberg’s belief that people ought to care more about


Ten Arguments for Deleting Your Social Media Accounts Right Now by Jaron Lanier. Henry Holt, 146 pp., $18.00

Cardboard cutouts of Mark Zuckerberg placed outside the Capitol to protest the spread of disinformation on Facebook, Washington, D.C., April 2018
Facebook’s power to “connect” them than about how it uses their data as a species of techno-narcissism, a Silicon Valley affection born of hubris and missionary zeal. Its unquestioned assumption is that if people around the world use our tools and toys, their lives will instantly improve by becoming more like ours. This attitude is expressed in products like Free Basics, a mobile app that supplies no-cost access to Facebook and a small selection of other websites in developing countries. In 2016 India’s telecom regulator blocked the app on the basis that a Facebook-curated Internet violated the principle of net neutrality. Marc Andreessen, a Facebook board member, responded on Twitter that the ruling was an expression of India’s “economically catastrophic” anticolonialism—effectively casting Facebook as a beneficent neocolonial power. While both he and Zuckerberg later apologized, both evinced incomprehension that anyone would reject the irresistible bargain of free Facebook.

In the heady days of the Arab Spring, it was easy to get swept along by such naïve good intentions and by the promise of social media as a benevolent political force. Wael Ghonim, an Egyptian Google employee, used a Facebook page as an organizing tool in the revolution that overthrew Hosni Mubarak. When complaints from human rights regional specialists, expressing regret, eventually responds, first by throwing groups grow loud enough, Facebook as an experiment the company has effectively taken sides against the brave news start-up that anyone would reject the irresistible bargain of free Facebook.

As Facebook proved a better tool for autocrats than for revolutionaries, the protest movement became a surveillance and disinformation machine. In Cambodia, Hun Sen’s government has poured money into Facebook advertising to build up an inflated following, while an “experiment” the company performed in six small countries—moving news content out of the primary Newsfeed into a separate “Explore” section—made independent media sources all but invisible. In the Philippines, where the average user spends nearly four hours a day on social media, Rodrigo Duterte’s government has carried out a campaign of legal harassment against the brave news start-up Rappler—which is, of course, mainly distributed via Facebook.

The list of countries in which the company has effectively taken sides against the opposition is very long. When complaints from human rights groups grow loud enough, Facebook eventually responds, first by throwing up its hands and then by hiring regional specialists, expressing regret, and promising to “do more.” Such gestures of the regime, once it discovered how useful they were for disseminating propaganda and monitoring dissent. After the Egyptian revolution was hijacked and then reversed, Ghonim reconsidered his enthusiasm for Facebook. “Social media only amplified that state by amplifying the spread of misinformation, rumors, echo chambers, and hate speech,” he said in a 2015 TED talk. “The environment was purely toxic. My online world became a battleground filled with trolls, lies, and hate speech.”

When he turns to the 2016 US election, Vaidhyanathan is especially good on the details of how Facebook not so inadvertently assisted the Trump campaign. “Project Athena,” Trump’s digital operation, was far less sophisticated than Hillary Clinton’s. But precisely because it had so little digital expertise, Trump’s side relied heavily on Facebook employees who were provided to the Trump campaign as embedded advisers. Facebook supplies these technical experts to all large advertisers, and in Trump’s case it made sure to find ones who identified as Republicans (similar advisers were offered to the Clinton campaign but turned down). These technicians helped the campaign raise over $250 million and spend $70 million per month in the most effective way possible on the platform.

The best weapon of Trump’s digital chief Brad Parscale was something called “Custom Audiences from Customer Lists,” an advertiser product released by Facebook in 2014. This tool allowed the Trump campaign to upload Republican voter lists, match them with Facebook’s user database, and micro-target so-called dark posts to groups of as few as twenty people. Using Democratic voter lists, it used the same kind of finely tuned, scientifically tested messages to suppress votes, for example by sending Haitian-Americans in South Florida messages about Bill Clinton’s having failed to do enough for Haiti. And because Trump’s inflammatory messages generated such high rates of “engagement,” Facebook charged his campaign a small fraction of the prices Hillary Clinton’s had to pay for its Facebook advertising.

While it helped Trump cultivate precision toxins in digital petri dishes, Facebook was simultaneously undermining the old fact-based information ecology. Always, this destruction was incidental to Facebook’s goals of growing its user base, increasing engagement, and collecting more data. But much as it tries to do with individual users, Facebook got the news industry hooked. Publishers of newspapers and magazines understood that supporting the company’s constantly changing business priorities—Instant Articles on mobile, short-form video, live video, and so on—would lead to more traffic for their own pages and stories.

For a time, the benefit flowed in both directions. But last year, under pressure to stop promoting fake news, Facebook began downgrading published content as a whole in its News Feed algorithm, prompting sharply declines in revenue and layoffs at many media organizations. Since January, a new emphasis on what Facebook calls “trusted” sources has had perverse effects, boosting traffic for untrustworthy sites, including Fox News and The Daily Mail, while reducing it for more reliable news organizations like The New York Times, CNN, and NBC. The reasons are unclear, but it appears that Facebook’s opaque methodology may simply equate trust with popularity. “Vaidhyanathan does not think our concerns should stop with Facebook. He says that Apple, Amazon, Microsoft, and Google also share a totalizing

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Aspiration to become “The Operating System of Our Lives.” But Facebook is what we should worry about most because it is the only one within reach of realizing that ambition. It currently owns four of the top ten social media platforms in the world—the top four, if you exclude China and don’t count YouTube as a social network. Zuckerberg’s company had 2.2 billion monthly active users in June 2018, more than half of all people with Internet access around the world. WhatsApp has 1.5 billion, Facebook Messenger 1.3 billion, and Instagram 1 billion. All are growing quickly. Twitter, by comparison, has 330 million and is hardly growing.

What would the world look like if Facebook succeeded in becoming the Operating System of Our Lives? That status has arguably been achieved only by Tencent in China. Tencent runs WeChat, which combines aspects of Facebook, Messenger, Google, Twitter, and Instagram. People use its payment system to make purchases from vending machines, shop online, bank, and schedule appointments. Tencent also owns four of the top ten social media platforms in the world—the top four, if you exclude China and don’t count YouTube as a social network. Tencent runs WeChat, which combines aspects of Facebook, Messenger, Google, Twitter, and Instagram. People use its payment system to make purchases from vending machines, shop online, bank, and schedule appointments. Tencent also connects to the Chinese government’s Social Credit System, which gives users a score, based on data mining and surveillance of their online and offline activity. You gain points for obeying the law and lose them for such behavior as traffic violations or “spreading rumors online.”

Full implementation is not expected till 2020, but the system is already being used to mete out punishments to people with low scores. These include preventing them from traveling, restricting them from certain jobs, and barring their children from attending private schools. In the West online surveillance is theoretically voluntary, the price we pay for enjoying the pleasure machine—a privatized 1984 by means of Brave New World. It is possible to imagine a future in which Facebook becomes more and more integrated into finance, health, and communications, and becomes not just a way to waste time but a necessity for daily life.

What is to be done about this blundering cyclops? Jaron Lanier’s proposal is a consumer movement. Lanier emerged in Silicon Valley a decade ago as a humanist critic of his fellow techies. One of the inventors of virtual reality in the 1980s, he has been playing the role of a deadlocked, digital Cassandra in a series of manifestos expressing his disappointment that digital technology has turned out to detract from human interaction more than enhance it. In Ten Arguments for Deleting Your Social Media Accounts Right Now, Lanier proposes that we follow his lead in opting out of Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, Instagram, and any other platform that exploits user data for purposes of targeted advertising, as opposed to charging users a small fee, the way WhatsApp used to.

Lanier’s strangled acronym for the business model he objects to is BUMMER, which stands for “Behaviors of Users Modified, and Made into an Empire for Rent.” BUMMER companies are those that work ceaselessly to addict their users, collect information about them, and then resell their attention to third parties. Lanier makes his case at the level of detail you’d expect from a critic boycotting his own subject. But drawing mainly on his own past experience and examining how Facebook makes money, he’s able to make a persuasive case that addiction to social media makes people selfish, disagreeable, and lonely while contributing to a corruption of democracy, truth, and economic equality.

His solution, on the other hand, is wildly inadequate to the immensity of the problem. Refusal to participate in digital services that don’t charge their customers, which Lanier says should be our rule, is little more than a juice fast for the social media–damaged soul. More than two thirds of Americans use Facebook. Over time, changing consumer preferences may erode this monopoly; use among US teenagers appears to be in sharp decline. However, much of the shift is to Instagram and Messenger, other social platforms that are owned by, and share data with, Facebook.

In the second half of the book, Lanier presents the world as a system of intertwined platforms. In the first third of the book, with 77 percent of US mobile social networking traffic, has a monopoly. It’s that under the prevailing legal standard of “consumer harm,” plaintiffs need to show that the platform was liable for actual harm, and we will. zapar.com

It will be difficult to limit the company’s power. Under what has been called “surveillance capitalism,” social media companies that provide free products always have an incentive to violate privacy and make money. Because Facebook profits by making more personal data available for use by third parties, its business model points in the direction of increased surveillance andzos of abuse. In the case of its 2011 FTC agreement, Facebook appears to have simply slapped off a legal obligation, preferring to risk fines rather than accept an impediment to growth. There is little reason to think it won’t make the same choice again.

Regulation might make Facebook still more powerful. Network effects, which make a service like Facebook more valuable to users as it grows larger, incline social media companies toward oligarchy. The costs of legal compliance for rules like the GDPR, which can be ruinous for smaller start-ups, tend to lock in the power of incumbents even more. Unlike smaller competitors, Facebook can afford to pay legal fees and develop tools to weed out manipulated images and fake posts, although he says this could take a decade. At thirty-four, he’s got the time. We may not.

What Facebook surely would not welcome is more vigorous antitrust enforcement. Blocking Facebook’s acquisitions of Instagram and WhatsApp were the best chances for the FTC to prevent the behemoth from becoming an unaccountable powerhouse. Reversing those decisions through divestiture or at least preventing these platforms from sharing customer data would be a way to limit Facebook’s influence. At a minimum, the company should not receive approval to acquire any other social networks in the future.

But current antitrust doctrine may not be up to the task of taking on Facebook or the other tech lethies. The problem is not establishing that Facebook, with 77 percent of US mobile social networking traffic, has a monopoly. It’s that under the prevailing legal standard of “consumer harm,” plaintiffs need to show that the platform was liable for actual harm, and we will.
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“There are no theories in circulation about Jacques Becker,” François Truffaut wrote in Cahiers du Cinéma in the spring of 1954, “no scholarly analyses, no theses. Neither he nor his work encourages commentary, and so much the better for that.” Truffaut was reviewing Becker’s newest film, Touchez pas au grisbi, an adaptation of Albert Simonin’s novel of a heist gone bad. The film would enjoy great commercial success and launch the final phase of Jean Gabin’s career by casting him as a patriarchal gangster, but Truffaut was not concerned with that aspect of it. For him and many of his colleagues at Cahiers, Becker was one of a handful of French filmmakers—Jean Renoir, Robert Bresson, Jean Cocteau, and Jacques Tati were others—who could be taken as role models, as embodying a more personal approach than the self-consciously literary and often formulaic modes of the “tradition of quality” they disdained. Becker was not a purveyor of broadly telegraphed social messages or portentous psychologizing, and his films could not be mistaken for anyone else’s: “Every one of Jacques Becker’s films is a Becker film... What happens to Becker’s characters is of less importance than the way it happens to them.”

Becker had been a significant figure in French cinema since his early acceptance with friends with whom he took a liking to the younger man—he was twenty years old and had a natural elegance—and relished their shared passion for films. Born in 1906 and raised in a bilingual household, the son of an industrialist who worked for the Fulmen battery company and an Irish-born fashion designer who maintained her own maison de couture in Paris, Becker had been a restless curious and playful adolescent and an indiffident student, an enthusiast of cinema and jazz bent on resisting his father’s efforts to channel him into the world of industrial engineering. Working for a time as a steward for a transatlantic steamship line, he got to know touring American musicians Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington among them, and met the director King Vidor, who offered him an acting job in Hollywood.

By the early 1930s Becker had formed a working relationship with Renoir that would continue throughout the decade, as he became an increasingly trusted assistant director, technical advisor (by virtue of his mechanical bent), and all-purpose consultant. He wrote and directed a portion of Renoir’s 1936 Communist-financed semi-documentary La vie est à nous and can be seen in bit roles in Boudu sauvé des eaux (1932) and La grande ilusion (1937), films for which he served as a second-unit director. The friendship was intense, never entirely tranquil, and for Becker decisive: “Not even Jean Renoir knows how much his personality and his destiny have influenced mine.” When Renoir fled to America in 1940, Becker remained behind, having been called up at the outbreak of the war. Taken prisoner in 1940, he spent a year or so in a German detention camp in Pomerania before being repatriated for health reasons after successfully faking an epileptic fit. Under the Occupation he made his first feature, the highly entertaining parodic crime film Dernier about (1942), and went on to the more substantial Goupi mains rouges (1943), a crime story, set deep in a rural backwater teeming with maîna and suspicion, that already shows him in full mastery of his art. His approach from the start involved multiple takes and complex continuity editing, experimenting with variant possibilities to be resolved in the cutting room, and he would work on all but one of his films with Marguerite Renoin—Renoin’s editor as well as his companion for most of the 1930s (she took his name although they were unmarried).

She would speak later of the demands of Becker’s way of working, stitching together bits of one take, bits of another, finding places to splice in incidental details he had captured, and creating fluid scenes out of the multitude of shots. Brigitte Auber, one of the stars of Rendez-vous de juillet (1949), described watching Becker and Renoir at work: “Every one of Jacques Becker’s films is a Becker film... What happens to Becker’s characters is of less importance than the way it happens to them.”

That subtle work of breaking scenes into fragments and establishing a new emotional continuity out of them underlies the rich texture he imparted even to seemingly simple situations, the sense that as in life many things are happening at once, as each person on screen moves along a separate trajectory of feeling.

After the war Becker was recognized as an important emerging director, with Falbalas (1945), an obsessive melodrama making full use of what he knew about the world of fashion, Antoine et Antoinette (1947), a romantic comedy about a working-class couple, Rendez-vous de juillet, a collective portrait of postwar youth seeking careers in jazz or theater or ethnology, and Edouard et Caroline (1951), another couple movie, this time engaging, or more precisely confounding, with the monied class. That Becker was perceived as a generational voice chronicling contemporary mores may account for the initially tepid reception of his unsurpassed masterpiece, the radiant tragedy Casque d’or (1952), with its evocation of the Parisian underworld of the turn of the century; its follow-up, Rue de l’Estrapade (1953), was seen mostly as a paler variation on his earlier comedies. While his social analyses seemed ambiguous in their class consciousness or his realism was tempered by a clear affection for popular genres, he came in for some criticism. In the ideological milieu of postwar France, Becker, despite earlier ties to the left and to the wartime Resistance, betrayed a reluctance to be neatly situated on the political spectrum. Nonetheless, with the success of Grisbi, his stature in French cinema seemed incontestable.

Yet within a few years Becker’s reputation was considerably diminished. In the pages of Cahiers, in a 1957 roundtable discussion on French filmmaking, Jacques Rivette labeled him as embodying an academic and a sell-out. His projects after Grisbi—the Fernandel vehicle Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves (1954), a lavish Arabian Nights escape film shot in Morocco, and The Adventures of Arsène Lupin (1957), a loose adaptation of Maurice Leblanc’s Belle Époque tales of the gentleman thief—were approved grudgingly, if at all, by earlier admirers. Truffaut suggested that Arsène Lupin could hardly be seen as important in the light of Max Ophüls’s Lola Montés, Bresson’s À Man Escaped, and Alain Resnais’s Night and Fog: “Arsène Lupin is an agreeable film with which you can pass an agreeable evening, but the question that imposes itself is what it means.”

Montparnasse 19 (1958; also known as Les amants de Montparnasse), a heavily fictionalized biopic with Gérard Philipe, did not achieve success, although it elicited characteristically paradoxical praise from Jean-Luc Godard (“Everything rings true in this totally false film... He who leaps into the void owes nothing to those who watch”). It was a death-haunted film—the project had been planned for Ophüls, whom Becker replaced after his sudden death; Philipe did not live to see the opening—and its single-minded attention to the artist’s brutal decline and squalid passing sounds a uniquely despairing note in Becker’s work, complete with a stylized image of Modigliani’s best-known works being looted by an unscrupulous art dealer, incisively played by Lino Ventura. Becker passed, however, in 1961, by then already ill. He died of lung cancer just after completing the last of his thirteen features, Le trou (1960), the account of a failed escape attempt from La Santé prison in 1947, based on the novel by José Giovanni, who was a participant in it. (Giovanni, the film’s co-scenarist and technical adviser, was an influential author in both crime fiction and cinema who served a long prison term and was for a time under sentence of death; he remains the object of many questions regarding his criminal past and activities during the Occupation.) Le trou was immediately recognized as an extraordinary accomplishment. Many thought it was Becker’s best film, and previous qualifications gave way to acknowledgments of its incontestable power, with Jean-Pierre Melville’s probably the most effusive: “How many...
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The splendors of Le trou and Casque d’or and Touches pas au grisbi were confirmed without relegating the rest of the work to minor status. Two underseen films in particular were revelations. Édouard et Caroline makes a great deal out of very little, restricting itself to two apartments and a single night, and hinging its highest drama on a lost waistcoat and a difference of exaggerated comedy; Arístide Lupin is genuinely witty while carefully playing everything straight. In the process, and in the most undemonstrative way, it extracts the sense of a lost paradise of impossible freedom—the freedom of the master thief who eludes all restraints—restored at last.

