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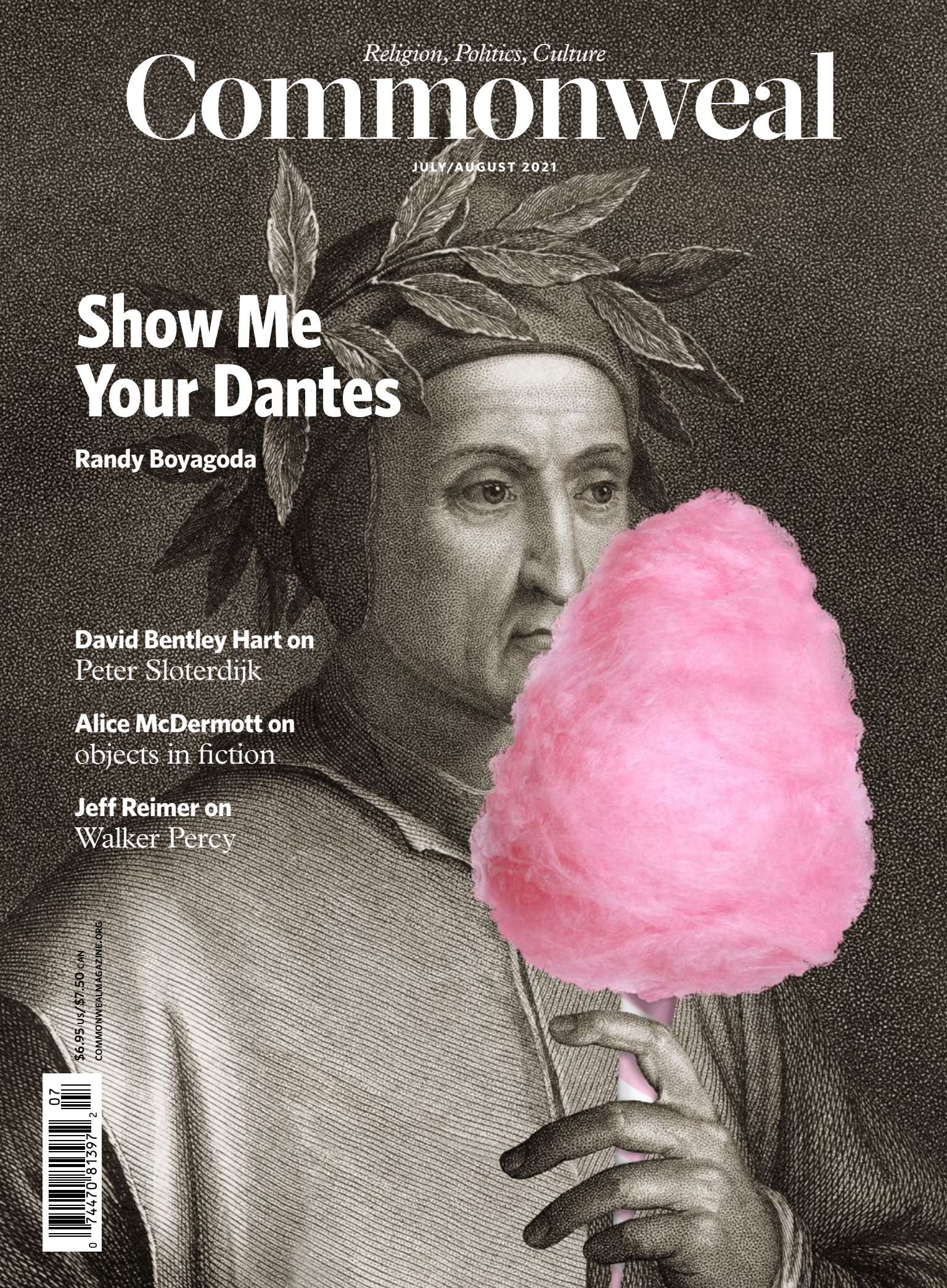

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Religion, Politics, Culture

Commonweal

JULY/AUGUST 2021 • VOLUME 148 • NUMBER 7

SUMMER FICTION

COVER DESIGN
David Sankey

COVER IMAGES
Alamy/Shutterstock

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FOUNDED IN 1924

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Commonweal [ISSN 0010-3330], a review of religion, politics, and culture, is published monthly, except for a single July-August issue, by the Commonweal Foundation, 475 Riverside Drive, Rm. 405, New York, NY 10115. Telephone: (212) 662-4200. Email: editors@commonwealmagazine.org. Fax: (212) 662-4183. POSTMASTER: send address changes to *Commonweal*, P.O. Box 348, Congers, NY 10920-0348.

LETTERS

The Pitfalls of the Meritocracy

'INTELLIGENCE WORKERS'

The mostly bland diagnosis of the state of our union and our psyches in Charles McNamara's essay "Know-Nothing Know-It-Alls" (June) is completely belied by the photo of "QAnon shaman" Jacob Chansley on the cover of that issue. While McNamara borrows Walter Lippmann's words to describe us as "cop[ing] with a modern world that is altogether too big, too complex, and too fleeting for direct acquaintance," Chansley's attorney has been describing him and his fellow insurrectionists in far less anodyne terms (with expletives but not politically incorrect language removed): "short-bus people.... people with brain damage.... They're on the...spectrum."

McNamara's further invocation of Lippmann to prescribe reliance on "bureaucratic 'intelligence work' done by academic experts who have the time and talent to master specialized knowledge" as our cure is even more off the mark than is his diagnosis of our ills. He should read Michael Sandel's new book, *The Tyranny of Merit* (or the excellent essay on that book in the April issue of *Commonweal*), which calls out the "toxic brew" in our meritocratic society of the hubris among educated elites and the humiliation and resentment among those who fail to succeed.

We do not need more expert information from "intelligence workers." We need functioning communities in which we can discover a common good. And, to bring in a second beautifully written essay in *Commonweal* (David Albertson and Jason Blakely's "From Here to Utopia," June), lived community is what the Church could reteach us. It could do so, that is, if bishops would stop pretending to be the "intelligence workers" on whose words we are all hanging to bring clarity to the complicated moral issues of our lives, and start attending to rebuilding our "devastated social belonging."

William McDonough
St. Catherine University, St. Paul, Minn.

CHARLES MCNAMARA RESPONDS:

I appreciate Dr. McDonough's letter and the opportunity it affords to underscore an important point about "intelligence work." As I write in my original commentary, Walter Lippmann's critics—John Dewey chief among them—were correct to be suspicious of a bureaucratic elite confident in its ability to cure all our literal and figurative ills. Lippmann's own notion of stereotypes, in fact, requires such suspicion: not a soul on Earth fully grasps this strange virus, and last year, disastrous epistemic "hubris" was on display among meritocratic heroes like Anthony Fauci and Jerome Adams. I did not intend to make an unqualified defense of elites, nor do I think I made one. (Last year in *Commonweal*, too, I lamented some failures of university meritocracy in a review of Zena Hitz's *Lost in Thought*.)