Becker has sometimes been accused (as by David Thomson) of not having an identifiable central theme or subject. Yet to take in all his films at Film Forum was to appreciate the full resonance of Truffaut’s remark that “every one of Jacques Becker’s films is a Jacques Becker film”—along with his later observation that the reception of craftsmanship was obsessive—from the drafting of the screenplay through all stages of post-production—but that craftsmanship served to convey the subliminal and elusive movements of awareness. The qualities of emotional frankness and rhythmic invention that he admired in jazz were the qualities that interested him.

Details are all: Anne Vernon in Édouard et Caroline turning on the radio when she finds herself alone for a moment, innocently, and with genuine melodies in her head, listening out for her favorite tune; or a piano tuner striking dissonant notes at the lottery office where Roger Pigtat has gone to make a plea about his lost ticket in Annette and Antoine. Perhaps; or children carrying on a noisy ping pong tournament in Falbalas while an alienated couple avoids conversation; or Serge Reggiani in Grisbi, rather than actually discovering truths. I do not recall that it made a very big impression in a season when New York screens were featuring Dr. Strangelove, The Pink Panther, Seven Days in May, Becket, and Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow. I do remember that at the time, and knowing Becker only as a name. The Night Watch affected me like nothing I had watched before, and that for years I was haunted by the memory of a film that had become very hard to see.

When I finally managed to catch up with it again, it was with renewed astonishment. It was indeed like nothing else: so formally perfect as to seem abstract, and at the same time—with the unexaggerated demeanor of its non-professional cast and the oppressive ness of actual prison locations—real enough to break down the separation between spectator and protagonist with the same force as the convict Roland striking a metal bar against a concrete wall. In long scenes with little or no dialogue, we feel what feels like an archaic level of human activity. Even after the end it is impossible to separate yourself from this cell and the company of these prisoners, whose eyes you have been looking into and whose breaths you have shared. Becker was aware that he was dying while making it; he barely survived the completion of the editing. A sustained urban nightmare.

My search for a reunion with Le trou became a search for the rest of Becker’s films, an ambition only partly realized through decades of scattered screenings. It was thus gratifying that New York’s Film Forum, after closing for several months to renovate and expand its screening facilities, chose to reopen this past August with a complete Becker retrospective, with the further advance-

* Cahiers du Cinéma 107 (May 1960).
derail things at any moment—whether from Antoine’s simmering rage about a lecherous neighbor, Édouard’s touchiness about Caroline’s affluent family, or Françoise’s sudden discovery of her husband’s infidelity. The equilibrium of the couples teeters from moment to moment, with never a resolution but for the provisional happiness of a recovered balance. If Becker places such high value on loyalty, it’s because it is almost never to be counted on.

He excelled at showing social rituals, always attentive to their fault lines and to the pockets of isolation within them. The supreme example of this is the long opening sequence of Casque d’or, where the interplay at a riverside tavern is choreographed in its minutest aspects, charting multiple lines of attraction, camaraderie, jealousy, and lethal combativeness while retaining the pictorial harmonies of, say, Auguste Renoir’s Bal du moulin de la Galette. Becker’s concern for character extends not only to minor roles, but to extras. By their responsiveness, or manifest lack of responsiveness. Whether it’s the usual appearance or personal tics but not only to minor roles, but to extras. Becker was if anything a pessimist when it came to the limits of human empathy. He did, however, stay faithful to the longing for a freedom never to be quite realized—an escape from the limitations he so precisely mapped. Toward the end of Le trou two of the prisoners break through a final barrier and, lifting a manhole cover, find themselves peering out at a Paris street, just before dawn, just outside the prison walls. In the end they will only have that glimpse and nothing more. The joy of it—the care with which the moment was made visible—feels like Becker’s testament.

Academy, he replies in what might sum up Becker’s aesthetic: “Everybody is always surrounded by everybody.”

With some filmmakers you come away with indelibly composed images, or moments of supreme tension or release, or an overwhelming sense of encroaching or radiant patterns, and Becker was certainly capable of all those effects. Yet the final impression after spending several weeks watching these films was of having associated with a remarkable variety of people—whether at a wedding party, in a workplace, in an after-hours café, or in a prison cell—and having gotten a very precise sense of both how they act within a group and what they are like in moments of pure aloneness, as they steal a glance at a mirror or pause in bewilderment on a staircase or, perhaps, meditate a betrayal, whether their own or someone else’s. Their voices and faces remain present.

The warmth of that impression has nothing to do with sentimentalism. Becker was if anything a pessimist when it came to the limits of human empathy. He did, however, stay faithful to the longing for a freedom never to be quite realized—an escape from the limitations he so precisely mapped. Toward the end of Le trou two of the prisoners break through a final barrier and, lifting a manhole cover, find themselves peering out at a Paris street, just before dawn, just outside the prison walls. In the end they will only have that glimpse and nothing more. The joy of it—the care with which the moment was made visible—feels like Becker’s testament.

They told us a story about the devil, mala cosa, small in stature with a beard whose face they could never see clearly who traveled from house to house with a flaming piece of wood, who stole whenever he wanted and, with a flint, gave them three incisions one palmo wide and two long in the sides, then pulled out their entrails, cut off a piece to throw into the fire, made three cuts in the arm, the second in the sangradiura obverse to the elbow, dislocated it before setting everything back in place, hands touching the wounds and saying they were healed. Sometimes he would appear at their dances, in costume, dressed as a woman or a man, and whenever he wanted to he picked up the buho house, lifted it into the air, then dropped it with a crash. The food they offered him he never ate, and when they asked him where he was from, he pointed to a cleft in the earth.

After the Avavares told us all this we laughed, but then they brought us many of whom he had taken, and we saw the scars of the cuts on their sides exactly in the manner they had described and we told them not to worry for the One God would protect them.

—Jeffrey Yang
of contraceptives. The Comstock laws, in place since the 1870s, effectively outlawed the circulation of any material that was considered obscene, and in some cases the use of contraceptives, including condoms, in part to discourage extramarital sex. When Margaret Sanger opened the first family planning clinic in New York in 1916, she was arrested and imprisoned on obscenity charges.

Governmental and reformer concern over venereal diseases escalated dramatically upon America’s entry into World War I, when the sexual health of soldiers became a military priority. Many thousands were infected as they socialized in cities where they were stationed before heading to the front, which resulted in the dismissal of over 10,000 men and countless lost hours of work. Recasting venereal disease as a national security issue led to the creation in the late 1910s of several laws that came to be known as the American Plan. Their enforcement was initially paid for by the National Security and Defense Fund; in 1918 Congress passed the Chamberlain-Kahn Act, which allocated $1 million to the project and established the Interdepartmental Social Hygiene Board to oversee its implementation.

What began as a local effort to reduce prostitution around military bases quickly expanded. Federal agents divided the nation into ten districts within which paid supervisors and field representatives were to “investigate the presence of alcohol, prostitution, and general female promiscuity in a given area.” Should investigators discover women they considered likely to have an STI, they had to apply for a warrant to examine them, quarantine them indefinitely, and subject them to medical treatments that were thought to be a “magic bullet” but were known to be extremely painful and carry terrible side effects. At the time, Stern writes, “no effective treatment existed for syphilis or gonorrhea.” This practice “went on for decades”—well after the supposed need to protect soldiers in both World War I and World War II passed—and incredibly, “the age listed for a first ‘offense’ or ‘delinquent act’ was known to be as low as seven.”

Reformers with their sights on eradicating prostitution were the ones originally most keen to promote the work of the American Plan, but in time numerous public health and governmental agencies were equally eager to undertake the effort after it lost federal funding in 1922. By 1918 the plan was operated in forty-one states; in no small part because legislators across the country had been handed a preworded “model law” regarding how best to control STIs. Among other things, this law stipulated that the spread of venereal diseases was “to be declared unlawful,” that such infections must be “reported by name, not merely number,” and that those deemed infected must be quarantined because “their habits are a menace to others.” These people were prohibited from seeking “private treatment” (from, say, a drugstore) and were also prohibited from asking any other authority to issue them certificates of freedom from venereal diseases.

The model laws remained in place, largely unchanged, in every state, establishing a legal precedent for detaining and quarantining citizens during any outbreak of disease—most recently Ebola and the Zika virus. Although it is obvious from these drastic guidelines that the political and legal architects of the American Plan had little regard for civil liberties, what it actually meant to endure the effects of the plan was murky even to Stern until he came across the case of Nina McCall, who died in 1957. He was struck by her story in part because she did not come from a major American city known for “immoral” or “seedy” living, such as San Francisco or Chicago. Nina lived in a small town in central Michigan, a sign of how deeply into the nation the American Plan reached. Most importantly, she decided to sue those who subjected her to confinement and treatment, leaving behind a paper trail of her testimony. “In all these ways,” Stern writes, “Nina made for an ideal protagonist.”

Ideal perhaps, but Nina McCall was not necessarily representative. Stern’s research indicated clearly to him that the plan “disproportionately affected nonwhite women, particularly those of Nina McCall’s color, for whom white, but there were also black women who had the audacity to file lawsuits, such as Betty May James from Texas, whom he perhaps could have profiled. But what elite reformers and medical professionals did to this unmistakable white girl from the middle of nowhere—neither an immigrant from New York, nor a black woman from the South—underscores one of Stern’s central points: that under the American Plan in Kansas, for example, mandatory vaginal examinations could legally be conducted under the auspices of the American Plan. Many thousands of women were infected as they socialized in cities where they were stationed before heading to the front, which resulted in the dismissal of over 10,000 men and countless lost hours of work. Recasting venereal disease as a national security issue led to the creation in the late 1910s of several laws that came to be known as the American Plan. Their enforcement was initially paid for by the National Security and Defense Fund; in 1918 Congress passed the Chamberlain-Kahn Act, which allocated $1 million to the project and established the Interdepartmental Social Hygiene Board to oversee its implementation.

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home warning the public that she was diseased and quarantined, or she could check into a local hospital where she would have to stay until she was fully cured. Despite her fervent insistence that it simply wasn’t possible for her to be infected, Nina chose detention over the prospect of bringing shame on her mother.

Nina spent nearly three months in captivity in a bleak fortress known as the Bay City Detention Hospital. Treated like a syphilitic, she learned that at the time involved painful injections of mercury that, in Stern’s words, caused, among other things, thrashing pain, kidney damage, inflammation or ulceration of the mouth, and terrible skin rashes. . . . It could [also] stunt growth, affect the membranes of the ears, the sinuses, bring about deafness or blindness, and result in death.

Despite these side effects, detain- ees were also forced to labor in their facilities; women like Nina scrubbed floors, washed laundry, and sewed bed- clothes and uniforms. Her treatment by state authorities showed that while she was far from the worst reported case; women accused of breaking the rules in a reformatory in New York were handcuffed with their hands behind their backs and fastened to the cell grating by another pair of handcuffs attached to those on their wrists so that, in some cases, their toes, or the balls of their feet, were only touched the floor; and while suspended, their faces were dipped into pails of water until subdued. Having been confined for gonor- rhea, Nina was then told she had syphi- lis. The toxic treatments she endured, including mercury injections and the application of various deadly silver pro- tein compounds to her vagina, caused her so much pain that she “couldn’t hardly bear the thought of lying in bed.” While she was finally released, she was far from the worst reported case: women accused of breaking the rules in a reformatory in New York were handcuffed with their hands behind their backs and fastened to the cell grating by another pair of handcuffs attached to those on their wrists so that, in some cases, their toes, or the balls of their feet, were only touched the floor; and while suspended, their faces were dipped into pails of water until subdued.

Nina lost the case, but won her appeal. It would take more than one young woman in one small town to bring down the American Plan, and while Nina’s attempt to do so are worth recounting in detail, the horror of the plan was on a larger scale. This decades-long initiative to “reform” poor women in the name of protect- ing the public was made possible by the strong support of well-respected female reformers like Jessie Binford, by the substantial funding of John D. Rockefeller, and by the influence of philanthropists, by the aggressive en- forcement of J. Edgar Hoover, and by the deep conviction of jurists such as Earl Warren that the American Plan was necessary for national security. Peck, Carney, and Corrigan were small cogs in a large and well-oiled machine. Stern is entirely right to concentrate on the underappreciated damage that the plan did to poor women across the country. The program, he shows, was never really about venereal disease—it was an effort to clean up the streets and police the behavior of women. He recounts how local law enforcement used the American Plan to “commit girls between the ages of ten and sev- enteen” for “frequent[ing] saloons,” or “even though the war was now over” and even well into the age of pencil- lin, today’s repressive laws, sentenc- ing, and prisons persist even now that the legal restrictions have reached historic lows. Powerful lobbying organizations, most notably the American Legislative Ex- change Council (ALEC), still push for the passage of model laws to exploit marginalized citizens as prison labor.

The good news, Stern notes, is that once they became aware of the Ameri- can Plan’s myriad abuses, many of the women who for years had championed its enforcement began to call for major reforms. The reformer Ann Webster came to lament having worked “in about every part of the country” and was “ashamed to admit” that she had been party to a procedure which deprived persons of their rights “. . . in the name of their welfare.” Recently, more than a few prosecutors, such as Larry Krasner in Philadelphia, and police, such as those affiliated with the Enforcement Action Partnership and Law Enforcement Against Prohibition, have also begun to reckon with the damage done by their zealous enforcement of the War on Drugs, which comes down hardest on poor and nonwhite people. They too now seek ways to atone by trying to roll back the worst of its laws.

McCall’s willingness to take her tor- mentors to court mattered; the count- less stories Stern has compiled of resistance to the American Plan by ord- inary people suggest that these wom- en’s self-advocacy, and the evolving conscience of women within various organizations, also contributed power- fully to its diminishing enforcement. And yet the laws of the American Plan continued to justify the arrest of “pro-miscuous” women and sex workers into the 1970s, decades after the discov- ery of penicillin and the development of sulfa drugs made venereal diseases easily curable. Perhaps Stern’s most im- portant point is that the American Plan matters because it “is not ancient his- tory, [it] helped create the infrastructure and rationale for an explosion of the female prison population that continues to this day.”

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Berlin Alexanderplatz was published in Germany in 1929. It was a novel bearing the name of a giant train station, and its immediate notoriety was due to its aura of metropolitan switchback and speed. No one, it seemed, had reproduced the wild cancun of a city with such meticulously wild techniques. In the nickelodeon theaters, audiences went to watch a quick-change succession of shorts—and now here, so argued its admirers, was the nickelodeon's novelist equivalent. Its author, Alfred Döblin, the son of a Jewish tailor from Steittin who practiced as a doctor, was a star of the Expressionist movement. His schtick was garish prose, tonal dissonance, and outlandish subjects: psychosis, suicide, lesbian murderers, anarchist revolution in eighteenth-century China. With Berlin Alexanderplatz, Döblin used his garish effects on his own drab neighborhood, the working-class environs of Alexanderplatz, and in the process created his most famous and influential work—praised by Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht, and later made into a television miniseries by Rainer Werner Fassbinder.

Berlin in 1929 was the junk city, total modernity. It was so modern that no one knew how to live in it, let alone de modernize it. It was so modern that no one could reproduce the wild cancan of a city that was inventive and intermittently comical. Jolas, who was born in New York, read Joyce's Work in Progress, Atget, Braque, Picasso, Desnos, Gide, and Rilke, as well as an early translation by Jolas of Kafka. Jolas's poem "Express," published in transition, gives the general high-speed vibe: "Wheels scream in the fevered crash of speed." No wonder he loved Berlin Alexanderplatz. Reading Jolas's translation now, however, it's not always easy to understand the reason for the zeitgeist excitement, and this is partly due to his solution to the crucial problem of this novel: its saturation in a collage of multiple languages, including a clotted Berliner patois. Jolas decided to make his characters speak in a kind of Ring Lardner Americanese, which makes the novel unintentionally comical, an artifact of picturesque language, like some Sunday night movie on a nostalgia channel, not the torrential act of transcribing it aspired—and seemed—to be.

But thinking about this problem again, and reading the new—also brilliant, also flawed—translation by Michael Hofmann, I wonder if in fact Jolas's problem wasn't specific to his translation but exposed something strange about the original itself. What I mean is: you can't consider this novel's translations without first understanding its unique and unnerving structure. The best contemporary essay on the book was Walter Benjamin's "The Crisis of the Novel." The review expanded, like an umbrella, from a single intuition: "The stylistic principle governing this book is that of montage."

Petty-bourgeois printed matter, scandalmongering, stories of accidents, the sensational incidents of 1928, folk songs, and advertisements rain down in this text. The montage explodes the framework of the novel, bursts its limits both stylistically and structurally, and clears the way for new, epic possibilities.

In Berlin Alexanderplatz Benjamin saw a way out of nineteenth-century interiors into the full modern wilderness. Which also meant that he saw a way out of the nineteenth-century novel. Instead of the dead exploration of psychological ambiguity, wrote Benjamin, Döblin wanted to base his novel on an explosion of pure fact. It wasn't a novel, therefore, it was an epic. Epic, for Benjamin, meant total objectivity. Its essence was montage because for Benjamin, meant total objectivity. Its essence was montage because montage was an arrangement of brute matter. And the purest form of material a novelist could use was language. "The book is a monument to the dialect of Berlin," wrote Benjamin. "He speaks from within Berlin. It is his megaphone." Or also: "It is rare indeed for the waves of incident and reflection to sweep over the reader and destabilize his comfort to this degree, and the spray of actual spoken speech has never given him such a soaking as here." Benjamin has paraphrased Döblin's own stated theory. In his Berliner Programm, written in 1913, Döblin had first pursued a dream of a new novel, beyond the usual territory of desires and motivations. The future novel, he wrote, would exist independently, the way the world exists: 'The book as a whole must not seem to be spoken, it must seem to be concretely there.' And it would do this by refusing any idea that a self possessed an interior: "I am not I, but the street, the lanterns, this and that event, nothing more." Fifteen years later, in 1928, while he was immersed in the writing of Berlin Alexanderplatz, this theory had developed a mutation. A self wasn't just its streets, its environment. It was also the language that surrounded it: "There is a productive power and a compulsive character inherent in every style." The modern self was a side effect of vaster forces: architectural, biological, linguistic. And so, to be equal to the modern, a novel had to be equal to this panorama of crowds and power. It had to become a world.

And of course this Weimar theory is seductive and delightful. I love the idea of this novel. Who doesn't want the world novel? The problem is the novel itself.

For Berlin Alexanderplatz isn't total twentieth-century delirium. It is nineteenth-century, too. It has a basic story—and a hero, Franz Biberkopf. And its basic meaning is described in Döblin's opening page, which offers an abstract of the novel to come:

The subject of this book is the life of the former cement worker and haulier Franz Biberkopf in Berlin. As our story begins, he has just been released from prison, where he did time for some stupid stuff; now he is back in Berlin, determined to go straight.

The story will end, writes Döblin, with our hero's illumination (a bildungsroman!):

A radical cure has been performed on Franz Biberkopf. And in the end we see our man back on Alexanderplatz, greatly changed, considerably the worse for wear, but straightened out.

To see and hear this will be worthwhile for many readers who, like Franz Biberkopf, fill out a human skin, but, again like Franz Biberkopf, happen to want more from life than a piece of bread.

The novel describes a moral odyssey, and it opens on Biberkopf's release from Tegel prison after a four-year sentence: "a man on whose arm a pretty girl from an engineer's family once hung, whom he turned into a whore and finally beat up so badly that she died." He may seem related to German modernism's ferocious sex mon-
sters, like Fritz Lang’s M or Robert Musil’s Moosbrugger, but for Döblin’s Franz, he’s an everyman—an outsider everyman. This figure of the ex-con has two uses for Döblin. His early stories were experiments in deranged perspective, and Biberkopf’s idea of reality is warped by an anxious semi-psychotic paranoia: “The façades were never-ending. There were roofs on the buildings, floating on the buildings, his eyes bounced around. Heaven forbid the roofs should slip off, but no, the buildings were steadfast.”

But maybe more important is the fact that he has been cocooned in Tegel prison. That time lag is the single mechanism controlling the novel’s leeming texture. Biberkopf goes out into the world and is overwhelmed. His release exposes modernity as the pure teeming texture. Biberkopf goes out through the nebulae of Döblin’s factory. He accepts. Beyond that there is nothing to report on his life.”

And what happens to Franz Biberkopf after his release is gradual, bewildering, implacable suffering. He meets a girl, gets a job selling newspapers, is befriended by a charismatic man called Reinhold, then gets himself involved in a gang robbery that goes wrong. In the escape, Reinhold pushes him out of the getaway car, and Biberkopf is run over so violently that his TV series, he turned the novel into a succession of snug interiors—bars and bedrooms—famously filmed with a silk stocking stretched over the lens, to make the light even more nostalgically soft. Those cocoons are the only places for Döblin’s characters feel safe, removed from the modern bombardment of words and images.

The tram turned a corner, trees and buildings interposed themselves. The streets were full of bustle, Seestrasse, people got on and off. Something in him screamed: Watch out, watch out. The tip of his nose felt cold, something brushed his cheek. Zwölf Uhr Mittagszeitung, B.Z. Die neueste Illustrierte, Die Funkstunde. “Any more fares?” The police have blue uniforms now.

The novel’s armature, therefore, is onward melodrama. It’s strange to see Hofmann in his afterword argue that the novel has “good bones”; and even stranger to see him argue that Franz’s story is “told in the little chapter summaries and episode titles.” For this novel’s plot is soggy, unconvincing—made out through the nebulae of Döblin’s minute and indirect narration. If its events are bones then they’re more like overcooked fish bones, gluey and deliquescent, while the exoskeleton of its episode titles and chapter summaries isn’t really concerned with plot description at all. What, for instance, is being told in Chapter 4’s intertitles? His arm has to be amputated. He convalesces, meets a new girl called Mieze (called Mitzi in the translation), whom he loves, and becomes a fence and pimp. But this brief period of (criminal) happiness is thwarted again by Reinhold, who tries to rape Mieze and, when she resists, kills her. Initially, Biberkopf is suspected of the murder. The trauma of the accusation causes him to go mad, so he is kept in an insane asylum—where he eventually reaches a point of total self-knowledge and self-hatred, self-knowledge as self-hatred:

Franz howls and howls, I am guilty, I am not a human being, I am a beast, a monster.

At that hour of the evening, Franz Biberkopf, former transport worker, housebreaker, pimp, manslaughter, died. Another lay in his bed. This other has the same name as Franz, looks like Franz, but in another world he bears a different name.

Eventually Reinhold is arrested, tried, and found guilty of Mieze’s murder. And Biberkopf is released—just as he had been released at the novel’s opening. The novel ends with Biberkopf’s new chastened life: “Straight as he had been released at the novel’s opening, Biberkopf meets two kindly Jewish men in the Scheunenviertel neighborhood. They give him shelter, advice, altruistic affection. They are a way station into the world of Berlin. But they’re really there, I think, not only to demonstrate the novel’s Oströumen smart, but its allegorical meaning. Part of this novel’s collage is its high-culture allusions—to Orestes, Isaac, and in particular Job. The novel is an Old Testament parable, an investigation into the meaning of suffering. Biberkopf leaves prison and enters the metropolis of wild freedom. He believes that he will find meaning in this life, that happiness is something he can create. And he is taught that there is no way of controlling a life, or happiness—that there is no possibility of a plan. The world is an overwhelming system. What awaits us, in the novel’s final sentences, is utopia and war, a festival of slogans and nonsense:

The road is into freedom, into the old world is doomed, wake up, dawn air.

And link arms and right and left and right and left, and marching, marching, we’re marching into war, with us are 100 comrades, they drum and play, widdeboom widdeboom, one’s all right, the other’s all wrong, one stops still, the other falls down, one runs on, the other lies still, widdeboom, widdeboom.

Fassbinder gleefully picked up on the book’s muted political investigation, converting Biberkopf’s delirium in the asylum into a Nazi phantasmagoria. And it’s true that in the current neo-fascist era it would be possible to read the story of Franz Biberkopf as a lesson in the dangers of political apathy. But I think a more accurate interpretation can be found in Brecht’s later disillusion with Döblin’s impatience with Döblin’s theology. On August 14, 1943, Brecht recorded how the exiled Fassbinder wasn’t so wrong when, for
German intellectuals had given a sixty-fifth birthday party for Döblin in Los Angeles—featuring readings, Berlin songs, and a speech by Heinrich Mann. Döblin had then, in a speech “against moral relativism and in favor of well-established norms, religious in character, winding in this way the irreligious sentiments of the majority of the party’s guests”:

When D began to outline how he also had made himself a dilettante, along with many other writers, in the ascent to power of the Nazis… I naively thought for a few minutes that he was going to continue: “I had sharpened the knives of the powerful, discouraged the oppressed, fed the starving with songs, etc.” but he was content to content to obviate this impression, impertinent, without remorse: “because I did not search for God.”

But you don’t read this novel for Biberkopf or its wobbly ideological lessons. You read it for the neon signs and general hubbub—for the montage. The zigzagging panorama that Benjamin adorned is why I want to make this novel exciting, Berlin Alexanderplatz is one huge effort of incorporation, the novel created. Every page is a flamboyant improvisation of registers and discourses and linguistic styles, like this way of triply describing Franz’s fiasco with a prostitute, lurching paragraph by paragraph from comic scene to interior monologue to medical textbook:

“You do me make laugh. You can lie still a moment. I’m not both- ered.” She laughed, extended her plump arms, pushed her stockinged feet out of the bed. “It’s not my fault.”

Out on the street! It’s still raining. What can the matter be? I better find myself another one. Have a good sleep, Franz, my boy, what’s wrong with you?

Sexual potency in the male is produced by the following, working in concert: 1. the glandular system, 2. the nervous system and 3. the sexual organs.

There are weather reports, cinema posters, property prospectuses. And minutely, pervasively, there is the language of newspapers. Biberkopf’s first job is as a newspaper seller, and the newspaper—the machine for the production of ersatz language—is a central character in this novel’s psychodrama:

Travel supplement. When the bit- ter season has broken into our chilly northland, between snow-splintering winter days and the first green of May, we feel drawn—an ancestral urge—to the sunny south beyond the Alps, to Italy…

Fatalistic speech from Marx, the Chancellor Marx: What lies ahead of us is according to my beliefs in Divine Providence. God has made His separate compacts with every nation. What individuals can do is strictly limited.

It’s this kind of montage that makes it very similar to other collage novels from the 1920s, especially Ulysses. Both Benjamin and Fassbinder rejected comparisons with Joyce, but the influence is undeniable. Just listen:

Franz Biberkopf steered his body in grey-green soldier’s coat through the crowd, little women standing at stalls buying vegetables, cheese, herding. Someone was flogging onions.

People do their best. Kids at home, hungry mouths, little beaks, open, shut, open, shut, click clack, just like that.

Locally, Döblin took from Joyce’s novel a method of interior monologue, and globally a perception that consciousness was constantly being invaded by dead bits and pieces of language: a zombie-collage aesthetic.

Why deny it? For Döblin also invented two techniques specific to Berlin Alex- anderplatz. The first is its gradually revealed anonymous narrator, a kind of cosmic explainer. It’s a voice that’s first heard in the jacket copy on Fischer Verlag’s first edition, and continues in its opening synopsis, then the chapter summaries and episode titles, until gradually Döblin claims this voice as his own and speaks directly to the reader: “This Berlin Alexanderplatz: book of mine is about the fate of Franz Biberkopf and everything in it is cor- rect, you will want to read and inwardly digest it, it has its palpable truth.”

In exposing even the novel’s con- struction, Döblin was following his basic crazed principle: every element of a novel should be pursued further than it had been before. And this led him to his second exaggeration of the art of montage: refusing to follow an innate logic of limited narrative perspective. Any small element could suddenly become the center of its own system. There’s a moment, for instance, when after a long scene in a bar, Biberkopf finally leaves. The classical novel would naturally leave the bar when its hero—here, Franz—finally leaves. The classical novel would have a great beauty. At every point in this narrative, through wild switches in tone, or perspective, or conventional length, Döblin risks his novel’s t teetering equilibrium.

It has a metallic taste! I love the way Döblin cannot help describing this landlord, and then his filling, and then the way this filling tastes—before continuing inside the landlord’s per- spective for two or three more dense paragraphs. Just as I love this random description of a kid waiting at a tram stop, which suddenly fast-forwards through his entire future life:

The landlord props himself against a brass beer tap, his tongue prods a new filling in his lower jaw, it has a metallic taste, little Emilie needs to go out in the countryside this sum- mer, or to Zinnowitz to summer camp. The girls are missing, has eyes en- counter the green leaflet again, it’s lying a little slant, he straightens it, a touch of obsessiveness there, he can’t stand to see anything crooked.

3.

And that constant careering, I think, is why this novel’s translations are so uneven, too. Hofmann is a wonderful translator: a one-man Bibliothek. He has remastered the sardonic bleakness of Joseph Roth’s prose or Gottfried Benn’s late poems in uniquely precise recreations. And yet his afterward to this translation is oddly chastened and subdued. “It is one thing to be lost in an original,” he writes ruefully, “some- thing else to be lost in a translation. A translation is unwilling, perhaps, to allow or stand up to the amount of interpretation from the reader that an original must expect.” This is the basic melancholy of translation. The logic of original and copy is so powerful that a translator is always in danger of losing its authority.

The problem with translating Berlin Alexanderplatz is that it is so careless with its own method. You can’t get away with Döblin’s method. This is because that’s grounded in the novel’s scribbled Berlin dialogue, crosshatched like an action painting. The patois is so specific that you either transpose it in transla- tion, or you disguise it. The way Hofmann did, failing, in American— or instead deliberately, as Hofmann does, blur the locale. His solution, he writes, was to aim for “the regional and unspecific”—to create an impossible Anglo-American slang specific to no single time or place. I understand the aim, but—as with Jolas—the practice is already unbalanced, and the act of translating it makes it spin even more uncertainly and wildly. And in fact what’s wonderful about Hofmann’s translation is that you can pack up, we’re not worried.”

“Franz, I’ll say it again, you’re a wet rag. You’ll get your comeuppance.”

I’m not really complaining. I can’t think who would be the ideal transla- tor of this novel: Raymond Queneau, maybe, or Thomas Pynchon. It was already unbalanced, and the act of translating it makes it spin even more uncertainly and wildly. And in fact what’s wonderful about Hofmann’s translation is that you can pack up, that’s pretty shabby of you, that puts the kibosh on everything.” “It’s only those who want to pack up, we’re not worried.”

Franz, I’ll say it again, you’re a wet rag. You’ll get your comeuppance.”

Suffer them to approach, the lonely brick houses glowing out a reddish light, suffer them to approach, the freezing travellers, the drivers of the carts bringing vegetables into the city, the little horses pull- ing. The great, flat, mute plains that the suburban trains and the expresses rumble across, spilling white light in the darkness to ei- ther side.

Maybe the biggest aesthetic problem is always this problem of incorporation: of the patois, of the dialects of these atmospheres that are considered to be unthinkable. And in Berlin Alexander- platz, in any language, Döblin provides a helter-skelter model.

VANISHING POINT

Sometimes the van was the color of the field. I was small then, barely eleven and every day that summer taller, more sure of itself than I. The silver grass of the lawn, uncut, used to wait for the moon to pass, sitting out by the wall to tilt up its face as if laughing, to shake out its long hair. No one could say I lacked imagination: the ferns were all the time wagging spindly, elderly fingers at me.

Once, a man caught my eye in the village: his was not the color of the van or the field. He said nothing to me and I hoarded it, that nothing, hoarded it still, nights the wind blows from the east with its city talk aglitter like fine rain in headlights.

The landlord makes himself a wiser man, at least. The want to tell it every other way. That’s what I say, at least. I say, “Do you know why I can’t stand to see anything crooked?”

—Vona Groarke
Matters of Tolerance

James Gleick


Scientists and engineers recognize an elusive quality—what Harold Harp, the per- fectonist, called “a concept of our world a- mongst whose precision was so taut and de- fine that it made the modern possible.” The perfectonist’s definition of precision is “an essential aspect of modernity that makes the modern possible,” Winchester writes:

“Precision is an integral, unchal- lenged, and seemingly essential component of our modern social, mercantile, scientific, mechanical, and intellectual landscapes. It per- vades our lives entirely, compre- hensively, wholly.

While the engineers had lovingly made yet another model of a car that enjoyed great precision in every aspect of its manufacture, those who had com- missioned and designed and mar- keted and sold it had no feel for the accuracy of their decisions.

Winchester is a longtime journalist turned author, a meticulous researcher and a cognitive thinker who has written superb books about The Oxford English Dictionary, the Krakatoa erup- tion, the birth of modern geology, and (separately) the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. Compared with topics like those, precision may seem an odd choice. What does it mean to write a history of so abstract a concept? Where does it even begin?

First Winchester needs to convince us that precision is a thing. It is, he tells us, a component of machines, and for that matter an essential component of the modern world. “Invisible, hidden in plain sight.” Besides being a com- ponent, it is a “phenomenon” that has transformed human society. We take for granted, like the air we breathe, but we are suckers for precision snow tires and precision beard trim- mers and we aspire to precision medi- cine and precision tattoo removal. It is “an essential aspect of modernity that makes the modern possible.”

In England, John “Iron-Mad” Wilkin- son was improving the manufacture of cannons, which were prone to explod- ing with deleterious consequences for the sailors manning the gun decks of the navy’s ships. Rather than casting cannons as hollow tubes, Wilkinson in- vented a machine that shaped and tempered the iron and bored cylindrical holes into them: straight and precise, one after another, each cannon identical to the last. His boring machine, which he patented, made him a rich man.