Rejecting Lippmann's reverence for authoritative experts, Dewey argues in *The Public and Its Problems* that expertise itself must center around McDonough's "functioning communities": "No government by experts in which the masses do not have the chance to inform the experts as to their needs can be anything but an oligarchy." Aware of the dangers of meritocratic aristocracy, Dewey concludes that the "world has suffered more from leaders and authorities than from the masses." After the fatal missteps of the Trump administration, I find it impossible to dismiss Dewey's verdict.

I agree with McDonough that what we all need is more epistemic humility—from bishops, from epidemiologists, and most of all from violent insurrectionists. Indeed, this was my essay's central claim. Perhaps he and I would also agree that the model "intelligence worker" is not the surgeon general nor even a university professor. She might instead be a volunteer clinician who offers her patients a "chance to inform" her about their pandemic bewilderment and humbly confesses some of her own in return.

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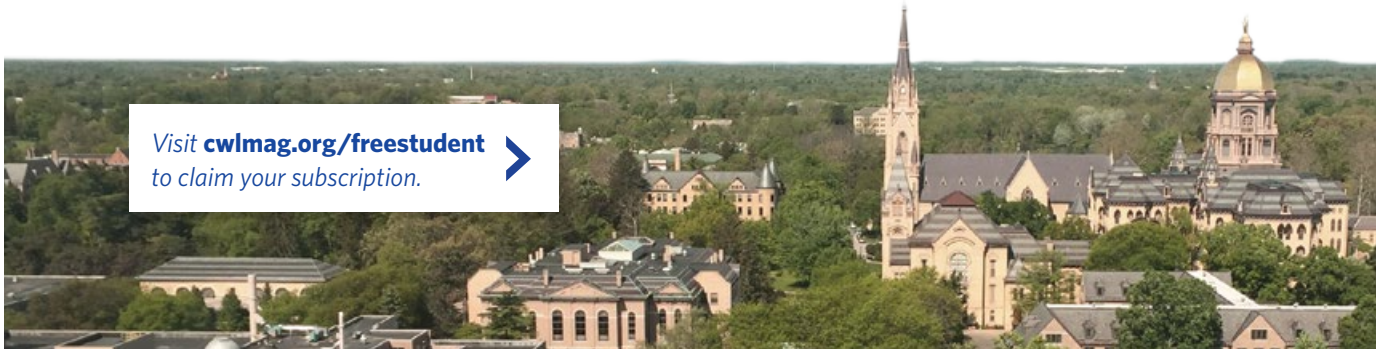

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LETTERS

INSPIRING THE NEXT SCHOLARS

I read with great interest Julia Young's review of Leslie Woodcock Tentler's *American Catholics: A History* ("Diversity & Division," May). One point in the review puzzled me. Young notes how readers might want "a fuller investigation of the history of Black Catholicism in the United States rather than the overview that Tentler provides." Her subsequent comments fail to mention that such an investigation already exists. While I too eagerly await the publication of Shannen Dee Williams's work, *Subversive Habits: Black Catholic Nuns in the Long African-American Freedom Struggle,* Fr. Cyprian Davis, OSB, already laid the groundwork in *The History of Black Catholics in the United States* (1995). My colleague Dr. Cecilia Moore has almost completed a revision of Fr. Davis's magisterial work, which inspired numerous publications on Black Catholics in the United States. May Fr. Davis rest in the light of Christ knowing his good work continues to inspire the next generation.

Sandra Yocum
University of Dayton, Dayton, Ohio

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Pastors, Not Prophets

"As a convert, I never expected much of the bishops," Dorothy Day wrote in a 1968 letter. "In all history, popes and bishops and abbots seem to have been blind and power-loving and greedy. I never expected leadership from them." Many Catholics, and not only converts, would agree with Day's jaundiced view of bishops—and June's meeting of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops reminded us why that's the case. President Joe Biden's worthiness to receive Communion dominated coverage of the proceedings, a predictably divisive outcome that underscored the bishops' political obtuseness and pastoral failings.

Not long after last year's election, USCCB president Archbishop José Gomez announced that a special working group would be formed to deal with Biden—the nation's second Catholic president, but one whose support for legal abortion created what Gomez called an unusually "difficult and complex situation." Then, on the day of Biden's inauguration, Gomez issued a statement that emphasized where they disagreed, "most seriously in the areas of abortion, contraception, marriage, and gender." In February, the USCCB's working group recommended that a document explaining Church teaching on the Eucharist be drafted, and that it insist on "the fact that our relationship with Christ is not strictly a private affair." When that proposal was taken up by the bishops last month, most observers assumed it was aimed at the president.

The USCCB's leadership has since tried to walk back any suggestion that they had Biden in mind. "The question of whether or not to deny any individual or groups Holy Communion was not on the ballot," they claimed in a recent press release. "The vote by the bishops last week tasked the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee on Doctrine to begin the drafting of a teaching document on the Eucharist." Alas, their protests were betrayed by bishop after bishop who couldn't help blurting out during the meeting that Biden *was* the problem.

If the bishops' bumbling was to be expected, responses to it have often been unsatisfying. Some critics have called out the bishops for their lack of consistency—why the reluctance to discipline Catholic politicians who support the death penalty, for example? It's a fair point, but one that would lead to the Eucharist becoming precisely what Pope Francis has said it's not: a "prize for the perfect." Others seem to suggest political leaders are entirely beyond the reach of their bishop's discipline.

Unlikely as it might be, it is not too late for the U.S. bishops to contribute to a better dialogue about "Eucharistic coherence," and this would begin with humility. Humility in the theological sense means seeing oneself as one truly is, and it usually depends on having at least some sense of how one is seen by others. The U.S. bishops continue to see themselves as prophets. That is, obviously, not how most Americans see them; it is not even how most American Catholics see them. The bishops have collectively lost the moral standing that prophets need through their mishandling of the sex-abuse crisis, their silence on features of contemporary Amercian life conspicuously at odds with the Gospel, and their unseemly eagerness to ally themselves with depraved political figures like Donald Trump in pursuit of a narrow set of policy goals.

The good news for the bishops is that they are not required to be prophets. Their main role in the Church is pastoral, not prophetic. And if they wish to address the question of Eucharistic discipline as humble pastors rather than as would-be prophets, they should take care to exercise prudence. That would require paying close attention to the likely outcome of withholding the Eucharist from pro-choice Catholic politicians and realizing that, if their purpose is to advance an anti-abortion political agenda, then barring Biden from Communion is supremely counterproductive: it will alienate many Catholics, including pro-life Catholic Democrats, and reinforce the perception among non-Catholics that the pro-life cause is sectarian, which the bishops continue to insist it is not.

The bishops' rhetoric often suggests that abortion is *exactly* like any other kind of homicide and ought to be treated as such by the law. If that's what they really believed, then they would have to be in favor of some kind of criminal penalty for anyone who procures an abortion. Instead, they claim that women who have abortions are also victims and should not be punished—though Catholics who procure abortions are still automatically excommunicated. The bishops would do well to acknowledge that abortion is different from other kinds of homicide because any law forbidding it imposes a significant burden, forcing women to remain pregnant and give birth against their will. One can oppose abortion without ignoring that fact, or treating it as trivial. The bishops would also do well to acknowledge that translating even very important moral proscriptions into laws is a complicated matter, requiring prudence and admitting of disagreement. Finally, they should remember that, while they can compel Catholic laity when it comes to the sacraments, they and all those who agree with them about abortion will have to persuade many Americans who disagree with them if they want to change the law. That is what it means to live in a democracy.

No More Blank Checks

On June 17, the House of Representatives voted to repeal the 2002 Authorization for the Use of Military Force (AUMF). Forty-nine Republicans joined all but one Democrat to end the nineteen-year-old authorization that Congress gave to President George W. Bush to invade Iraq. The vote on H.R. 256, which was introduced by Rep. Barbara Lee (D-Calif.), is a welcome step in a years-long campaign to retrieve some of the warmaking powers Congress has ceded to the executive branch over the past two decades. Article One of the Constitution gives Congress the power to declare war, but authorizations like the 2002 AUMF effectively cede that role to the president. If the repeal passed in the Senate, the Iraq-specific authorization could no longer be used by any president to justify future military operations.

But the vote to repeal the 2002 AUMF will not by itself solve the problem of executive overreach. It will not even eliminate the misuse of AUMFs. The 2001 AUMF, passed three days after 9/11 and still on the books, is still the one presidents most often use to justify military action. This earlier AUMF allows the president to wage war against anyone who, in the president's accounting, "planned, authorized, committed or aided" the attacks of September 11, 2001. In the twenty years since, the authorization has been used to justify military operations and targeted strikes in at least nineteen countries, including the Philippines, Kenya, Somalia, and Georgia.

In a statement after the passage of H.R. 256, President Biden expressed support for the repeal of the 2002 AUMF. This is certainly a good thing, but the rest of the statement reveals that Biden's position on AUMFs in general is less solid. Biden supports the outright repeal of the 2002 AUMF because the United States has "no ongoing military activities that rely solely on [it] as a domestic legal basis." But he says he wants Congress not only to repeal but to *replace* the sweeping 2001 authorization, presumably because active military operations *do* rely on it. The replacement AUMF, Biden says, must give him the "clear authority to reduce threats"—specifically "terrorist threats"—throughout the world.

Writing in our pages, Andrew J. Bacevich has argued that Biden is fundamentally a supporter of the foreign-policy status quo: a "perpetual war" of military operations and multigenerational wars conducted throughout the world by the executive branch with little input from Congress or the American public. Under a status-quo president, a new but vague authorization to protect "national interests" from "terrorist threats" would do nothing to prevent us from continuing to stumble into endless military conflicts.

Now that H.R. 256 is passed, the Senate will vote on a bill introduced by Sen. Tim Kaine (D-Vir.) and Sen. Todd Young (R-Ind.) to repeal the 2002 AUMF, as well as the 1991 AUMF, which is still active. Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer has agreed to hold a vote on it, which will likely fall mostly along party lines; Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell has expressed opposition to repealing any authorizations. But given that the majority of Americans desire an end to our ongoing military operations, as well as a greater role for Congress in making decisions about when and how to use the military, the time could be near when Congress finally takes back some of the power the Constitution gives it.

Kaine has pointed out the dangerous open-endedness of the current AUMFs: "We pass them and then they just float out there like these zombies that can be used for mischief." There may again be occasions when it will be appropriate for Congress to issue a new AUMF, but only in response to a specific threat and with a well-defined objective. It is an inexcusable abdication of its own responsibilities for Congress to continue giving presidents a blank check for the use of deadly force abroad.

—Regina Munch

Curbing Carbon

Climate change isn't just a set of apocalyptic conditions that will be heaped on future generations—it's a gradual disaster we are already experiencing. In the American West and Southwest, where the duration and frequency of heat waves has increased every decade since the 1960s, June brought record-setting temperatures in Phoenix (117 degrees) and unprecedented triple-digit heat to Oregon and Montana. Lake Mead, which supplies water to 25 million people in three states and parts of Mexico, is at its lowest level since it was created with the Hoover Dam in 1935, and the federal government is planning to declare an official water shortage there in August. The extreme drought, along with early wildfires, suggests that we will face yet another deadly fire season this year. These are not temporary aberrations. They are the normal and foreseeable effects of excessive carbon emissions.

Of the major players responsible for keeping the world addicted to oil, ExxonMobil is perhaps the most notorious. Despite receiving internal confirmation of the dangerous warming effects of carbon dioxide as early as 1978, the company spent decades funding think tanks and organizations like the now-disbanded Global Climate Coalition to sow doubt about climate change; paying "independent" scientists to publish contrarian research; and successfully convincing the Bush administration to abandon the 1998 Kyoto Protocol. Exxon's January 2021 Energy & Carbon Summary previewed its plans to expand its drilling presence and boost its fossil-fuel production over the coming decades (including in Texas, where extreme temperatures have already caused major electrical outages this year and where energy companies are currently begging residents to reduce their electricity use). Despite recent PR efforts to "green" the company's image, it's clear that, even among global oil

companies, Exxon has demonstrated a particularly stubborn refusal to take steps toward decarbonization.

But now the company may be facing pressure from a new source: its own board. Thanks to the recent campaign of a small activist investment firm called Engine No. 1, Exxon's twelve-person board counts three new climate-focused members. Engine No. 1 was founded last year by activist investors Chris James and Charlie Penner to select corporate-board candidates with energy experience and a willingness to address environmental harm. It is not a major shareholder in Exxon, but it didn't need to be to pull off such an audacious project; it only had to convince the major shareholders to support the candidates it put forward. For investors like the state pension fund in California, where the effects of continued fossil-fuel consumption are so pronounced, nudging Exxon toward alternative energy was a welcome development. Three of Exxon's largest shareholders—Vanguard, BlackRock, and State Street—also expressed support.

James and Penner frame their strategy as a sensible business choice, not a noble sacrifice. They point to Exxon's historic losses in the past decade and argue that the company needs "directors with track records of looking profitably around corners in energy." That didn't stop Exxon from spending $35 million to fight the campaign. (Engine No. 1 spent almost as much). But despite the best efforts of CEO Darren Woods, Exxon's board now includes three proponents of decarbonization: Gregory Goff, a former oil executive; Kaisa Hietala, former vice president for renewable energy at a Finnish petroleum company; and Alexander Karsner, an energy entrepreneur. While they still face nine board members entrenched in the status quo, their upset election demonstrates that even the most recalcitrant fossil-fuel companies can be pushed toward a low-carbon business model. The question is how long it will take them to get there. With so much of the world already ablaze, there's little time to lose.

—Isabella Simon

The Eviction Crisis

Even as the pandemic continues to recede in the United States and the economy shows signs of a strong (if uneven) recovery, another crisis looms just around the corner. Come August, millions of low-income Americans will find themselves at risk of eviction. The U.S. Census Bureau estimates that more than 10 million households—a staggering 14 percent of all U.S. renters—are behind on rent because they lost income during the pandemic, and more than 4 million are likely to be evicted in the next two months.

Because those facing eviction are also among the least likely to be vaccinated, the CDC has extended the national moratorium on evictions through the end of July. That measure provides a much-needed reprieve, but urgent challenges remain. A little less than half of the $46 billion renters' relief fund approved under the CARES Act and the American Rescue Plan remains undistributed. This is mostly the fault of sluggish state bureaucracies; New York, for example, distributed less than half the available money last year, then waited until June of this year to open new relief applications. In other states, such as Tennessee and Washington, conservative judges have quietly quashed the CDC's national moratoriums, allowing evictions to proceed and thereby offering a grim preview of what's in store for the rest of the country.