Watt, meanwhile, had patented his steam en- gine, a giant machine, tall as a house, at its heart a four-foot-wide cylinder in which blasts of steam forced a piston up and down. His first engines were hugely powerful and yet frustratingly in- efficient. They leaked. Steam “gushed every- where. Winchester, a master of detail, lists the ways the inventor tried to plug the gaps between cylinder and piston, rub- ber, linned oil-soaked leather, paste of soaked paper and flour, cork- board shims, and half- dried horse dung—until finally John Wilkinson came along. He wanted a Watt engine to power one of his bellows. He saw the problem and had the solu- tion ready-made. He could bore steam- engine cylinders from solid iron just as he had naval can- nons, and on a larger scale. He made a massive boring tool of ultrahard iron and, with huge iron rods and iron sleighs and chains and blocks and “searing heat and grind- ing din,” achieved a cylinder four feet in diameter, which as Watt later wrote “does not err the thickness of an old shining at any part.”

By “an old shining,” he meant a tenth of an inch, which is a reminder that measurement itself—the science and the terminology—was in its infancy. An engineer today would say a toler- ance of 0.1 inches.

James Watt’s fame eclipses Iron- Mad Wilkinson’s, but it is Wilkinson’s precision that enabled Watt’s steam engine to power pumps and factories all over England, igniting the Industrial Revolution. As much as the machinery itself, the discovery of toler- ance is crucial to this story. The toler- ance is the clearance between, in this case, cylinder and piston. It is a specifi- cation on which an engineer (and a cus- tomer) can rely. It is the foundational concept for the world of precision. When machine parts could be made to a tolerance of one tenth of an inch, even finer tolerances would be possible: a hundredth of an inch, a thousandth, a ten-thousandth, and less.

Watt’s invention was a machine. Wilkinson’s was a machine tool: a ma- chine for making machines and their parts. More and better machines fol- lowed, some so basic that we barely think of them as machines: toilets, locks, refrigerators, gas burners, automobiles, and so on. Precision is crucial to this story because modern machines are dependent on mere machines—lies in their repeat- ability. Artisans of shoes or tables or even clocks can make things exquisite and precise; the concept of precision was very much for the few, Winchester writes. “It was only when precision was created for the many that precision as a concept began to have the profound impact on society as a whole that it does today.” That was John Wilkin- son’s achievement in 1776: “the first construction possessed of a degree of real and reproducible mechanical
Honoré Blanc, is credited with showing component parts. A French gunsmith, the warehousing and distribution of were interchangeable, they made possible a world of mass production and we were in exchangeable, they made possible the industrial age," achieved a tolerance of one ten-thousandth of an inch. Metal screws and other pieces could be turned out by the hundreds and then the thousands, every one exactly the same.

Because they were replicable, they were interchangeable. Because they were interchangeable, they made possible a world of mass production and the warehousing and distribution of component parts. A French gunsamist, Honoré Blanc, is credited with showing the making of a lathe that made wooden parts. Cobbler's still made the shoes, but now the sizes could be systematized. "Prior to that," says Winchester, "shoes were offered up in barrels, at random. A customer shuffled through the barrel until finding a shoe that fit, more or less comfortably." Before long, Blanchard's lathe was making standardized gun stocks at the Springfield Armory and then at its successor, the Harkers Ferry Armory, which began turning out muskets and rifles by the thousands on machines powered by twenty-five briddles, and twenty-five pans, randomly shuffled the pieces, and then rebuilt "out of this confusion of components" twenty-five new locks. Particularly impressed was the American minister to France, Thomas Jefferson, who posted by packet ship a letter explaining the new method for the benefit of Congress:

"They were machine-made in their entirety, lock, stock, and barrel." It is perhaps no surprise that the military played from the first, and continues to play, a leading and deadly part in the development of precision-based technologies and methods.

The same methods that enabled mass production of guns led to sewing machines, combine harvesters, and bicycles. By the time of the American Civil War, precision engineers in England had learned to make parts to a tolerance of a millionth of an inch. High-velocity rifles followed, and precision timepieces. A new century, a few more orders of magnitude, and then automobiles. On one side of the Atlantic, Winchester admires the Silver Ghost of Henry Royce and Charles Rolls, "the nonpareil, the exemplar of all that is right in engineering," but acknowledges it to the very highest of standards, and with the highest level of precision." On the other side, though, Henry Ford was advertising his Model A—"made of few parts, and every part does something"—followed by the Models B, C, F, K, N, and, finally, T, the Tin Lizzy. During the same period that the Rolls-Royce factory turned out almost eight thousand Silver Ghosts, Ford made more than 16 million of his motorcars.

The true invention, of course, was the assembly line. And though his car was by comparison crude and cheap and unreliable, it was Ford, not Rolls and Royce, who demanded the utmost precision. The assembly line depended on replication, a flow of parts reliably the same, perfectly interchangeable. Removed from the equation: the need for human craftsmanship.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century the Luddites, named after a possible mythical weapon, were the Ludd, smashed stock frames—knitting machines—that imitated the motions of human weavers and, with increasing efficiency, put them out of work. The Luddites were victims of precision, and they weren't the last. At the Portsmouth dockyards, Henry Maudsley's machines replaced a hundred skilled workers. There, as Winchester notes, precision "seemed to benefit those with power; it was a troubling puzzlement to those without." Automation replaced artistry. Interchangeable parts—copies, by definition—drained work of craftsmanship. In effect they turned artisans into machines themselves. The French were more inclined to resist this trend than the British, but the march of progress was inexorable. "By superseding labour the country is depopulated and filled with machines," wrote the mathematician and engineer Charles Dupin, and The Economist reported in 1852:

"The reverse is the fact. England is not depopulated, and it is by using and employing more and more machinery, that her people are nourished and increase in numbers as well as in wealth. They borrow the powers of nature and obtain food in abundance, while the French can scarcely live, and the Irish are starved.

How can engineers resist the ever finer, ever more exact, ever more perfect technologies that come from pushing the bounds of mechanical possibilities? We are always chasing a colossus of mass and power, weighing eight tons and delivering five times that in thrust, but its essential quality is precision: for its boundaries the limits of human skill. Automation and robotics are no longer optional. "Precision engineering," says Winchester, "does now appear to have reached some kind of limit, where the presence of humans, even essential to maintaining the attainment of the precise, can on occasion be more of a drawback than a boon."

Glass gives way to silicon: the smoothing and layering and etching of integrated circuits has taken precision to submicroscopic levels. The transistors on modern chips are invisible, smaller than the smallest bacteria, and approaching the dimensions of atoms. The superlatives of precision start to outrun the power of even Winchester's prose: "edge-of-the-seat, leading-edge, bleeding-edge utopian micro-precision." Precision applies to time as well as space. The atomic clocks that synchronize the world's networks—and enable navigation by GPS—keep time in perfect nanoseconds.

But when does perfectionism become pathology? Maybe precision is a thing we have come to fetishize. Collectors of Leica cameras and Swiss watches, audiophiles in search of the perfect gold-plated speaker cable, devotees of titanium pocket knives and pens—at some point the hunger for perfection for its own sake becomes a cult. Winchester sees this. His paean to perfectionism finally throws itself into reverse and rediscovers the virtues of imprecision. He suggests a need for balance and looks to Japan, a country that worships precision but also continues to revere the patient craftsmanship of hand tools and natural materials.

Japan gives us the term wabi-sahi, the acceptance of imperfection, asymmetry, and incompleteness. "Humankind," says Winchester, "obsessed and impressed today with the perceived worth of the finely finished edge and the perfectly spherical bearing and degrees of flatness that are not known outside the world of the engineer, would perhaps do well similarly to learn to accept the equal significance, the equal weight, of the natural order.

As we approach what must be physical limits on precision—engineers can contemplate the Planck length, where quantum uncertainty overtakes classical measurement—we may recognize psychological limits, too.
The View from the Attic
Madeleine Schwartz

A View of the Empire at Sunset by Caryl Phillips. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 324 pp., $27.00

Few books have been as poorly served by their authors as the novels of Jean Rhys. The drinking (two bottles of wine a day, so drunk that she got violent, so drunk that she got stuck in the toilet), the poverty and the helplessness, the tangled affairs and the excruciating loneliness—the story of her life nearly eclipsed her talent. “Jean Rhys was not a modern woman,” wrote her biographer, Carole Angier. “From beginning to end, dependence was her way of life.” Born Ella Gwendoline Rees Williams in 1890 on the Caribbean island of Dominica, she moved in her teens to England, where she worked as a chorus girl, nanny, and prostitute. Men supported her throughout her life, especially her second husband, Leslie Tilden Smith. He typed up the writing she left scattered on pieces of paper around the house and reassured her of her genius even after she beat him up.

One summer during college, I read the four volumes of collected Paris Review interviews in order to learn how to be a writer (an exercise that was unsuccessful but that I nonetheless recommend). Rhys’s answers seemed so sad, so pathetic, so decracy: “I’ve never written when I was happy. I didn’t want to. But I’ve never had a long period of being happy. Do you think anyone has? . . . When I think about it, if I had to choose, I’d rather be happy than write.”

None of this prepares you for the pleasure of reading her novels. What’s extraordinary is how they seem so very alive. Part of this is the language Rhys uses, always simple, mostly short sentences, which add up to short books too. The drinking (two bottles of wine a day, so drunk that she got violent, so drunk that she got stuck in the toilet), the poverty and the helplessness, the tangled affairs and the excruciating loneliness—the story of her life nearly eclipsed her talent. “Jean Rhys was not a modern woman,” wrote her biographer, Carole Angier. “From beginning to end, dependence was her way of life.” Born Ella Gwendoline Rees Williams in 1890 on the Caribbean island of Dominica, she moved in her teens to England, where she worked as a chorus girl, nanny, and prostitute. Men supported her throughout her life, especially her second husband, Leslie Tilden Smith. He typed up the writing she left scattered on pieces of paper around the house and reassured her of her genius even after she beat him up.

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In Voyage in the Dark, for example, there’s a scene in which Anna Morgan goes to the house of the wealthy man about to take her on as his mistress. Anna has moved to London from the Caribbean after her father died. She is cold and lonely. Her stepmother cuts her off, so she joins a chorus and does what the other girls do: finds a man to support her. She is naive and needy enough to believe that this might be love:

He was saying, “You’re perfect darling but you’re too fat for me. You’ll be all right later on. Not that it has anything to do with age. Some people are born knowing their way about; others never learn. Your predecessor—has her.”

“My predecessor?” I said. “Oh! my predecessor.”

“He was certainly born knowing her way about. It doesn’t matter, though. Don’t worry. Do believe me, you haven’t got to worry.”

“Yes, of course,” I said.

“Well, look happy then. Be happy. I want you to be happy.”

In just a few lines Anna has learned that while he is her first love, she is not his, and that it’s not love at all. The entire scene is presented and digested in a flash.

Rhys started writing while living in a grungy room in a part of London called World’s End:

My fingers tingled, and the palms of my hands. I pulled a chair up to the table, opened an exercise book and wrote This is my Diary . . . I filled three exercise books and half another, then I wrote “Oh God, I’m only twenty and I’ll have to get on living and living and living.” I knew then that it was finished and there was no more to say.

She put the exercise books at the bottom of her suitcase. “Wherever I moved I took the exercise books but I never looked at them again for many years.” Later, when living in Paris with her first husband, Jean Lenglet, a Dutch musician and crook, she tried to sell a translation of his articles on Paris chansonniers and met a newspaper editor who asked if she couldn’t write instead. The editor rearranged the exercise books and sent them to Ford Madox Ford, who suggested that the young writer take up the pen name “Jean Rhys” and helped her edit her text for publication. They also began an affair.

Like nearly everything Rhys did, it was a bad idea. All four participants—including Stella Bowen, Ford’s common-law-wife, and Lenglet—later described the entanglement in books. No one appears to have had a good time. Worse, for Rhys’s work at least, was the way Ford described her writing. In his introduction to The Left Bank and Other Stories, her first collection, he spent half a dozen pages recounting his own Paris experiences before casting her as a kind of helpless idiot savant. “Coming from the Antilles, with a terrifying insight and a terrific—almost lurid!—passion for stating the case of the underdog, she has let her pen loose on the Left Bank of the old World.” He praised her “singular instinct for form” possessed by “almost no English women writers.”

In fact, Rhys was an incredibly careful and painstaking writer. The control she was unable to show in her life she exerted on the page. It’s true that most of her stories were based on her own experiences, but she hated the idea that her work was largely autobiographical. It was far too sophisticated for that. In a section of her diary she kept in the 1940s while separated from her third husband, Max Hamer, she worries about her egotism. She imagines herself on trial, cross-examined by an unnamed prosecutor:

It is myself
What is?
All. Good, evil, love, hate, life, death, beauty, ugliness.
And in everyone?
I do not know “everyone.” I only know myself.
And you?
I do not know them. I see them as trees walking?

Rhys made up for her inability to invent with an almost fanatical devotion to structure, working and reworking her books so that they would in some way resemble reality. “The things you remember have no form,” she told The Paris Review. “When you write about them, you have to give them a beginning, a middle, and an end. To give life shape—that is what a writer does. That is what is so difficult.” She went over her texts endlessly to make the writing more simple, more lifelike. “I can write mediocre ‘poetry’ so easily, and labour so over people’s painstaking effort must be blotted out.” Her efforts are invisible, the triumph of her work.

One of the joys of reading Rhys’s novels back to back is watching her learn from one to the next. Her early ones are good but simple. The narrative in Voyage in the Dark is buoyed by a sort of naive guilelessness. By Good Morning, Midnight, her second-to-last novel, Rhys has absorbed the tricks of modernism. She deploys them delicately to try to understand the effects of mistake and regret. Her subject is again a woman, alone, living in a series of depressing hotel rooms. Here she is Sasha Jansen, worn down by her mistakes, sitting around Paris hoping that a new dress, a new perfume, might turn her life around:

Saved, rescued, fishied-up, half-drowned, out of the deep, dark river, dry clothes, hair shampooed and set. Nobody would know I had ever been it. Except, of course, that there always remains something—Never mind, here I am, sane and dry, with my place to hide in.

The perspective moves over the course of the book closer to Sasha and then farther away. Like that in Voyage in the Dark, the writing is immediate and fresh. Unlike that book, there’s no backstory. We never learn where Sasha is from, where she is going. Details leech out of a failed marriage, thoughts of suicide. It is gradually revealed that Sasha had a child who died:

Do I love him? Poor little devil, I don’t know if I love him.

But the thought that they will crush him because we have no money is torture.

Money, money for my son, my beautiful son….

I can’t sleep. My breasts dry up; my mouth is dry. I can’t sleep.

Money, money….

Where was he buried? Is his death the reason for the end of her marriage? (Rhys herself had a son who died as a...
baby from a combination of parental in-competence and active neglect.) These questions receive no answers. When the book ends, Sasha's life is just as sad and lifeless as it was when the book began. It simply continues outside our view, as the regret and remorse linger.

Wide Sargasso Sea was Rhys's last novel and the one that most like a traditional story. It clearly has a beginning and a middle and an end, and other features readers look for in novels. As a result, the book is wafted to much more attention than Rhys was nearly forgotten. The interest gener-ated by other modernists had largely eluded her. Aside from her relationship with Rhys, the novel had never been a part of any sort of group; she knew few people and even fewer writers. When an ac-cess decided to adapt Good Morning, Midnight for a radio play in 1949, the producer assumed Rhys was prob-ably dead. Entire years seem to have been lost to disarray or sickness. Still, she worked on Wide Sargasso Sea for twenty-three years thinking that “it might be the one book I've written that's much use.”

It's not hard to see why it made the splash it did. By telling the story of Jane Eyre's mad woman in the attic, Rhys turns Brontë's novel on its head. Bertha Kentigern is not a cruel and weak hag but is named Antoinette Coswey, a guileless woman twisted by her husband's power. Rhys's Rochester is cruel, greedy, racist. He insults the Caribbean people he meets and denigrates them: “I was tired of them; they were just as crude and dull as their father and their tears, their flattness and envy, conceit and deceit.” His behavior is heartless and controlling. He sleeps with other women in the bedroom he shares with his wife. He changes her name in order to exert his will over her although she pleads for him to stop. “You are trying to make me into some-one else. I don’t like me, I don’t like me.” Rochester doesn’t care if he destroys his wife's fragile sense of self. He has already taken over her estate. “I saw the hate go out of her eyes. I forced it out of her.” The hate blotted out her beauty. She was only a ghost.

When the events of Brontë’s book fi-nally appear in the third and final part of Rhys’s novel, the reader is exhilarating to see so clearly what Jane blindly accepts in acquiescing to Roch-ester. (It's easy to forget that the last chapters of Wide Sargasso Sea were written before the first.) Rhys's conclusion that the novel is not really about Jean Rhys. She’s “Gwen,” “Wen-nie,” or “that Williams girl.” Elizabeth Lowry noted that “Phillips's Gwen visits the ruins of the old family plantation, which ‘ungrateful Negroes’ have burned down. Why don’t they like us?” she wonders. In its merciless exposure of the long-term damage of every kind of bondage. Wide Sargasso Sea shows that Rhys knew very well why they hate us. Though I imagine that Phillips also knows this—you can't read that novel without not-ing Rhys's analysis. It makes up most of the book. A muted Rhys is a choice author.