Though late to address the crisis, the Biden administration is now calling for an "all hands on deck effort by local governments, courts, community organizations, and the legal community to create alternatives to evictions." Since so much of the nation's housing policy relies on a patchwork of state and municipal regulations, there's a limit to what the federal government can achieve on its own. Nonetheless, the Biden administration is now taking decisive measures to keep people in their homes. To prevent potential foreclosures, Biden has ousted Trump appointee Mark Calabria from the helm of the Federal Housing Finance Agency. The Treasury and Justice departments have issued new memos to speed up the distribution of rental relief and enhance renters' bargaining power in court. Biden has also convened a White House summit on the eviction crisis to solicit "immediate eviction prevention programs" from state and local leaders.

He'd do well to consider developments in California and Pennsylvania. Last month, California Gov. Gavin Newsom announced that his state would use $7 billion in federal relief funding to pay back-rent and past-due utility bills for all low-income renters. The plan amounts to the largest single rent-relief program in the country's history. And when landlords complain that they too are the victims of lost income, cities like Philadelphia have begun to call their bluff. The city is now allowing landlords to sue for eviction—but only *after* they've helped their tenants apply for federal aid and have demonstrated a good-faith effort at "eviction diversion" through arbitration. This is a creative way of balancing the legitimate property interests of landlords with a tenant's right to a vigorous legal defense.

Whatever the results of current efforts to stem the coming tide of evictions, the country is long overdue for a robust public discussion about the increasing scarcity of affordable housing. That debate should put renters front and center. The government already offers a range of benefits and protections for homeowners. But as David Dayen points out in the *American Prospect*, we routinely treat renters with "callousness and cruelty," punishing them with dispossession for "one false move." It doesn't have to be that way. Biden has repeatedly said that "housing is a human right." He will now have a chance to show the country he means it.

—Griffin Oleynick

CATHLEEN KAVENY

Ancient, But Ever New

The unsettling experience of reading St. Augustine in Latin

Princeton University's Department of Classics just announced that its majors will no longer be required to know Greek or Latin. One reason proffered is that the language requirement discriminates against economically disadvantaged students, who don't have access to those languages in their high-school education.

I don't buy that argument, for two reasons. First, Princeton can easily afford to send smart, interested students to intensive summer language programs to bring them up to speed. Second, the argument proves too much. Very few public schools, particularly those in economically disadvantaged communities, offer Chinese or Arabic. But no one would say that students majoring in Asian Studies or Middle East Studies don't need to learn them; in these cases, languages are rightfully considered essential to understanding different people and their culture.

I suspect there's another, deeper reason for Princeton's decision. It came at a time of a growing concern about the moral status of the field of classics itself. For critics, classical languages and traditions are the source of Western hegemonic thinking, which the requirement to learn them perpetuates. We need to keep Greek and Latin at a safe distance, then, because they are ultimately inseparable from our society's entrenched racism, sexism, and other forms of structural injustice. I don't buy this argument either—even on its own terms. What it misses is the fact that reading important texts in the original language is rarely a staid endeavor, let alone a reactionary one, but rather an unsettling intellectual challenge.

Over the past year, I've been taking a class that's working through Augustine's *Confessions* in Latin. I have read the *Confessions* at least ten times in several different translations. But it is only close scrutiny of the text in Augustine's own words that has allowed me to get to know him in an unmediated way. No translation, no matter how fine, can fully communicate Augustine's intellectual power and exquisite control of Latin.

If you read him slowly and carefully, as you have to if Latin isn't your native tongue, Augustine not only tells you who he is and what he is capable of doing, but he also shows you. He is beguiling and terrifying, sometimes simultaneously. You can see why he became the father of Western Christianity. You can also see the need for some intense family therapy.

Augustine is a master rhetorician. Even as he complains that the game of rhetoric is all smoke and wind ("*nonne ecce illa omnia fumus et ventus?*"), he repeatedly reminds us that he is very good at it indeed ("*et maior etiam eram in schola rhetoris, et gaudebam superbe et tumebam typho*"). Although he heavily criticizes students of rhetoric for their focus on money and fame, Augustine candidly admits that he now uses the same skills for divine ends ("*tibi serviat quod loquor et scribo et lego et numero*").

So caveat lector. The adolescent who excelled at evoking the emotions of a weeping goddess will not hesitate to use those skills to move his audience to love him, and through him, to love God the way he does. He told us as much. But what if all that sweet talk doesn't work?

Here is where things get interesting. Many people attempt to distinguish the earlier, dialogical Augustine we see in the *Confessions* from the later, coercive Augustine who justified the use of force to keep the schismatic Donatists in the Church (Letter 93 to Vincentius). But a slow, careful reading of the *Confessions* in Latin reveals that they are one and the same ambivalent man.

In Book I, Augustine describes the regular beatings he received as child from his teachers—wondering, even thirty years later, how his parents could have laughed at his sufferings, which he compares to torture ("*quemadmodum parentes nostri ridebant tormenta quibus pueri a magistris affligebamur?*"). As a small boy, whose dread was far from small, he asked God to rescue him ("*rogabam te parvus non parvo affectu,*

Jusepe de Ribera, *Saint Augustine Praying*, c. 1636

CLASSICPAINTINGS/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

ne in schola vapularem").

As he tells us, God did not heed his prayer. The adult Augustine acknowledges he was sinning by disobeying his parents, implying that the beatings were justified. But he undermines that implication by pointing out the ways in which adult business dealings are very similar to the games of children that take them from their studies—and no one beats them.

More troublingly, Augustine groups the beating of school children and the torments of the martyrs together under the jurisdiction of God's strong laws ("*valentibus legibus*"). He describes these laws as healing harshnesses ("*salubres amaritudines*"), calling us away from destructive delight ("*iucunditate pestifera*") and back to God.

Really? I found myself talking back to Augustine at this point, for the first time in years: Do you really want your readers to believe that beatings and torture are both to be counted as *healing* harshnesses? Even after you've waxed eloquently about how most adults do everything they can to avoid the instruments of torture ("*eculeos et ungulas atque huiuscemodi varia tormenta*")? Now, it's true you say that the faithful think little of these tortures ("*ita parvi aestimet*"). But that's just a throwaway line, in the middle of your bitter complaint against your parents for ridiculing your pain.

The *Confessions*, of course, are addressed to God; in its first sentence, Augustine tells God that He is great, and strongly worthy of praise ("*Magnus es, domine, et laudabilis valde*"). And indeed, Augustine lavishly praises God throughout. But Book I also gives the reader reason to worry that God's dealings with us are not entirely praiseworthy. Indeed, in Augustine's telling, they border on abusive, and can be used to justify our abuse of one another. Who, exactly, is Augustine's God? And is He worthy of worship? I glided over the question in English. But the Latin forced me to face it head on.

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MATTHEW BOUDWAY

There Ought to Be a Law

The temptations of American legalism

In this country, political movements to legalize something are usually also social movements to normalize it. The most vocal supporters of drug legalization believe there is nothing immoral about drug use, even if they acknowledge the dangers of addiction (and some don't even do that), while the most vocal opponents of legalization believe that drug use is both a threat to public health and a moral problem. A similar coincidence of moral and legal views obtains, *mutatis mutandis*, in the case of what legalizers call sex work and what prohibitionists continue to call prostitution: most of those campaigning to make it legal also believe that no social stigma should attach to either the sex worker or the client, while most who believe that prostitution is immoral can be counted on to believe that it should remain illegal.