Phillips's real target is England itself. Black people have come to England for hundreds of years, but it has never wished to see itself as a nation of im-migrants, as Phillips wrote in his essay “The Pioneers: Fifty Years of Carib-bean Migration to Britain.” For most of the time, it relied on a grand idea of a “continuous historical past... impervious to pollution from foreign sources.” When men and women trav-eled from the Caribbean in the 1940s and 1950s to England, they expected to be welcomed there “in the same un-complicated manner...which a child expects from the mother,” he writes. “Surely that is the needed idea that the chilliness did not just refer to the weather.” “Race and ethnicity are the bricks and mortar with which the British have traditionally built a wall around the perimeter of their island nation and created fright.” In making Rhys just another blink-ered Brit, Phillips may be saying more about her than about the culture that has welcomed her than her books them-selves. It's in this small act of revenge that he best embodies the spirit of his subject.
Should We Reopen the Asylums?

David Oshinsky

Damnation Island: Poor, Sick, Mad and Criminal in 19th-Century New York
by Stacy Horn.
Algonquin, 284 pp., $27.95

Genetics in the Madhouse: The Unknown History of Human Heredity
by Theodore M. Porter.
Princeton University Press, 447 pp., $35.00

No One Cares About Crazy People: My Family and the Heartbreak of Mental Illness in America
by Ron Powers.
Hachette, 360 pp., $16.99 (paper)

In 1939 the British physician Lionel Penrose published an article that described an in- verse relationship between prisons and asylums—the so-called Penrose Hypothesis. Widely respected in medicine for his pioneering work on Down syndrome and other hereditary disorders, Penrose was better known for applying mathematical formulas to nagging social issues. Using statistics gathered from eighteen European countries, he determined that the convict population in a given locality went up or down depending on the number of occupied psychiatric beds. As one group grew in size, the other declined at a similar rate.

The article didn’t make much of a splash. A world war intervened, and Penrose moved on to other things. (His much-discussed Penrose Method, developed in the 1920s, was designed to analyze questions where the answer could be yes or no.) When the war ended, he returned to his research, the use and misuse of asylum institutions. He could hardly wait to leave. “I never felt such deep disgust and measureless contempt,” Dickens wrote, “as when I crossed the threshold of this madhouse.”

To save money, unsupervised convicts were assigned nursing and maintenance duties in the asylums, mixing freely with the inmates and spending nights locked up with them. Physical abuse and chemical restraints, especially morphine and opium, became commonplace. Before long, Horn contends, the terms “criminal” and “insane” were close to interchangeable on Blackwell’s, a “devastating association” that made the mentally ill appear more dangerous than they were.

For years, Blackwell’s geographic isolation kept it safe from prying eyes. That luxury ended in 1887, with the publication of Nellie Bly’s sensational exposé in Joseph Pulitzer’s New York World. Having bought the dying newspaper from the robber baron financier Jay Gould, Pulitzer had revved it with lurid stories, vivid graphics, and banner headlines—“FRENCH SCIENTIST AND EXPLORER DISCOVERS A RACE OF SAVAGES WITH WELL-DEVELOPED TAILS” being a prime example. Pulitzer fancied himself a muckraker, uncovering graft and brutality in municipal institutions. Bly’s assignment was to get herself inside Blackwell’s main asylum—a task she prepared for by spending several hours in front of a mirror “practicing to be a lunatic.” In short order she was arrested, carted off to police court, sent to Bellevue Hospital for observation, declared insane, and shipped to the island.

Her exposé, Ten Days in a Mad-House, spared few gory details. Conditions inside the asylum, she wrote, were vile enough to turn anybody insane. The City Council investigated, promised greater oversight, and budgeted additional funds for the inept Department of Public Charities and Correction. It was good theater, but little more. By the 1890s, Blackwell’s enormous institutions housed close to 16,000 inmates, or 1.2 percent of the entire population. Their sheer size mocked the reforming spirit that had created them.

Horn ends her story as the twentieth century begins. “They didn’t get it right,” she concludes, noting that the most potentially significant change—the merging of Public Charities and Correction into two separate departments in 1895—had little effect. It’s hard to disagree. Though the institutions on Blackwell’s would be shuttered in the coming years, the ones that replaced them—like the violent, overcrowded, and “nearly unlivable” city jail on Rikers Island—were hardly better. Horn offers no solutions; she is a storyteller, and a good one. The problem is that her often riveting account rarely connects Blackwell’s to the outside world. There is little about the waves of immigration that transformed New York City, or the professionalization of its police force, or the advances in medicine and public health during a century of revolutionary change. As such, we never quite get off the island.

How did one become insane? This question grew more complicated as asylums spread across Europe and the United States, and detailed re- cordkeeping became the norm. By the early 1970s, officials of London’s Beth- hem Royal Hospital—better known as “Bedlam”—claimed that “by God’s Blessing…there have been above two thousand…” a wishful boast, to be sure. Bethlem’s pa- tient registers listed numerous causes of insanity, including “Misfortunes,” “Family and hereditary,” “Frights,” “Love,” “Drink,” “Pride,” “Parturi- tion,” “Fever,” and “Veneeral” disease. As the UCLA historian Theodore Por- ter makes clear in Genetics in the Mad- house, all this was based on three thoroughly original study of human heredity re- search, the use and misuse of asylum statistics have quite a checkered past. The uses and misuses of insanity statistics have quite a checkered past. The uses and misuses of asylum statistics have quite a checkered past. The uses and misuses of asylum statistics have quite a checkered past. The uses and misuses of asylum statistics have quite a checkered past.
example, the Bloomingdale Asylum in New York City discharged the same female patient forty-six times as “recovered.”

This film had its limits. The public couldn’t help but notice that many of the asylum patients returning to society hadn’t been “cured,” and that the number of those entering and reentering these institutions were alarmingly high—as was the cost of running them. According to Porter, growing public anxiety and demand for asylum doctors to focus on heredity as the primary cause of mental illness. There was nothing new to this; heredity had long been connected to insanity. What had changed was the greater emphasis it received—a shift caused less by the spread of Darwinism, Porter believes, than by the need of “alienists” (the former term for psychiatrists) to explain the limits of asylum care.

Data collection now became more crucial, though the purpose had changed. The vast records of the asylums would be used to construct intricate family trees that traced feeble-mindedness and insanity across generations. Even better, these data meshed nicely with the rise in the early 1900s of Mendelian genetics, which provided an air of scientific legitimacy. Asylums and prisons weren’t to blame for failing to cure mental illness and criminal behavior; genes were.

A new movement arose—a pseudoscientific called eugenics—that aimed to curd the herd by keeping those with “undesirable” traits from reproducing. Porter is careful to differentiate the “undesirable” traits from reproducing. Psychiatry (the former term for psychiatrists) to explain the limits of asylum care.

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It’s widely claimed (though frequently challenged) that one in two prisoners has some form of mental illness, with a smaller, but substantial, percentage suffering from schizophrenia and bipolar disorder. Most are young blacks and Hispanics swept up by the policies that drive incarceration: the war on drugs; broken windows policing, which targets minor offenses; and mandatory minimum sentencing. Like POWs, Roth stresses America’s failure to provide the vital community mental health services first promised in the Kennedy years. In shifting that task to the institution least qualified to handle the problem, the typical prison inmate is “young, male, and not white.” The typical prison inmate in the 1950s was “elderly, female, and white.” Today, by contrast, the typical prison inmate is “young, male, and not white.” The study estimates that depopulating the asylums “accounted for only between 4 percent and 7 percent of the overall rise in incarceration.” As Roth concludes, it’s not that one caused the other. Rather, both problems have been fundamentally shaped by many of the same systemic, lack of resources, lack of effective political interest, and, above all, a lack of understanding of the actual needs of those who are sick.

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When four American troops were killed in an ambush in Niger last October, few back home knew they were even there. Niger, a Francophone and Muslim country that is bordered by Libya and Algeria to the north, the Sahel to the south, Chad to the east, and Burkina Faso and war-torn Mali to the west, rarely comes up in discussions of foreign policy. On the United Nations Development Programme’s Human Development Index, which measures life expectancy, education, and other vital statistics, Niger ranks 187th out of 189 countries. Its population is doubling every twenty years, as women have an average of 7.2 children. Yet because of concerns about security and migration, Western governments are now investing huge sums in Niger. The European Union will disburse more than 3 billion in aid over the next few years, and policemen from the EU are training thousands of Nigerien counterparts. Across the Sahel, the vast and arid swath of land between the Sahara and tropical Africa, $6 billion will be spent by foreign governments and development banks over the next five years. The US military is building an airbase in Agadez, Niger’s gateway to the Sahara, which will cost $110 million to construct and $15 million a year to maintain. The G5 Sahel force, formed in the northern town of Dirkou, French Mirage jet fighters patrol the skies, German aircraft are here, and British military transport helicopters arrived in July to help the French. Italy is planning to send troops to Niger, and there are French and US bases scattered across the region.

When four Americans were killed in Niger’s border with Mali and jihadists from Boko Haram spilling into the country from Nigeria in the southeast, defense takes up 17 percent of the country’s budget, of which 84 percent comes from foreign aid. Students I talked to at Niamey University in June said they did not know what foreign troops were doing in their country. “Maybe the French are there to protect the president from a coup d’état,” said Aliu, twenty-five, a math student. “We heard that our army is not allowed to go to the American base,” he added, referring to a base in Niamey, the capital, that is run by the US but officially Nigerien. Maybe the foreigners were there because they wanted the gold that is mined in Niger, he said.

When I asked a colonel in charge of information at Nigerien army headquarters what French troops were doing at Madama, an army base deep in the Sahara and close to the Libyan border, he picked up his phone and called someone: “What the fuck are they doing up there? Are they still doing their patrols or what?” Even he did not know.

It is clear to Western strategists, at least, that the presence of French and American forces is not a mere coincidence, but a deliberate attempt to maintain military presence in Niger. The Western ousted of Muammar Qaddafi in 2011 destabilized the Sahel. Arms flooded out of Libya, which also became a base for al-Qaeda. This led to the rise of Islamist groups and a rebellion in Mali, where Tuareg nationalists are using arms from Libya and in alliance with mostly non-Tuareg Islamists, seized the north of the country in 2012 and declared independence, calling their new state Azawad. In January 2013 the French led an emergency coalition to evict them, and the Tuareg, who number five million, said they would not go. The French are in the region, feuding with the Niger army. In 2014 the French created Operation Barkhane, which consists of 4,500 soldiers in the Sahel and costs €900 million a year. The French were also behind the creation in 2017 of the G5 Sahel force, which will eventually consist of five thousand soldiers from Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso, Mauritania, and Chad and has support from the French army. At a funding-raising conference in February, €614 million was pledged for it, including €100 million from Saudi Arabia, €100 million from the EU, and €49 million from the US. Barkhane is also supporting MINUSMA, a 12,000-troop UN peacekeeping force in Mali. Fighting spilling over the border has displaced at least 14,600 people within Niger since the beginning of the year, adding a further strain on the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), which already cares for 58,000 Malians on the Niger side of the border and 250,000 displaced by Boko Haram in the southeast. About 2,000 Sudanese from Darfur have also recently fled, mostly from Libya, to Agadez, where many of them are camping in the streets.

The G5 Sahel headquarters in Mali was attacked by jihadists on June 29, leaving several dead. On July 1 a Barkhane convoy was attacked, injuring several French soldiers and killing at least four civilians. Islamic State in the Greater Sahara, one of the groups that has seized territory that was previously seized by the Tuaregs, has said it claimed responsibility. When five soldiers were killed in a skirmish, General Bruno Guibert, then the outgoing commander of Operation Barkhane, but its members were dispersed and many of its leaders killed or captured. In the border region of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, a “vast operation to finish off and neutralize the enemy” was imminent. When I asked General Guibert what he thought Barkhane’s successes and failures were, he claimed that there were “only successes” and “no failures.”

Guibert and I were talking in the canteen of the French base in Niamey, which acts as a logistics hub for Barkhane. It is commanded by Colonel Guillaume Gauthier, who showed me four Mirage fighter jets with under-wing rockets ready to scramble. He said the planes sometimes swoop low over groups of jihadists without firing, “just to say ‘hello, I suggest you do something else!’” Nearby were helicopters, four French and German transport planes, a refueling plane, and five French Reaper drones. Next year these sleek intelligence-gathering aircraft will be equipped with missiles. The US military refused to show me its base (there are up to eight hundred American troops stationed in Niger), but it is next to the French one, so I could see the slim rockets under the wings of the US drones in open hangars. When the US base in Agadez is complete, these drones and other aircraft can be moved there, giving them a far greater range across the Sahara into Libya, Algeria, and the north of Mali. Drones are already reported to be flying from the CIA base at Dirkou, which is even closer to Libya. On May 10, Robert S. Karem, the US assistant secretary of defense, said of the Agadez project, “This effort is necessary because the establishment of terrorist safe havens in the Sahel could pose a significant risk to US national security interests.”

Given the turmoil in Libya, Mali, and northeast Nigeria, there is clearly a legitimate security interest here. If they are not resisted, Islamists would take over and control vast areas. But the situation is complicated. As Marc-Antoine Muratori of the Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique, clear in his new book, L’Afrique, nouvelle frontière du jihad?, jihadists in the region attach themselves to existing conflicts, for example between herders and pastoralists of different ethnicities. On the Mali-Niger border French and G5 Sahel troops are allied with Tuareg-nominated militias. The mostly nomadic Tuaregs are in a conflict over pastureland with local Fulani (Peulh) herders, and others, as a consequence, are joining militias dominated by their own people and Islamists.

Montelos also notes that Western responses to terror provoke backlashes from people who would not otherwise be involved in conflicts. Young men take up arms after the often-corrupt local armies, backed by French and American advisers, drones, and planes, kill civilians or burn their villages. Local groups will claim allegiance to al-Qaeda or ISIS even if there is little genuine connection with them, because it can make them appear more legitimate. Montelos writes that “Western armies have neither the capacity nor the will to replace failing states in Africa, in particular when they pursue scorched-earth policies,” and that “the goodwill with which they are received when they arrive can quickly turn them from ‘liberation forces’ into occupying troops, bolstering accusations of neo-colonialism as their stay lengthens.”

Likewise, the region’s small jihadist groups cannot replace states or bring order. Their contraband networks can be nothing more than a mere pellagra, unable to pay for modern services such as hospitals or infrastructure such as roads. But if Western governments see them only as terrorists and fanatics and ignore legitimate complaints—poverty; marginalization by governments, particularly of people who live far from their capitals; allegations of any government or services across large areas—then a “war of civilizations” between the West and Islam might seem convincing. And that is what Islamist ideologues want.

Over the past decade, hundreds of thousands of east African migrants and refugees destined for Europe passed through Agadez. On the trip there, they were likely to have passed trucks carrying Nigerien uranium ore to West African ports, from which it is shipped to France to fuel nuclear power plants. The numbers shot up after the fall of Qaddafi, peaking at an estimated 333,891 in 2016. Once migrants arrived in Agadez, they had to arrange the next leg of their journey, across the desert to Libya, from which they hoped to cross the Mediterranean. In the last four years some 600,000 have made the crossing from Libya to Italy, and it is believed...
that hundreds of thousands more are trapped in Libya waiting to do so. Now the Nigeriens are enforcing an anti-trafficking law, which means that fewer than a thousand people have made it through. This is the other reason the EU is giving Niger so much money, and why Rhissa Fellou, the mayor of Agadez, says that this is now the police checkpoint at the entrance to this ancient city.

This vast flow of people has meant boom times for Agadez. After years of centuries has profited from the Trans-Saharan trade. In the past camels were loaded up with gold and salt, and slaves and pilgrims traded along with them. In the 1980s, heroin from Afghanistan was delivered here, but that was ended by a Tuareg rebellion beginning in 1990. When the migrants began to arrive, the people told me that the laws were being ignored. Bus companies added extra lines to transport them. At the bus station they were met by men who took them to “ghettos,” as migrant lodgings are called. They ferried them around town to money transfer companies where they could get cash from home and helped them prepare for the journey. In the meantime the migrants worked in local shops, bought food, and paid fixed commissions for matching them up with drivers. Migrants would leave every Monday in convoys of up to two hundred vehicles carrying five thousand people, with a military escort for the next stage of the trip north to Libya. In a town of perhaps 200,000 people, fortunes were made.

The章me de Tissit, a local NGO, says that six thousand people were directly employed in the business, with half of the town’s population benefiting in one way or another.

All West African nations belong to the Economic Community of West African States, so their citizens have the right to travel and work wherever they like within the region. Up until a few years ago, if travelers wanted to pass through the middle of the Sahara on their way to Libya, that was their right. Then everything changed. The government commonly said that EU pressure to slow migration led Niger to pass an anti-trafficking law, which it began enforcing in 2016. Gogé Maimouna Gazibo, the head of Niger’s antitrafficking unit, told me he was under pressure to slow things down. “The EU is telling us to slow them down,” he said.

Today, Agadez, home to a mosque built in 1515 with a famous pointed roof, is taking so long to get here. Some migrants have been stuck in Libya for months. The UNHCR has been able to get only a few thousand of them out of Libya. Feltou suggested that people are also “fettered” because the EU’s promised aid is taking so long to get here. Some migrants still pass through the city, however, despite police checkpoints and checks at the EU border.

In Europe and America, migration has become a major political issue. In Agadez, as the Americans build their military base on the edge of the desert, the issues of migration and Western security come together. While Mali is the epicenter of the struggle against the jihadists, in Niger the West’s military fight against them and Europe’s fight against African migration come together. The two stories are not directly linked, but they make Niger a country of strategic interest in a way it has never been before. According to many Nigeriens I met, Westerners have ignored President Mahamoudou Issoufou’s increasing authoritarianism and the corruption of his government because of their concerns about terrorism and especially about migration. The French and American bases were installed in Niger illegally without any debate in parliament, says Issoufou Yahaya, a political scientist at Nasmy University. In March and April, twenty-six activists were arrested, and on the day I met Yahaya, he had just come back from visiting one of them, Al Idrissi, in prison. They had been organizing protests against the new budget, which will increase taxes for most ordinary people but lower them for multinational corporations, which activists accuse of pillaging the country’s uranium and gold. In the past, the EU and the US might have been vocal when civil liberties were infringed like this, but now French president Emmanuel Macron prances Niger as an “example for democracy” and has made no comment about the arrests.

Anyone you ask in Agadez laments the end of the migrant boom, claiming that business has collapsed. Mayor Fellou suggested that people are also “fettered” because the EU’s promised aid is taking so long to get here. Some migrants still pass through the city, however, despite police checkpoints along the way. Some who know the cars impounded, most of those who used to drive them north don’t want to take the risk anymore. The entrepreneurs of Agadez who have money and are now investing elsewhere. David, who used to work in the migrant business, showed me pictures on his phone of cars he bought in Libya and delivered to Europe and earned a healthy profit to customers across Africa. Cars were good, he said, but nothing like the easy money you could make before from migrants.

Despite its being 110 degrees. Those I spoke to had harrowing but drearily repetitive tales of being kidnapped, beaten, and detained in Libya. Their captors gave them phones so they could call their impoverished families back home and beg them to pay ransoms.

Alfred Leigh, a thirty-one-year-old Liberian who wants to be a musician, told me his story, which was typical. He had reached Libya and worked as a tailor to earn some money to cross the Mediterranean. Finding Libya too dangerous, he moved to Algeria where he got a job in a restaurant. For the first couple of months all was fine, but when the restaurant stopped paying him and Leigh asked for his wages, the boss called the police. Leigh was arrested, put on a truck, and dumped with hundreds of others in the desert twenty miles from the Nigerian border. Leigh said that “some got lost, some were throwing away their suitscases, there was no water or food…” I just thought, “Almighty God for my life!” After his experiences, Leigh said, he decided he did not wish to risk his life on a sea crossing and would be happy to go home. But Giuseppe Loprete, the head of IOM in Niger, pointed out that many who have set off, funded by family, are reluctant to go home if they don’t make a profit or have nothing to show for their trip. They are afraid of being regarded as shameful and hence unmarriedage losers.

In a center run by the UNHCR, I met Elisabeth Zamke Massagong, a thirty-six-year-old Cameroonian who had also been working in Algeria when she was picked up off the street by police.

After being dumped in the desert, she and the other migrants she was with were told to walk to Niger. “Fuck you! Go back to Africa!” shouted the Algerian security personnel who supervised them. Algeria has an agreement with Niger to deport its migrants, and it has sent back 31,697 people since 2014. However, in the last fourteen months it has also illegally deported to Niger 13,000 West Africans from countries with which it has no agreement. In Algiers, Agadez Mayor Marcey Maiga told me that she was working to help African migrants. She said she had been living, it passed her home, which was in a part of town inhabited by Africans. All the doors had been kicked in and the houses robbed. “Why do they destroy people’s lives like this?” she asked. She said she thought the police were in league with criminals and said that many migrants had been arrested and where their homes are.

Nearby, a mission of the French and Nigerien Red Cross had set up a clinic in a grocery store run by a man who had fled to Europe. Two years ago, it would have been packed, but now there were just a few Senegalese and Gambians. They had heard stories of Africans being kidnapped by Libyans, but it had not happened to them yet. They knew about the risk of drowning in the Mediterranean. But so many of their friends had successfully made it to Europe that they thought it was worth taking. Basiriou Bole, a twenty-seven-year-old from Senegal, said that if he died on the way to Europe, “it is not a problem.”

Dorcas, a twenty-seven-year-old Gambian, said, “Europe owes us because it took our ancestors to work there, as slaves in Europe and America.” They had been bought in exchange for salt and gunpowder, he explained, and then “our ancestors—they are called Negroes and Blah Blah Blah Blah Blah.” They had been brought in for forced labor for the Europeans in America and Europe. But now, if we want to go to Europe, it is a problem!”

When I went to get my Nigerien visa at the embassy in Paris, I saw women with signs saying “Famille syrienne” (which many believe they are not). Among them were a large number of young African men. Many, if not most of them, had probably passed through Agadez to get there. “Baskets! Baskets! Baskets!” they cried, chanting the French word for the sneakers they were hawking. I wondered if it was really worth it—getting into debt or selling land and property to risk their lives on the Mediterranean, just to sell sneakers. But in the ghetto of Agadez young men were staring at their phones, reading Facebook posts full of encouraging words by friends or even traffickers, fearing the trip was not going to be easy. “Why not me?” they asked.

—September 27, 2018
The Last Cowboys: A Pioneer Family in the New West
by John Branch
Norton, 277 pp., $26.95

Joseph Brodsky wrote, “Should the world collapse, its main stylistic device would no doubt be water.” He was talking about the watery city of Venice, and about the natural affinity humans (made mostly of water) have for it. But if in the end we will all return to dust, then we have something fundamental in common with the American West, too; in the wake of the country’s vast expanses, the main stylistic device is dust. All true westerns are dust dissipating in the rearview mirror, elegies for ways of life that constantly disappear.

The Last Cowboys: A Pioneer Family in the New West, by John Branch, takes as its subject the work, and its main stylistic device, of the Wrights, a ranching family from Milford, Utah, who have been part of that landscape for generations. The book is written in a voice that is in some ways a good idea, and relaxing. Keeping himself personally out of the story, Branch allows us to find ourselves in the Wright family—father, son, and their many siblings, the story’s protagonists. This wrenching, bleak, exquisitely written story is in some ways a good idea, and relaxing. Keeping himself personally out of the story, Branch allows us to find ourselves in the Wright family—father, son, and their many siblings, the story’s protagonists.

Branch has a big challenge in dealing with so many characters, and it left little room for including himself. The same logic of space and reader attention span may have caused him to edit out most of the women. But to me, this quote from Monica is one of the real moments in the book. I think that had I written the story on the plain old first person now and then, rather than staying faithful to the Times omniscient style throughout, the women in the story somehow might have become more real.

The book is written in a voice that could be called “Times omniscient.” Early on, we see Bill at his cow camp, up on the mesa, where he stays by himself for days at a stretch while keeping track of the cattle. He gets up before the sun rises, gets his truck, and goes to check on his range. Walking through the brush, he now and then pinches it to get the hell beat out of them. Horses break and prostrate through the skin, vertebrae get crushed, heads get hit, and brains get knocked unconscious. After a few years in the arena most riders have more than a few metal rods and pins holding them together. The inescapable question, and one that Branch does not answer, is: Who is insuring these people? What must all these guys’ operations, ambulance rides, physical therapy sessions, etc., cost? (And that doesn’t include the dentistry for the teeth that get knocked out.) But all of the Wrights make six figures a year on the rodeo circuit. Does most of it go to repairs?

The book conveys a strong sense of western geography. When the Wrights’ cattle get down into the intricate windings of the canyon where they graze for part of the year it takes a lot of bushwhacking to move them out. The ranch itself, with its core twenty thousand Wright-owned acres and its twenty thousand acres of leased federal land, makes an interconnected grazing system that is for how to use to the maximum. Of planners who come from elsewhere, Bill says:

They see these plants and this dirt and these cliffs and think this area great from that moment on.

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fives years earlier. Ryder, who takes home $114,000, is only eighteen. The bucking horses have names like Lunar Fringe, Killer Bee, Urgent Delivery, Lipstick N Whiskey, and Kid Rock. Rides are described with the slow-motion precision made possible by instant replay—the horses’ crow-hopping, high-kicking, sunfishing, sidewinding, and all the rest. When the riders fall and break bones there are audible cracks.

Though ordinary-guy heroes, the Wrights are also described as a band set apart. We learn little about their competitors, and as for the family’s many fans, the ones who line up to get autographs in Las Vegas’s D Casino (another of the Wrights’ sponsors) appear as faceless throngs, or they’re mentioned with disdain as “the kinds of people who wore cowboy hats into casinos.” Throughout all, Cody and the other rodeo Wrights remain unfailingly polite and sportsmanlike, and stick to the “Yep,” “Nope,” and “Thank you kindly, ma’am” school of cowboy expressiveness. When the failure of another rider would advance them in the standings, they do not root for him to get bucked off. They never cry, or scream in pain, or brag, or gripe too much about the judges’ rulings. They win or lose, smile shyly, say little, and go home or to the hospital.

Two 1916 x 27½” sheets per packet, printed in Italy on heavy stock with metallic highlights; also suitable for craft projects and scrapbooking.

October 25, 2018
The Immigrant at Home

Francine Prose

A Terrible Country
by Keith Gessen
Viking, 358 pp., $26.00

According to the familiar adage, there are only two stories: a man goes on a journey and a stranger comes to town. It’s a catchphrase that falls apart when measured against one’s experience of literature. Yet I found myself recalling it after reading Keith Gessen’s excellent new novel, A Terrible Country. What if those two plots were in fact successive chapters in a single story? A man (or woman) goes on a journey and becomes the stranger in town. Isn’t that what happens in the novel of immigration?

A Terrible Country gives us this narrative arc—and plenty more—to consider. It inspires us to reflect on the indelible stamp that each historical era leaves on its survivors; the harrowing or indelible stamp that each historical era leaves on its survivors; the harrowing or indelible stamp that each historical era leaves on its survivors; the harrowing or indelible stamp that each historical era leaves on its survivors; the harrowing or indelible stamp that each historical era leaves on its survivors.

The last of my old classmates from the Slavic department had recently left for a new job... and my girlfriend of six months, Sarah, had recently dumped me at a Starbucks. “I just don’t see where this is going,” she had said, meaning I suppose our relationship, but suggesting in fact my entire life. And she was right: even the thing that I had once most enjoyed doing—reading and writing about teaching Russian literature and history—was no longer any fun. I was heading into a future of half-heartedly grading the half-written papers of half-interested students, with no end in sight.

The failed academic, unlucky in love, is literary shorthand for “going nowhere.” So like Andrei, the reader is grateful and relieved when, in the opening pages, he gets a call from his older brother Dima, a Moscow wheeler-dealer and would-be plutocrat. His older brother Dima, a Moscow wheeler-dealer and would-be plutocrat. His older brother Dima, a Moscow wheeler-dealer and would-be plutocrat. His older brother Dima, a Moscow wheeler-dealer and would-be plutocrat.

Andrei, whose Russian is serviceable but rusty, has suffered through previous trips to his native land, grad school summers spent in a city marked by poverty, petty crime, urban decay, and paranoia. During one such visit, he ritually arranged his brightly colored American toiletries (razor, shaving gel, antiperspirant) as a kind of magic charm and personal protest against the bleak, post-Soviet-era grayspace: “The colors were brighter and more attractive than anything I saw around me... I felt like James Bond practically, with my little kit of ingenious devices.”

By 2008, when the novel begins, the world may be on the brink of financial crisis, but Moscow is doing great. With Oil was selling at $14 a barrel, and they had clobbered the Georgians—is what they were laughing about?

Modernization theory said the following: Wealth and technology are more powerful than culture. Give people nice cars, color televisions, and the ability to travel to Europe, and they’ll stop being so aggressive. No two countries with McDonald’s franchises will ever go to war with each other. People with cell phones are nicer than people without cell phones.

I wasn’t so sure. The Georgians had McDonald’s, and the Russians bombed them anyway. On the train to the city center, Andrei’s reunion with his widowed grandmother is affectionate and touching. Formerly a lecturer in history at Moscow State University until she was forced from her job “at the height of the ‘anti-cosmopolitan,’ i.e., anti-Semitic, campaign,” Baba Seva quizzes her grandson about his life in New York, and they discuss her chances of being invited to her best friend Emma’s dacha. So we are as shocked as Andrei when their lively conversation takes a precipitous turn for the worse.

“Andryusha,” she said. “You are such a dear person to me. To our whole family. But I can’t remember...”
it. They handed over the money. They didn’t even blink.

Andrei earns a meager living teaching college literature courses on the Internet, a job that requires him to spend hours at the one café where he can buy a reasonably priced cappuccino and that—unlike his grandmother’s apartment—has reliable Internet service. Like many new arrivals, he finds himself comparing his former home with his current one. “In New York during rush hour the trains could be so crowded that people couldn’t get on, and had to wait for the next train. In Moscow when this happened, people got on anyway.” The men Andrei sees around him are big, kasha fed, six feet tall, stuffed into expensive suits, balancing themselves on shiny, pointy-toed shoes, never smiling. Ten years ago you walked down a Moscow street and ran into a lot of thugs in cheap leather jackets. Those guys were gone now, replaced by these guys. Or maybe they were the same guys? They haggled the sidewalk; they barred ahead without looking to see what was in the way; they kept their hands by their sides and their fists clenched, like they were ready to use them.

Determined to construct a viable life for himself in Moscow, Andrei makes tentative advances and suffers dramatic (and cautionary) setbacks. On a shopping trip to buy slippers for his grandmother, he finds a neighborhood ice rink where the hockey players allow him to join the game. Or at least they don’t stop him. Andrei’s a passionate hockey player, and the sport provides a way for him to make friends and improve his language skills. Meanwhile the city is losing him things that he’d rather not learn. He’s pistol-whipped by a thuggish assailant who sees Andrei’s looks and his willing, unassuming, inarticulate, well-behaved nature. He’s pistol-whipped. Andrei’s “debt” consists in not telling the truth that Andrei’s “debt” demands in advance—for the wreck they will presumably make of her apartment. At a dimly illuminated pawn shop “WHAT HAVE YOU DONE FOR RUSSIA?!” at a visiting American academic whom he is jealous. Impressed by his fervor, another guest, the attractive Yulia, asks him to “say a few words about the American system” at “a small discussion about neoliberalism in higher education” that she is organizing at a bookstore. After Andrei’s brief talk about the sorry plight of adjuncts in the United States, his new friend Sergei—the goalie on his hockey team—speaks at greater length:

> What we’ve seen in Russia in the last twenty years is the replacement of a stagnant, sometimes violent and oppressive, but basically functioning state with a dictatorship of the market. People have died, of starvation, of depression, of drug abuse, and not only have they done so quietly, they have done so willingly. They have praised their conquerors.

Sergei’s speech strikes Andrei with the force of a revelation. “Suddenly everything I had been looking at—not just over these past months in Moscow, but over the past few years in academia, and over the past fifteen years of studying Russia—became clear to me.” Andrei joins a socialist group that calls itself October. Its members converse to read and discuss Marx and to attend political protests. There’s an irony that Gessen well understands in a Marxist cadre meeting in the country that has witnessed one of the longest-lasting and most spectacularly failed Marxist experiments. But Andrei and his friends believe in the idea—the ideal—of a state in which labor and human rights are valued and the government works to improve its citizens’ well-being, health, and education.

We were steeped in memories of the violent Revolution and its even more violent Stalinist sequel....

The Octobrists had carved a little path through Moscow that allowed them to enjoy it. None of them made much money, or even any. They couldn’t become full citizens of the consumer paradise that Moscow had become. But there were little cafes and bookstores and bookstore-cafés where you could sit and have tea or a beer for a couple of dollars and read Dostoevskia for a few hours without anyone bothering you. Even critical theory, which had fallen out of fashion in the United States, down. The lies on the television, too, after a while, wore you down.

Events conspire to remind him that he is an outsider. He and a friend encounter a group of skinheads yelling, “Beat the Jews, save Russia!” When Andrei takes his grandmother to the park, they push her out on the benches turn out to be the mean-spirited anti-Semites that Baba Seva has said they are from the beginning. And yet, despite everything, Andrei’s infatuation with Russia continues:

> I loved it. I loved kasha and kotlety and I loved the language and I loved the hockey and I loved the people. I fell in love with some of the people on the street. I loved walking down Sretenka with my hockey gear in my Soviet backpack, emerging at Prospekt Mira and then walking to the stadium past the McDonald’s, the Orthodox church, the market where we failed to buy my grandmother’s slippers, and then into the rink. Late at night, on my way home, I loved sometimes buying half a chicken from the Azery guys. “Our hockey friend!” they always said, greeting me. On nights when I went to see Yulia, I loved taking a car for three dollars—a flat one hundred rubles, who could argue.