This tight alignment between ideas about the law and ideas about morality is a distinctly American phenomenon. Outside of this country, it is not so uncommon to encounter people who do not believe prostitution is always immoral but nevertheless believe it should be prohibited for some other reason, perhaps because of its connection to human trafficking. Nor is it uncommon in other parts of the world to meet people who disapprove of prostitution but do not believe it should be illegal. The very liberal prostitution laws of most Latin American countries are widely accepted there, despite the fact that public disapproval of prostitution remains very high. This circumstance would surely strike many Americans as odd. But why should it? Why is there so little space between our own intuitions about the law and our intuitions about what might be called public morality (as opposed to the purely private, to-each-her-own morality that our public discourse passes over in silence)?

One possible explanation has to do with our cultural and religious pluralism. Law and commerce are perhaps the only two things that all Americans can now safely be assumed to have in common. Some have argued that the United States is today less a nation in the traditional sense than a multi-cultural commercial empire. But social stigmas against things like drug use and prostitution are cultural artifacts and therefore make sense only within the context of a common culture. The values Americans are still assumed to have in common, like equality and freedom, are all readily translatable into a legal idiom: equality *before the law*, freedom understood as a set of *rights*. In order to be intelligible to one another, we find it necessary to formulate our moral ideas in purely economic or legal terms—terms of equity, utility, and consent.

Another possible reason for the close alignment between legal and moral ideas has to do with our country's pre-pluralist roots in Puritanism. To the Puritan mindset, law and morality are really the same thing. Just as the Constitution is the charter for our government, for the Puritan the Decalogue is the charter for all morality, a set of basic prohibitions from which we can derive other, more specific prohibitions. *The Book of the General Lawes and Libertyes Concerning the Inhabitants of the Massachusets* (1648), one of the earliest codes of criminal law in colonial America, begins with this observation:

> So soon as God had set up Politicall Government among his people Israel he gave them a body of lawes for judgement both in civil and criminal causes. These mere breif and fundamental principles, yet withall so full and comprehensive as out of them clear deductions were to be drawne to all particular cases in future times.

The same document goes on to claim an equivalence between God's laws and the laws of properly constituted civil authorities:

> That distinction which is put between the Lawes of God and the lawes of men, becomes a snare to many as it is mis-applyed in the ordering of their obedience to civil Authoritie; for when the Authoritie is of God and that in way of an Ordinance Rom. 13. 1. and when the administration of it is according to deductions, and rules gathered from the word of God, and the clear light of nature in civil nations, surely there is no humane law that tendeth to common good

SHAWSHOTS/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

(according to those principles) but the same is mediately a law of God, and that in way of an Ordinance which all are to submit unto and that for conscience sake. Rom. 13. 5.

In short, the (divinely revealed) moral law and the "lawes of men" admit of no separation from one another. Whatever is wrong should be publicly forbidden; whatever is not forbidden is morally a matter of indifference. Among the things that were forbidden in seventeenth-century Massachusetts: idleness, swearing, "tippling" for more than half an hour at a time or after nine o'clock in the evening, gambling, wearing lace, or just dressing above one's station. One could be fined or whipped for lying and banished for heresy. Fornication was punished by fines, corporal punishment, and forced marriage. One could be put to death for acts of bestiality, blasphemy, disobedience to one's parents, adultery, and, of course, witchcraft. In 1653, a man named Thomas Kemble spent two hours in the stocks for "lewd and unseemly behavior"—kissing his wife on their doorstep. Making matters worse, he did it on a Sunday. (We Catholics have had our own problems with legalism, but there has always been a healthy tension between Catholic canon law and moral theology, along with a less healthy Catholic tolerance of hypocrisy.)

Of course, it would be a mistake to reduce the Puritans' theology to their sumptuary and Sabbath laws—just ask Marilynne Robinson—but the Puritan way of thinking about morality, as primarily a matter of following rules, and of the law, as primarily a matter of morality, has continued to have a profound effect on our culture wars long after the decline of the theology that underwrote it. Both progressives and conservatives continue to debate contested social questions with the assumption that whatever is clearly wrong ought to be legally forbidden. It follows that whatever is not forbidden is not to be condemned. "It's a free country," we like to say—by which we usually mean, "It's not against the law, so butt out." This is partly why our culture wars are so often won or lost in the courts.

The repeal of Prohibition may seem like an obvious counterexample to this argument. Americans may still disagree about alcohol, but we all now agree that Prohibition was a mistake, right? Well, not exactly: there are still eighty-three dry counties in the United States. In any case, it isn't an accident that Prohibition happened here and not in other Western countries, or that it enjoyed a good deal of public support even after its disastrous social effects became evident. Of course, many Americans who do not themselves drink or use drugs also believe it should be legal to do so, but that is because they understand it as a question not of morality but of morally neutral preference. Similarly, there are people who become vegetarians because they believe it is a healthier diet, or because they don't like the taste of meat. But the militant vegetarian who believes it is *wrong* to eat other animals, or wrong to raise and slaughter them to be eaten, is also more likely to believe that the issue is not only ethical but also political and legal.

This tendency is one reason why the controversy over abortion is so much more neuralgic in this country than in most others. We know from public surveys that many Americans who disapprove of abortion don't think it should be recriminalized. That suggests that this issue is another exception to the pattern I've described. But because we are not used to talking about grave evils without recourse to legal categories,

Among the things that were forbidden in seventeenth-century Massachusetts: idleness, swearing, "tippling" for more than half an hour at a time or after nine o'clock in the evening, or just dressing above one's station.

people do not have a common language with which to express and defend this apparently awkward pair of convictions. On the one side, it is argued that no one who understood the true enormity of abortion could wish to see it remain legal in any circumstance—after all, it is a grave injustice, and what is the law for if not to redress injustices? On the other side, it is assumed that no one who thinks abortion should be legal would wish to discourage it in any way.

Even the Clintonite formula "safe, legal, and rare" is considered unacceptably squishy by today's abortion-rights activists. Safe, yes; legal, of course; but why rare? In their view, if it is legal, there is no reason why it should not also be common. In a quarter-century we have gone from "safe, legal, and rare" to "Shout your abortion!" The first was never going to end up on any T-shirts or bumper stickers: it was the product of cagey political triangulation, but it did capture an important nuance. The second is a more authentic expression of the attitude animating contemporary pro-choice activism, and more typically American in its impatience with the tone of tragic necessity.

The case for criminalizing abortion, because it is a kind of homicide, is in its own way very American; so is the case for celebrating abortion rights as a triumph for women's equality. We understand these positions easily, even if we do not agree with them. But to say that something should remain legal even though it may be morally worse than some things that should *not* be legal still strikes many of us as an outlandish paradox.