Throughout the novel, Andrei has witnessed political protests, mostly from a distance, since his terrified grandmother pulls him away whenever she sees a crowd forming. And he’s participated in a potentially volatile though ultimately nonviolent demonstration. But a more confrontational protest—against a Russian oil company—leads to a pivotal scene during which things go badly wrong for Andrei, and disastrously wrong for his Russian friends. It’s a bit difficult to understand why Andrei does what he does—especially because he himself isn’t certain: “I’ve gone over in my mind what happened next, a a few times. I’ve tried to imagine what it would be like not as much as I should.” Is he simply naïve? Is he acting from cowardice, willing to do “just about anything” to save his own skin, taking the easy way out? Of course, it’s not lost on the Octobrists that Andrei seems less strong, less passionate, less convinced. “Suddenly it was still cool here. It was the Moscow I had once hoped existed but couldn’t find. Now here it was.”

But the more well-adjusted and assimilated Andrei feels, the more often, and the more pointedly, Yulia reminds him that he doesn’t understand what it means to be Russian. When Andrei criticizes the lighting in a basement cafeteria, Yulia fumes: “You have no idea how we’ve lived. You have no idea how valuable a place like this is.” Unable to deflect her anger, Andrei throws up his hands “like a person who was at the end of his rope, who felt like he couldn’t say anything without being attacked and so therefore had decided to say nothing.”

The frustrations of dealing with Yulia’s disapproval lead to another turn—a downturn—in Andrei’s view of Russia:

> I wasn’t sure I could handle being in the constant presence of someone so morally acute. I wasn’t sure I could live up to it. I was sure, in fact, that I could not.

More to the point, what would I really be able to say to Andrei indefinitely?... Just to do anything—to get more lives sharpened, to get a library book, to get from one part of the city to another—was an unbelievable hassle. What in New York took twenty minutes, here took an hour. What in New York took an hour, here took pretty much all day. It wore you down. The frowns on the faces of the people wore you...
Beautiful Country Burn Again: Democracy, Rebellion, and Redemption, by Ben Fountain. Ecco, 433 pp., $27.99

Behold, America: The Entangled History of “America First” and “The American Dream” by Sarah Churchwell. Basic Books, 348 pp., $32.00

Hitler’s American Model: The United States and the Making of Nazi Race Law by James Q. Whitman. Princeton University Press, 208 pp., $24.95

You don’t necessarily need an ethnic or religious scapegoat to be a thuggish strongman, but it sure helps. Narendra Modi rose to power in India in a party that has long demonized Muslims—and after doing conspicuously little to stop a massacre of them while running his home state of Gujarat. Viktor Orbán in Hungary has variously attacked Jews, Gypsies, and Arab and African refugees. And where would Donald Trump be without his fusillade of investigative against Mexicans, Muslims, and black Americans?

Barack Obama’s two terms as president allowed too many of us to think that the worst, at least, of the dark current of racism in America had run its course. But the election of the man who opened his campaign with an attack on Mexican “rapists” has made us realize otherwise. This is someone who, after one Latino and four black teenagers were arrested in 1989 and charged with assaulting and raping a white woman in Central Park, took out full-page newspaper ads urging the death penalty for such crimes. And who, years later, after DNA tests and someone else’s confession cleared the five, declared them still guilty. The Trump presidency’s decades-long roots in race-baiting have at least had the virtue of shocking several new books into being, one of them superb.

Anyone who has read Ben Fountain’s previous work knows him as one of the boldest voices in American fiction. His 2012 novel, Billy Lynn’s Long Halftime Walk, is a hilarious, excoriating, brilliantly structured send-up of the madness and hype of George W. Bush’s wars. It takes place entirely during the halftime show at a Dallas Cowboys football game, seen through the eyes of a teenage, traumatized, sex-obsessed soldier as he and his squadrades, between stretches of combat in Iraq, are used as part of the show. An earlier volume of short stories, Brief Encounters with Che Guevara, probes our national psyche in a different way. Almost every tale is about an American who, through idealism, bravado, or naiveté, manages to get in over his or her head through idealism, bravado, or naiveté, every tale is about an American who, through idealism, bravado, or naiveté, manages to get in over his or her head.

Fountain’s new book, Beautiful Country Burn Again, based in part on his reporting of the last presidential campaign for The Guardian, is about an entire country that got in over its head. A meandering, shaggy monster of a book, it’s too long (skip the interchapter month-by-month summaries of the news events of 2016), and its first half—brilliant reporting from the campaign trail—feels only loosely joined to the second, a pained cry from the heart about the many decades of history that have led to the pickle we’re in. But in different ways both halves are dazzling.

The novel’s gifts that so inspired Billy Lynn are on full display. Here, for instance, is Fountain describing Cornel West warming up a crowd for Bernie Sanders:

Tonight he is dressed in his trademark three-piece black suit with dark scarf, white shirt, and black tie, the French cuffs of his shirt sticking out so far and bright they might as well be sodium flakes. In that suit, with his gray-streaked Afro and facial hair like Spanish moss, he looks less like a man of the twenty-first century than a fire-brimstone preacher and part-time doctor hurled out of the 1890s. …

“Brothers and sisters of all colors in Iowa are you ready to make history on Monday n-i-i-i-i-i-g-h-t”—he thunders like God’s own MC…. The kids go nuts. …

The kids have never seen anything like Cornel West with his flailing arms and incandescent French cuffs and the rock-drill delivery of his voice, every syllable banging home with the hard rattle-tatta of a speed bag or a Gatling gun. He could be Great-Grand-daddy Hip-Hop, the original guy up there in the pulpit from whom everything and everybody flowed, blues, jazz, soul, skiffle, R & B, rock & roll, funk, punk, rap, ska, and whatever comes next. The root of it all.

Fountain applies the same zestful paintbrush everywhere. On Hillary Clinton: “With the years has come a kind of dreadnought presence, queen of the fleet, thick armor plating and think he gargles twice a day with a cocktail of high-fructose corn syrup and holy-rollar snake oil. His tone and cadence take after the saccharine blather of the great Christian pitchmen of radio and TV, the hucksters who mastered the catch in the throat, the tremulous quaver and gulp, because as every pro knows that’s where the money is…. There’s a schlump fleshiness to him, a blurring of definition in his face and neck, the

American Devilry
Adam Hochschild

Beautiful Country Burn Again: Democracy, Rebellion, and Redemption, by Ben Fountain. Ecco, 433 pp., $27.99

Hitler’s American Model: The United States and the Making of Nazi Race Law by James Q. Whitman. Princeton University Press, 208 pp., $24.95

You don’t necessarily need an ethnic or religious scapegoat to be a thuggish strongman, but it sure helps. Narendra Modi rose to power in India in a party that has long demonized Muslims—and after doing conspicuously little to stop a massacre of them while running his home state of Gujarat. Viktor Orbán in Hungary has variously attacked Jews, Gypsies, and Arab and African refugees. And where would Donald Trump be without his fusillade of investigative against Mexicans, Muslims, and black Americans?

Barack Obama’s two terms as president allowed too many of us to think that the worst, at least, of the dark current of racism in America had run its course. But the election of the man who opened his campaign with an attack on Mexican “rapists” has made us realize otherwise. This is someone who, after one Latino and four black teenagers were arrested in 1989 and charged with assaulting and raping a white woman in Central Park, took out full-page newspaper ads urging the death penalty for such crimes. And who, years later, after DNA tests and someone else’s confession cleared the five, declared them still guilty. The Trump presidency’s decades-long roots in race-baiting have at least had the virtue of shocking several new books into being, one of them superb.

Anyone who has read Ben Fountain’s previous work knows him as one of the boldest voices in American fiction. His 2012 novel, Billy Lynn’s Long Halftime Walk, is a hilarious, excoriating, brilliantly structured send-up of the madness and hype of George W. Bush’s wars. It takes place entirely during the halftime show at a Dallas Cowboys football game, seen through the eyes of a teenage, traumatized, sex-obsessed soldier as he and his squadmates, between stretches of combat in Iraq, are used as part of the show. An earlier volume of short stories, Brief Encounters with Che Guevara, probes our national psyche in a different way. Almost every tale is about an American who, through idealism, bravado, or naiveté, manages to get in over his or her head through idealism, bravado, or naiveté, every tale is about an American who, through idealism, bravado, or naiveté, manages to get in over his or her head.

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Why did more than 60 million Americans—many of them good people, people wise in other aspects of life, people who should know better—vote for what it is? "Fountain asks, "about the American character that allows the long con of our politics to go on and on...? We must, on some level, want what they're offering."

In his marvelous portrait, for instance, of "Pappy" O'Daniel, a Texan of the 1930s who charmed radio listeners with gospel readings, country music, sentimental poetry, and, for his company, Hillbilly Flour. (Filmgoers may remember Charles Durning playing him in the Coen brothers' 2000 movie O Brother, Where Art Thou?) In 1938 O'Daniel was elected to the U.S. Senate on the campaign theme of "Pass the Biscuits, Pappy." His platform? "The Ten Commandments, no sales tax, and a guaranteed pension for a 90-year-old" for every Texan over the age of sixty-five. He plugged Hillbilly Flour at every stop, and sales doubled during his campaign. Once he was in office, however, he pushed for a sales tax, an amendment to the state constitution to freeze taxes on oil and gas extraction at rock-bottom rates, and spent his time attacking Communists, Nazis, and "labor leader racketeers." The oilmen and bankers who had backed him got what they paid for, but working-class program continued to win support in such numbers that in a special election for the US Senate in 1941 he defeated a candidate who might have served them better, a youthful New Deal backer, Lyndon Johnson. Remind you of anybody?

What are such bait-and-switch con men offering? Above all, messages, once overt, then coded, today starkly transparent. What is not so obvious is that they treat us, fools that we are, should have such eloquent advocates..."

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The visitors studied several features of the American legal landscape. An important one was the laws against interracial marriage in no less than thirty states, laws that sometimes also provided severe criminal penalties for any such couple. The Maryland statute, for instance, set a prison term of eighteen months to ten years. These laws were relevant, of course, in propaganda for the German race. The following year a deluge of Nazi lawyers who felt the same way, despite being a man of considerably more selfishness than race, Franklin D. Roosevelt. The most glowing accounts from across Europe and Asia, adventurers, and outcasts. But this was far more than a tough-on-crime gesture; it was a government trying on the cloak of legality to the elemental fact that she was one of the friends of Modi and Orbán are doing something else: Whose interests does the American wealth concentration in the hands of a few, but we can’t have both.” In search of hope, he goes back to someone else who felt the same way, despite being a man of considerable wealth himself, Franklin D. Roosevelt. The most glowing account of the Radetzky March with the stark falsification of an old ballad.

And the well, and much more; “That we’re alive and well today, walking and talking and in some cases making a career out of bashing the government, it’s because the Grandpa did a thing.” He gave us electricity to light the house, power a refrigerator to keep food from spoiling in the summer heat, pump water from the wells. “We’re all burners to help those suffering most, that could benefit everyone. Until we have an alternative vision to ever-greater income gains went to the country’s banks were broken up, and 95 percent of income gains went to the country’s wealthiest one percent. Also painfully clear is the way Hillary Clinton’s tone-deaf campaign and her coziness with Goldman Sachs and Clinton Foundation donors held forth no alternative vision to ever-greater inequality. And Hillary couldn’t wave magic dust for the trees.” Fountain writes, “due to the elemental fact that she was one of the trees.”

The bottom line is this, Whitman writes: “When the leading Nazi jurists assembled in early June 1934 to debate about how to institutionalize racism in the new Third Reich, they began by asking how the Americans did it.”

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As with the first American president in history endorsed by leaders of the Ku Klux Klan.

Jerry Brown, “we’ve got ‘em under control, folks.”

But this was far more than a tough-on-crime photo op. For the granite face of nearby Stone Mountain is a subject of the Austro-Hungarian empire, a bright boy who escaped his father’s financial disgrace by running away and converting to Islam. Now, at the height of his power, he heads an army of misfits, adventurers, and outcasts from across Europe and Asia, and yet wherever he goes he remains Ivo Andrić, who won the Nobel Prize in 1961, is a born storyteller and a magnificent stylist, and here, in his final novel, he surrounds his enigmatic central figure with many vivid and fascinating minor characters, lost souls and hopeless dreamers all, in a war that is slowly sliding towards disaster. Omer Pasha Latas combines the leisurely melancholy of Joseph Roth’s The Radetzky March with the stark falsification of an old ballad.

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Responses to ‘Reflections from a Hashtag’

To the Editors:

It took me exactly twelve minutes to read the Jian Ghomeshi article [NYR, October 11] on your website today. As someone who was sexually victimized by Ghomeshi in 2013, I ask you that you allocate the same amount of time to what I’m about to write to your readers as I did to my coming across your article the same time ago on my phone. I hope you agree that the same amount of time can be spent on thinking about what it feels uncomfortable and sick to our stomachs.

The choice to publish Ghomeshi’s piece was a personal and courageous act for the women he has victimized that his story is worth more than ours. As I read of his wounding words, I dug into a demographic account for legal fees and awkwardly meeting women while gallivanting around Europe—I thought about the thousands of dollars I’ve put on my credit card to pay for the counsel that has remained a constant over the past four years, because trauma changes you on a physiological level that feels impossible to understand. I thought about the days I missed work because I lay frozen in bed filled with a hollowness that can only be felt when your humanity is stripped from you by the (physical) hands of a man who mansplained to you to establish dominance with whom he held the power from the start. I thought about the fear and frustration deep within my being, which fractured friendship who feel an injustice has been done. Does it not make sense to give an apology to those who felt wronged instead of giving an excuse not to? In my opinion, the essay is traumatically self-abused.

Joanne O. Vancouver, British Columbia

To the Editors:

On my drive to a much-needed visit with my mother, it was brought to my attention that Jian Ghomeshi had written an essay painting himself as a victim and that I needed to read it. I had brushed the topic aside at a 2002 CBC Christmas event. It was that meeting, unfortunately, that years later, resulted in charges of sexual assault. During the drive I was reading reviews requests for my response. It became apparent that in any given moment this nightmare can all happen again. The power of memory and momentum that it had a few years ago.

While reading the essay, I felt con- tingency, to feel sympathy for a victim. This was evident from the stories of a new acquaintance who was oblivious of his status as a fallen celebrity, good or bad. The author had married a woman who wanted to protect their own careers, loss of income, and suicidal ideation. Although he had a lack of narcissistic barriers, he was dealing with thousands of women who had reached out to share experiences of physical and emotional trauma from violence. This led him to the only way he could have possibly dealt with this was by setting off the woman who the notorious Jian was? Did he have a name tag on? If the karaoke scene were in a piece of fiction. I don’t think it would hold water. And isn’t it convenient that it happened long enough ago to make him foggy on details if he were pressed for details? I also think that some people might have a hard time believing the train story at the end of the article.

Linda Redgrave

To the Editors:

It’s been said, “The British and the Ameri- cans were two people separated by a com- mon language.” I wonder if the rational- ization for choosing to publish the Jian Ghomeshi piece isn’t an example of that. Attempting to answer a hypothetical question about Harvey Weinstein posed by the public, editor Ian Buruma said he couldn’t answer the question “since he [Weinstein] has been accused of rape, which Ghomeshi has been accused of, apart from the fact that it happened long enough ago to make him foggy on the details if he were pressed for them.” I also think that some people might have a hard time believing the train story at the end of the article.

Linda Redgrave

To the Editors:

The fact that you published Ghomeshi’s point of view on the numerous allegations against him without minimal fact-checking is reprehensible. For one thing, he was not fired by the CBC because of “allegations of sexual misconduct circulating online” by an ex. He was fired because he literally showed CBC brass photos of a woman he had beat the hell out of, and tried to pass it off as “rough sex.” Oh, that was the crime. The trial was a farcical presentation of chauvinist stereotyping male malignants of the crime of hair-pulling, etc., not even in Canada. He was, in fact, charged with four counts of criminally harassing a witness, and no criminal charges of hair-pulling, etc., not even in Canada. In the end, it all was just a cover-up.

Lisa Guenther

To the Editors:

Why does the entire first paragraph in Jian Ghomeshi’s essay read like an outright lie? Was he sitting right beside the sign-up sheet? How did the person know HE was a victim? How did he know who the notorious Jian was? Did he have a name tag on? If the karaoke scene were in a piece of fiction. I don’t think it would hold water. And isn’t it convenient that it happened long enough ago to make him foggy on details if he were pressed for details? I also think that some people might have a hard time believing the train story at the end of the article.

Michael Mitchell

To the Editors:

The ink is dry, so I have heard, on the print run you authorize that bears Ghomeshi’s name. As a woman who lived in Canada during Jian’s trial, during which he was acquitted. I learned exactly how the rich and the powerful are protected, and not just Jian. How did she know who the notorious Jian was? Did he have a name tag on? If the karaoke scene were in a piece of fiction. I don’t think it would hold water. And isn’t it convenient that it happened long enough ago to make him foggy on details if he were pressed for details? I also think that some people might have a hard time believing the train story at the end of the article.

Allan Lynch

To the Editors:

I am mystified what possessed your publi- cation to run the essay by Jian Ghomeshi in which he bemoans the loss of his reputation and career because he was “demanding on dates.” That makes it sound as though he insisted on the Pinot Grigio while his partner would have preferred the Merlot. As Anne Kingston reported in her ex-
For over half my life, men have poked, prodded, commented on, peered at, and nasty things, and put them in print more than theirs than mine. The only difference between them and Jian? They were not celebrities. But the effect that these norms have had on men is tangible. I cringe when I am walking alone at night and see a man up ahead. In my single days, I always ensured I was in busy buildings or public spaces in case I got weird vibes. I watch my drink like a hawk while socializing, regardless of the company or context. It no longer surprises me when grown men shout sexual advances at me in broad daylight and then deride me when I rebuke their efforts. It disgusts me to know my experience is not unique.

I am among an endless ocean of women whose stories are just as true, if not more intrusive, more chilling, more unethical. This is to say nothing of the women being assaulted, abused, and raped. Sure, not all men treat women this way, but I will say with the utmost confidence, and contrary to what Jian seems to be peddling, that just because he was not found legally culpable that does not make the consequences of his actions, exactly as he described them, any less dire. I am more, not because of what he has denied but because of what he has so cavalierly admitted to.

Claire Pitcher
Vancouver, British Columbia

To the Editors:

As contributors to The New Review of Books we are writing to express our dismay at the departure of Ian Buruma from the editorship of the Review. Ian Buruma has proved to be an outstanding and courageous editor—a model of public intellectuals who champion the free play of ideas in our pages, and whose voice has been an intellectual beacon has been jeopardized to sexual assault or abuse of the type real-life, everyday women who have been found him witty and charming in Europe. Of men (that was present in spades), not responsible for decades, even through periods where the reader's interest in the thoughts and or context. It no longer matters that was present in spades), not know what he has done but because of what he has so cavalierly admitted to.

Allegre Sloman
Burnaby, British Columbia

To the Editors:

I was shocked by Ian Buruma’s decision to run the Jian Ghomeshi piece in the current issue of the NYRB. I've been a subscriber for decades, even through periods where the magazine's pages have continued to be run the Jian Ghomeshi piece in the current issue of the NYRB. I've been a subscriber for decades, even through periods where the magazine's pages have continued to be

Susan Bernofsky
Associate Professor and Director, Literary Committee
Columbia University

To the Editors:

My name is Claire Pitcher and I am a thirty-two-year-old Canadian woman. I am positive that part of the rationale for publishing Jian Ghomeshi's focus on how he did not because of what he has denied but because of what he has so cavalierly admitted to.


To the Editors:

I'm writing to add volume to the litany of people who are so, so disappointed by your choice to give space in your publication to an article by Jian Ghomeshi. Perhaps this piece is tailored to appeal to an imagined readerhip of intellectually lazy men looking to indulge their narcissisms, to a crowd of rage clicks readers will inevitably give you to see what this trash pile piece consists of. Maybe you truly and honestly think you're showcasing a subversive new perspective on a subject. Regardless, you're reinforcing the notion that men who abuse women could have a place in their professional field.

Today in light of this news, I'm thinking of the two-year-old Canadian woman. I am positive that part of the rationale for publishing Jian Ghomeshi's focus on how he did not because of what he has denied but because of what he has so cavalierly admitted to.

Claire Pitcher
Vancouver, British Columbia

To the Editors:

If you want to save the magazine from deride me when I rebuke their efforts. It disgusts me to know my experience is not unique, I have been thinking about you over the past four years. I was sad for you when David Bowie died. You had in many ways introduced me to Bowie, but I had never really liked him, and I saw him in a new light through your eyes.

Yesterday I read your article in The New Review of Books. Thank you for writing that. As I said, I have been thinking about you and now I have a new glimpse into your journey. I agree with [Canadian journalist] Christie Blatchford (who I nor long ago did not have) that you have every right to put your foot down and seemed to bring the best out of your guests. I became a fairly regular listener.

To the Editors:

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To the Editors:

I would like to thank you for Q. I am a sixty-eight-year-old woman who did not then (and does not now) have her finger on the pulse of any current culture, and gradually as I listened to you I became aware of many new things and liked a lot of what I heard. You wrote with wit and back and seemed to bring the best out of your guests.

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To the Editors:

The Editorial Staff replies: We understand our contributors’ concerns. Rea Hederman, the publisher of the Review, has assured Ian Buruma and Ian Buruma that his resignation was not a response to outrage over “Reflections from a Hashtag,” and we strongly believe in the reader's interest in the thoughts and views (primarily through exclusion) until fifteen years ago, and the magazine’s pages have continued to be...

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“This collection gives Bunch’s cybernetic vision of the future new life for a new generation of science-fiction readers. . . .

A disturbing, stark, and deeply thought-provoking collection of stories chronicling humankind’s demise into heartless automatons.”

—Kirkus Reviews

Welcome to Moderan, world of the future. Here, perpetual war is waged by furious masters fighting from Strongholds well stocked with “arsenals of fear” and everyone is enamored with hate. The devastated earth is coated by vast sheets of gray plastic, while humans vie to replace more and more of their own “soft parts” with steel. What need is there for nature when trees and flowers can be pushed up through holes in the plastic? Who requires human companionship when newmetal mistresses are waiting? But even a Stronghold master can doubt the catechism of Moderan. Wanderers, poets, and his own children pay visits, proving that another world is possible.

“As if Whitman and Nietzsche had collaborated,” wrote Brian Aldiss of David R. Bunch’s work. Originally published in science-fiction magazines in the 1960s and ’70s, these moderation stories, though passionately sought by collectors, have been uncirculated in a single volume for close to half a century. This volume includes eleven previously uncollected Moderan stories.

Like Anthony Burgess in A Clockwork Orange, Bunch coined a mind-bending new vocabulary. He sought not to divert readers from the horror of modernity but to make us face it squarely.

“Great writers do two things at one and the same time: they bring us more fully into the world around us and they open worlds behind that visible, everyday one. They make us profoundly uncomfortable. I still approach these stories with a singular mix of anticipation and apprehension. No writer has ever made me more uncomfortable than David R. Bunch.”

—James Sallis

MODERAN

David R. Bunch

Foreword by Jeff VanderMeer

Paperback $16.95

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56

The New York Review

this barn-burning claim: “When a man is publicly accused of sexual misconduct in this era, you can pretty reliably predict his fate. There is always a verdict at the end of a trial.” My point is that the trial is a sham, a farce, a charade. It leaves open the question of guilt and innocence. It can be used to turn a man into a hero and a villain at the same time. It can be used to cover up major sexual misconduct. It can be used to cover up major sexual misconduct.

I am profoundly disappointed that you chose to print an “essay” by serial abuser and sexual predator Jian Ghomeshi. The events that Mr. Ghomeshi describes took place I followed the case closely and have always believed that Jian Ghomeshi did not share the condemnation of others.

I think the treatment that he received was very harsh. I am a professional woman, now retired, who started her career in the late Seventies and worked without a break until 2012. I have had my fair share of misogyny and discrimination, attempted sexual seductions, and sexist put-downs and gosip, and I was delighted when the McTo movement took off. But there is another side: the overreaction of rejected women seeking revenge, or desire for the limelight, or the naiveté of the man and his lack of questioning the toxic masculinity of the culture that raised him.

When the charges against Mr. Ghomeshi were not proven and he was released I felt vindicated: the women were not wrong but they were hysterical and seeking revenge. Not that I see his behavior. I feel very much as he describes in this article: that while he was unthinking, selfish, and unkind, he was not malicious and predatory and he is capable of love and his experience. As a veteran of the pre-MeToo gender and sex wars and feeling some compassion for Mr. Ghomeshi, I thought I would like the CBC to offer Mr. Ghomeshi another chance. He is damn well deserving of it.

I am a nobody, like most of the people who write to ask you why you decided to run this letter (and hopefully many more in the near future) I am writing to ask you why you decided to run this piece.

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To the Editors:

Seldom is rape reported. When it is, rarely does anything at all happen. Not even an investigation. When a case goes to court, despite overwhelming evidence, hardly ever is a man convicted of rape. Rape statistics were put on the books with it in mind that rape is something black men do to white women. But that is completely wrong. Mostly rape occurs between people who have met. It happens in professional settings and at parties. It happens on dates. Most rape is acquaintance rape.

It means nothing at all that there are no convictions. White men make law to protect white men. That is all.

The only way to get more women writing for and for all publications is to find things to cultivate them. You will not necessarily like us or like what we have to say. We are not like you. But women and minorities do not show up. Some of us are afraid of throat knocking. But mostly we stay away from white male bastions, because they are unapetizing places. We have PTSD from the last grizzly experience.

Mr. Buruma believes he is a good guy, because he will admit that "MeToo is a necessary corrective." All of you think you are good guys. Stop thinking that. Brett Kavanaugh thinks he is a good guy. It is time men listened. It is time men realized that women don’t think any of you are good guys.

No, men do not have a side in this. That is like white supremacists saying white lives matter too.

Just to make this personal for a moment, my whole career has been overwhelmed by sexual harassment, by fending off male editors with the wrong idea. By now I am just used to it. If it isn’t that, then there are men who think I am difficult. I now have advanced breast cancer, so I am a new kind of difficult. Men don’t like that either.

I mentioned the lynching memorial. It is funny stuff. I would like to see the result of that thing done to commemorate crimes against women. I would like to see it here in New York City, which is where I live, and also where so many other crimes that are unspoken and unreported crimes take place. I would like to live to see this. I hope my feminist friends will organize with me to do this.

In the meantime, shame on Ian Buruma, but he is not so exceptional. May he see the light.

Elizabeth Wurtzel
New York City

To the Editors:

I am a Canadian woman who grew up listening to Jian Ghomeshi, and lived through his to speech that offends us is not banishment or censorship, but more speech.

Zoe Heller
New York City

To the Editors:

To express my deep appreciation to you for publishing the essay by Jian Ghomeshi. I was appalled by how he was treated, how he sank into oblivion. I feel that Ghomeshi sipacquently acquitted of all charges by the courts, how he was being denied any voice, particularly, of course, by the oh-so-politically cor- rect Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, and by the hysteria and rush to judgment that often seems to accompany the MeToo movement. I found it honest, appropriately nuanced, and coura- geously balanced between accepting respon- sibility and standing up for himself. I applaud your courage in printing it, and presume you are as appalled as I am at the ongoing despi- cable, irrational, and very upsetting hatred expressed toward both you and him in re- sponse to the publishing of his words.

I looked at only two comments, but do not have the stomach to continue reading. The sentiments of most of these folks seem some- how worse than what he is admitting to. By forgetting the simple truth that all of us are made up of many parts, some good and some not so good, their comments become devoid of even a hint of understanding, compassion, or forgiveness. The stones they are throwing reflect the hubris of those who think that the casting of these stones is not also a sin!

I hope you will consider a thoughtful re- sponse to the attitude of those criticizing your decision to give Jian a voice.

Peter Light
Roberts Creek, British Columbia

The Editors:

Shame on you. Printing letters on your pages is not advisable in helping him advance an entirely false narrative of his victimization. Giving an abuser the opportunity to revictimize people in your pages is not advisable in helping him advance an entirely false narrative of his victimization.

Giving an abuser the opportunity to revictimize people in your pages is not advisable in helping him advance an entirely false narrative of his victimization.

I am a long-time subscriber from Canning, Nova Scotia.

I would invite Mr. Buruma to take a trip to Roberts Creek, British Columbia.

To the Editors:

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I care deeply about fairness, due process, and second chances, and I realize that Ghomeshi was acquitted of the criminal charges against him based on a few minor incom- sistencies in his accusers’ stories. I don’t automatically believe that his history could be in every cir- cumstance, but in this case, where multiple women came forward, spoke to the media, put their reputations on the line, and told all similar stories about violent sexual predation, I believe these women. And I believe the reports that say Ghomeshi is a narcissist who has shown no remorse for his actions.

The Ghomeshi case was traumatizing for so many Canadian women. For weeks as the story broke, every woman I knew felt battered by the public misogyny it unleashed. We relived our own trauma, reexperienced our own shame.

We didn’t do enough to stop it. Would anyone believe or defend us if we came forward? We spoke in private and conteúdo with one other. The cycle repeated for the duration of his trial. This is to say nothing of what his actual victims went through. I person- ally know of at least one woman who was attacked by him and never came forward.

Please don’t put us through this again by featuring Ghomeshi on the cover of your magazine.

To the Editors:

I am a Canadian professor Emeritus, Ohio State University, Faculty Emeritus, Ohio State University, Fielding Graduate University, Vancouver, Washington.

I am enraged that you would let Jian Ghomeshi, and are quite happy to leave him be as a pri- vate citizen, free to live out his days coming to terms with how his behavior harmed so many women. We don’t want him there.

I must tell you as well that this story is quite timely for me, as I was the very day it came about to order a box of Camels. A publication as a surprise gift for my partner, who is a writer and avid reader. I think I’ll refrain from giving you any further finan- cial support, and look instead to supporting a less misogynist literary digest. And I shall be urging my friends who subscribe to The New York Review of Books to consider canceling their subscription, and discouraging you for your support of “fallen men.”

Shame on you. You have a potential reader here in Canada, home of Ghomeshi’s twenty-four victims. If you had any sense of decency, you would devote your next issue to these women, and any of the other vic- tims of “fallen men.” You have an oppor- tunity here to flip the script—please take it.

Pete Johnston
Toronto, Ontario

To the Editors:

I am a long-time subscriber from Canning, Nova Scotia.

I would invite Mr. Buruma to take a trip to Roberts Creek, British Columbia.

To the Editors:

I can scarcely believe an institution with your history could be so careless in helping him advance an entirely false narrative of his victimization, and are quite happy to leave him be as a pri- vate citizen, free to live out his days coming to terms with how his behavior harmed so many women. We don’t want him there.

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To the Editors:

When the Jian Ghomeshi case became public, I was still reeling from my own sexual assault. At the time of my assault, I had just turned twenty. I was in a depressive episode and suicidally depressed.

The friendship had been exclusively platonic. The man in question had gone out of his way to be supportive of me when I was in a fragile space. That night, he used the safety net he’d made me, strangled me with it, and raped me. He asked at each point if I liked it. I could not speak.

Now, I realize that publishing a contribution from the likes of Jian Ghomeshi may seem like an alternative to the #MeToo movement. Maybe it’s because you think there’s a duty to represent both sides to each story. Maybe it’s because you feel bad for a famous person and wanted to hear what he had to say.

What you clearly did not consider was the retraumatization not only of the woman he traumatized, but of all survivors of sexual violence. By publishing this, you are telling us that the people who violated us can get away with it, relatively unscathed. Hell, they can even write an article about the difficulty of leaving the house post-traumatic stress disorder to my medical history and have to cope with its impacts in my own daily life and marriage, six years after the fact.

I’ve added post-traumatic stress disorder to my medical history and have to cope with its impacts in my own daily life and marriage, six years after the fact. I’ve added post-traumatic stress disorder to my medical history and have to cope with its impacts in my own daily life and marriage, six years after the fact.

I understand that under the law, he has been exonerated. I also know that situations like this are why we didn’t report. My assailant has a totally normal life. He’s married. He has kids. He’s added the post-traumatic stress disorder to my medical history and has to cope with its impacts in my own daily life and marriage, six years after the fact.

There is nothing owed to the Jians of the world. By commodifying our trauma, you are sending a visceral message that our lives are less valuable. These acts are more valuable.

To the Editors:

Please, I subscribe to your magazine for its insightful reviews and thought-provoking essays, but not sub-story quasi-confessional from Jian Ghomeshi.

I work in the media in Canada. I know he’s with them now. The media figures who circulate throughout the industry years before the story broke.

Oh I’m sure he’s a “changed man” and feels bad about what he’s done, but not once in his ponderous and self-inflating essay does he come out and apologize.

He does not deserve space in such a journal as yours. Seriously rethinking my ongoing subscription.

Mike Duncan
Toronto, Ontario

To the Editors:

I had considered taking a subscription to NYRB, but after your publication of the defensive piece by Jian Ghomeshi, an abuser of many women, I will not. Shame on you. What a waste of prime intellectual space.

Ann Shola Orloff
Professor of Sociology and Political Science, Board of Lady

To the Editors:

I have been a subscriber to the NYRB for forty or more years. Helen Epstein, Robert Gottlieb, and Marcia Sachs Eisenmann have written as the late Elizabeth Hardwick and Robert Silvers are among the many that make up the fabric of my affections for your serious journal.

This latest development, where the new editor decides to give a platform to one of the present-day media figures who cannot reach beyond his self-interest and narcissistic defenses, has shocked and saddened me. Buruma’s recorded answers to queries as to what he has done and why are further evidence that a very intelligent intellectual may also have moral and ethical blindness, a sensibility narrowed by gender interests that desensitizes a person to what more than half our human beings and women, should the responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts.

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