It is possible, of course, that Americans who are "personally opposed to abortion" but do not support its criminalization are confused about either the moral or the legal argument. My point here is only that there is no necessary contradiction between the two sides of their position, and therefore no reason to doubt either their sincerity or their seriousness. They say they want to live in a society that values and protects the unborn, but they worry about the *state* using its coercive power to force women to remain pregnant and give birth against their will. This has been roughly President Biden's position, as I understand it. One may find that way of understanding the issue inadequate, as I do, but it is neither incoherent nor "unspeakably craven," as one Catholic journalist on Twitter has claimed. Even Thomas Aquinas drew a distinction between the morality of abortion and abortion law, teaching that abortion is always wrong but should be illegal only after "quickening"—just as both he and Augustine thought that prostitution, though gravely sinful, should be tolerated by civil authorities. Citing Augustine's *De ordine*, Aquinas argues in the *Summa theologiae* that governments "rightly tolerate certain evils, lest certain goods be lost, or certain evils be incurred." It would be imprudent for civil law to forbid every sin, or even for civil authorities to enforce every law. "Quickening," we now know, was primitive embryology, and therefore a bad basis for Aquinas's distinction between abortions that should be permitted and those that shouldn't. Whatever the limitations of his science, though, it remains significant that he could conceive, even in the case of abortion, of a distinction between what was immoral and what ought to be illegal: the former was a much larger category, and no less important.

One common mistake is to imagine that, even if the law should not concern itself with every moral question, the kinds of moral questions it *does* concern itself with are the most important ones: the state can afford to overlook our venial sins, as it were, but not our mortal ones. But that, again, is to misconstrue the relationship between morality and the law, which is rightly concerned not with the gravity of immoral actions but with their effect on what Aquinas called "temporal tranquility"—something more than public order but less than perfect justice. Every sentient adult has encountered people who are both perfectly law-abiding and thoroughly vicious, people who have betrayed friends or told damaging lies out of sheer malice. Does this mean we must either criminalize all deceit and betrayal or reconsider our judgment that such people are vicious? Of course not. Does it mean that deceit and betrayal are less damaging than, say, shoplifting? No.

The law is one thing, morality another; they are always related but never the same. The susceptibility of our politics to moral panics, and of our moral commitments to new laws and legal rulings is a regrettable feature of our national life. Yes, some important legal and political reforms in America, such as the abolition of slavery, began as moral movements, but other moral movements, such as Prohibition, went astray precisely by seeking a legal enforcement of virtue. The law is a teacher, as the new integralists are always reminding us, but woe to the society for which it has become the only effective teacher, or the only meaningful test. A single-minded focus on legal and political reforms often simplifies complex social realities and preempts real moral reflection, replacing the full palette of values—of good and bad, better and worse—with the black-and-white of permissible and impermissible or the gray of moral indifference. This tendency flattens our public morality into a deadening binary of what will land you in jail or get you fired, and what won't. If it won't, then, to use the current expression, "It's all good." But it *isn't* all good. There are social evils to which the appropriate response is not primarily legal or political, just as there are political or legal resolutions that do not settle moral questions. Let both the holdovers of the old Moral Majority and the champions of the Great Awokening take note.

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BRETT C. HOOVER

Still Unaccommodated

Why are Hispanic Catholics treated unequally in so many U.S. parishes?

After more than a decade of researching parish life, and after teaching many cohorts of diverse pastoral ministers, something has become disturbingly clear to me: institutionalized racial and ethnic inequality, especially of the anti-Hispanic variety, is endemic in Catholic parishes.

There are statistics that bear this out. From 2011 to 2013, the National Study of Hispanic Ministry in Catholic Parishes surveyed parish and diocesan leaders across the country about parish ministries that serve Hispanics. Researchers found that, while people of Latin American origin or descent make up nearly half of the total U.S. Catholic population, only about one-quarter of U.S. Catholic parishes intentionally serve Hispanics. Among those that do serve Hispanics, more than 40 percent of parishioners are non-Hispanic whites. The structural difference is clear: white Catholics are accommodated everywhere, but Hispanic Catholics only in certain parishes.

A similar disparity also exists in Eucharistic worship, the foundational act of Catholic parish life. Spanish-language Masses account for just 6 percent of all Masses celebrated across the country, despite the fact that more than 12 percent of Americans speak Spanish as their first language. (*Eighty percent* of Hispanic Catholics are either Spanish-dominant or bilingual, according to the Pew Research Center.) In many shared parishes—that is, parishes serving multiple ethnic and linguistic groups—Sunday Masses in Spanish are often relegated to the least convenient times, or shunted to the most rundown spaces, even as sparsely attended English-language Masses continue to be celebrated at prime hours in the best spaces. At least one geographically vast Western diocese does not appear to offer a single regular Mass in Spanish. This takes a real spiritual toll, which often goes unseen. I recall one visitor to a Midwestern parish from a nearby state breaking down in tears while participating in the liturgy in her native language. It was something she hadn't been able to do in a long while.

A member of a Hispanic youth group helps collect donations during Mass, April 26, 2015.

CNS PHOTO/SAM LUCERO, THE COMPASS

Harder to capture in statistics but no less real are disparities in parish leadership. In many parishes, the staff remain entirely white even long after Hispanics have come to account for a significant proportion of the parish. One of my Latina graduate students, after reading about an example of this from more than a decade ago, sighed as she explained that this is not a problem of a previous era but still very much a reality, even in California, where more than two-thirds of the Catholic population is Hispanic. And even when Hispanics do hold leadership positions, they are not treated equally. An adult Spanish-speaking youth leader at one parish told me how surprised she was to learn that there was an actual budget for the English-speaking youth group. She had always paid for expenses out of her own pocket. What's more, the English-speaking youth minister was a paid employee; hers was a volunteer position.

Ethnic and racial inequalities can be difficult to unravel—one accounting leads to another. Some years ago, I was studying an urban African-American Catholic parish, which also included a small Latin American immigrant community. There I observed patterns and structures that had clearly been shaped by the African-American leadership at the parish, from the direction of the parish school to the regular birthday and anniversary announcements at the end of every Mass (including the Spanish Mass). Over a period of about twenty years, the neighborhood had gradually become majority Hispanic. Even so, the African-American community retained the upper hand, not just in parish life, but in local civic leadership and business ownership, too.

How, I wondered, had things ended up this way? Interviews and further research revealed that Black leadership in both the parish and neighborhood had required decades to take root, long after African Americans had formed a

majority. Across the decades, the African-American character and identity of the parish had waxed and waned, according to the whims of the (white) bishop and the (usually white) pastor. At the time of my investigation, the number of Black Catholic parishes in the diocese had already declined precipitously; two other historically Black parishes had been granted no priest pastor at all. The Black community feared, not unjustifiably, that Black Catholic parish life would simply vanish if they didn't hold on to the power they'd painstakingly acquired. An Hispanic parishioner reported that an African-American friend had once made this fear explicit, telling him sadly, "You will replace us."

Reforming parish life, even when undertaken with the best of intentions, is harder than it looks. Too often, rules and procedures ostensibly designed for fairness—like standardizing parish meeting-room reservations, posting signs in multiple languages, or mandating staff liaisons for every ministry—end up cloaking structural inequality, not correcting it. Some parish rules even have discernible roots in appeasing the complaints of influential parishioners, especially those who are openly hostile toward immigrant Catholics. Take a policy as seemingly innocuous as mandatory meeting-room clean-up. One Mexican associate pastor pointed out how strict rules about orderly facilities ended up imposing unfair burdens on Hispanic parishioners with small children. In another parish, community leaders of all groups were required to attend a monthly liturgical planning meeting in English. But the Hispanic members had to make do with inadequate translation, and so could not meaningfully participate. In a third parish, the campaign to renovate the worship space apparently did not involve the poorer Spanish-speaking community at all.

Ethnic inequality can be found even in the many rules and procedures drafted for the protection of children in the wake of the 2002 Dallas Charter. That system relies on fingerprinting and government background checks, an easy sell in middle-class white communities. But many Hispanic families include members without immigration status, who are understandably reluctant to offer their identifying information to the government. Parishes lose needed volunteers as a result.

An even more troubling manifestation of racial and ethnic inequality in the U.S. Catholic Church also involves the sex-abuse crisis. A series of articles from the Associated Press in 2019 and 2020 reported that bishops and superiors of religious orders disproportionately reassigned abusive priests to poorer parishes—mainly comprising Native American, Black, and Hispanic Catholics. Deeper research into the extent of the problem has only just begun. (Most dioceses do not keep racial and ethnic data on sex-abuse victims.) But real, disproportionate damage has been done to these communities, and not by accident.

Disrupting and repairing the structural inequalities in Church institutions is not easy, and often not welcome. It requires time and commitment to unravel and remedy, and even the remedies that exist can prove inadequate. The wider inequalities in American society make such work even harder; it also doesn't help that in many parishes whistleblowers often get branded as troublemakers. A now-retired bishop once told me how it had taken him decades to build up a diocesan chancery staff that resembled his diverse diocese in terms of language, race, ethnicity, and culture. But even a single decade is far too long. Five years is too long. Inaction in the face of inequality breeds cynicism. It pains me to see young Catholics lose their idealism about ministry as they witness the persistence of these inequities. Change may be difficult, even upsetting, but it must come—and soon.

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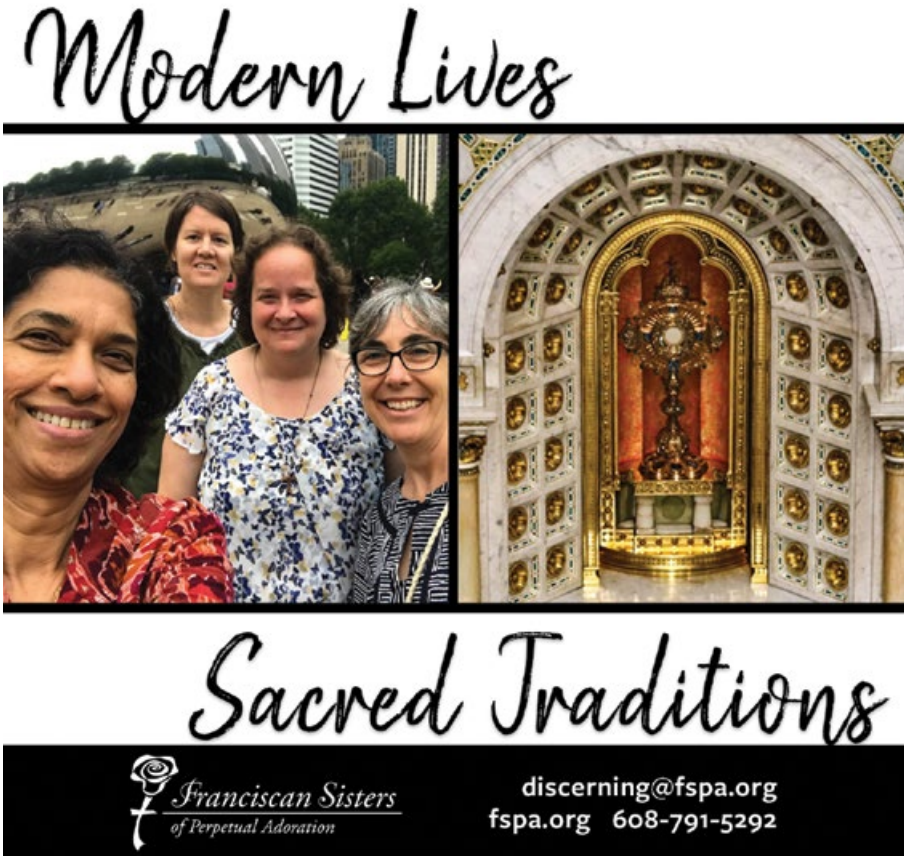

ELIZABETH M. LYNCH

Never Again?

Lessons from the Holocaust apply to China's Uyghurs.

Ethnic Uyghur women wave flags during a protest in Istanbul, October 1, 2020.

CNS PHOTO/MURAD SEZER, REUTERS

One of the few happy memories Ann would share from her childhood was the time she spent in a Dutch orphanage. She talked about it often—the endless fields of red and yellow tulips that surrounded the place; the Dutch princess who sometimes stopped by to visit; the day trips to Amsterdam to visit the Rijksmuseum. Every time Ann reminisced about her time there, her pale blue eyes would light up her thin, wrinkled face and a small smile would sneak across her lips. Tulips were her favorite flower.

Ann Buchsbaum was already eighty-nine years old when I first met her in 2012, and her body was beginning to betray her. Only a few years earlier, Ann was going to parties in Manhattan, volunteering at her beloved museums, and reading voraciously. Now, she used a walker; her tiny, hundred-pound frame was slightly hunched; and her outings were limited to a three-block radius around our Forest Hills apartment building. Her social circle had been whittled down to her home-health aides and a few hallway neighbors. But Ann still had her stories and an enthusiasm for life. I could never tell if that enthusiasm was genuine or just a habit.

Born to an upper-middle-class Jewish family in Vienna in 1923, Ann was barely fifteen when the Nazis invaded Austria in March 1938. That November, she watched from her bedroom window as the Nazis, alongside her Christian neighbors, set fire to Jewish-owned businesses and destroyed Vienna's centuries-old synagogues. *Kristallnacht*—the night of broken glass, as it came to be called—was the moment when Ann and her family knew the only way to survive was to escape. "We could look out the window and see the trucks go by. Men standing on them…going to Dachau. We knew. Everyone said it didn't exist. It existed," Ann told the Center for Jewish History.

Not long after *Kristallnacht*, Ann's father was able to get her a coveted spot on a *kindertransport* out of Vienna to Holland. Fifteen was the cut-off age and Ann just made it; a year older and she would have been ineligible. "If I hadn't gotten out then, I would have been killed in one of the camps," Ann once told me. Holland was the country that first saved her life.

When I told Ann that I was making a two-day trip to Amsterdam, my first visit to the Netherlands, she was elated. Because Ann always spoke so highly of the Dutch during the war, I decided to visit the Dutch Resistance Museum, which memorializes Dutch efforts to combat the Nazis during the German occupation of Holland in 1940. The museum was dimly lit—appropriate given that so many Dutch resisters were executed for their efforts. But there was little information about the Jews. Only a small section, relegated to the corner of the museum, mentioned them at all, and that was merely a tangential reference in a story about a one-day strike held by Dutch workers to protest the anti-Semitic laws imposed by the Nazis. *Was this all they did?* I wondered.

"So how was Amsterdam?" Ann asked me after my return to New York. "It was great," I said, not wanting to mention my disappointment at the Dutch Resistance Museum. She smiled and nodded enthusiastically: "Yes, isn't it a wonderful country?" I felt that I had to be honest with her. I recounted my visit to the museum. "Ann, they really didn't do much for the Jews," I said, knowing this could shatter her. Seated in her walker, Ann instantly darkened. She looked down at her hands, her bony fingers clenched tightly in her lap. "Yes" she said softly, without looking up. "But they did more than anyone else."

In June 1939, six months after *Kristallnacht*, the United States turned away a ship full of German Jewish refugees. The quota of German immigrants—27,370, set by the eugenics-based 1924 Immigration Act—had already been met. The ship was ultimately forced to return to Europe; of the 937 passengers aboard the *St. Louis*, 254 of them were killed in the Holocaust. A few months earlier, Sen. Robert F. Wagner and Rep. Edith Rogers had introduced a bill that would have permitted an additional 20,000 German Jewish children to enter the Unit-

ed States. Sixty-seven percent of Americans opposed it, and the bill never made it out of committee. By the end of the war, approximately 1.5 million Jewish children had perished in the Holocaust.

Americans were largely aware of the Nazis' persecution of the Jews, even during the 1930s. A new project at the U.S. Holocaust Museum, which collects newspaper clippings from that time, reveals that a wide swath of the U.S. press covered the Nazis' increasingly violent anti-Semitism: the 1935 Nuremburg Race Laws, which stripped German Jews of their citizenship; the forced "Aryanization" of businesses, where Jewish business owners were forced to sell their business at rock-bottom prices to non-Jews; and the 1933 opening of Dachau as a forced-labor camp. *Kristallnacht*, and President Roosevelt's public condemnation of it, was also widely covered.

According to *The Berlin Mission*, a new book by Holocaust historian Richard Breitman, U.S. policymakers knew even more. Consular officers in Germany met regularly with Jewish refugees applying for American visas and also maintained contact with Nazi officials; it couldn't have been hard to predict what would come next. In December 1938, consular officer Raymond Geist wrote from Berlin to his superior back in Washington D.C.: "The Germans are determined to solve the Jewish problem without the assistance of other countries, and that means eventual annihilation." Yet the United States did nothing to facilitate Jewish immigration during those critical years. "Never again," we tell ourselves today.

But today the world is confronted with another global power intent on destroying its own people. And again, U.S. sanctuary remains elusive. Since at least 2017, the Chinese government has forcibly detained more than 1 million Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims, all without due process, in 380 concentration camps in Xinjiang province. Forced labor of Uyghurs, both inside and outside the camps, has been well documented. According to escapees, physical and psychological torture in the camps is common. Multiple women have testified to systematic rape by prison guards, and forced sterilization and abortions are widespread. Satellite images taken in Xinjiang over the past three year reveal the destruction of thousands of mosques, evoking a present-day *Kristallnacht*.

The U.S. government has acknowledged the Chinese government's actions in Xinjiang as genocide. But it has not yet taken any action to expedite Uyghurs' entry into the United States. Fortunately, there is now a bill in the House (and a corresponding bill in the Senate) that could change this. Uyghurs and other Chinese Turkic Muslims would be granted "Priority 2" (P-2) status under U.S. asylum law; as P-2 refugees, they would not have to prove "individual persecution" and would be able to apply directly to U.S. authorities for resettlement. They could therefore bypass the longer, default route of first seeking a referral from the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees, a national embassy, or an NGO. P-2 status would also enable Uyghurs to apply for resettlement regardless of where they are in the world. And, as the bill makes clear, their entry into the United States would not be counted against any numerical limitation, an important factor since President Biden has wavered on his promise to increase the refugee quota. "As a Jew and as an American, I believe there is a moral responsibility to act," Rep. Ted Deutch, the sponsor of the House bill, told me. "I'm proud of our country's storied history of offering refuge to oppressed people, but particularly as a Jew, I'm also keenly aware of our past failures to welcome refugees in time to save them."

Still, the United States can and should do more. Asylum applications should be expedited for Uyghurs and other Chinese Turkic Muslims currently residing in the country. The waiting period to receive a work visa, which the Trump administration extended to a year (up from 150 days), should be waived for Uyghur asylum seekers. The Biden administration should also provide financial support to recently arrived Uyghurs, in line with past precedent for targets of genocide. In 2018, the Trump administration established the Genocide Recovery and Persecution Response Program to aid Yazidis in northern Iraq. A fund for Uyghur victims should also be established; it could be paid for by leveling sanctions on corporations illegally importing Xinjiang cotton or tomatoes, or other goods coming from Xinjiang. Concrete action taken by the United States would likely have ripple effects in wealthy countries throughout the world, potentially increasing the number of Uyghur lives saved.

On May 10, 1940, one year after the United States refused to admit a boat full of Jewish refugees, the Nazis invaded the Netherlands. Ann had escaped just a few months before; any child still living in her former orphanage was killed in the Holocaust. Every week, the orphanage gave each child a stamp, so they could keep in contact with their parents. Ann used hers to write (in perfect English) to the U.S. consulate in Rotterdam, begging to be allowed entry to the United States. Her gambit worked. In August 1939, Ann was summoned to the consulate; after her visa number was finally called, she learned that the U.S. consular general wanted to meet her. "We need people like you," he told Ann. Her fierce advocacy had made an impression on him.

Ann was able to survive to the age of ninety-four in part because of luck. She was lucky to be born to an upper-middle class family that had the means to ensure she learned English; lucky that *kindertransport* took children up to the age of fifteen; lucky that the U.S. consular general read her letters. To end the genocide in Xinjiang, there is a lot the United States and the rest of the world will need to do, especially against a country as powerful as China. Perhaps we will never be able to completely eliminate the element of luck in refugee resettlement. But we can certainly reduce it, starting by ridding ourselves of the glaring inconsistencies in our refugee policies, especially in the face of genocide. Only then will "never again" actually mean something.

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Two Poems by Don Barkin

ELEGY IN A PUDDLE

Not being here, he can't see
this inky portrait of a tree,
much less the tree against the sky
which is the limit of the eye,

reminding us that the cost
of Paradise is that it's lost.
While Heaven fitted in a puddle
like a ship is His rebuttal.

MORE WEIGHT

We shrug at shade like wind or fog, though in autumn
gusts of paper-shuffling in lofty offices
will roil a lawn like God's face on the waters.
True, these don't shake the thrones of thickened things —
a banker's manse sprawled on its throne of lawn,
where heavy elms warn lovers to move on.
They'll fall in time the way all despots fall:
first the midget in his braided tunic,
then his statue toppled with a rope.
And though we'd rather have an apple than
the apple's shadow, it's not wrong to think
how clouds as vast as ranches sadden Kansas.

DON BARKIN *has published poems in* Poetry, *the* Virginia Quarterly Review, Poetry Northwest, Commonweal, Prairie Schooner, *and other magazines. He is the author of three full-length books of poems,* That Dark Lake *(2009)*, Houses *(2017), and* The Rail Stop at Wassaic *(2020)*.

Giving the Sickness a Name

Jeff Reimer

Walker Percy & acedia

Acedia is Walker Percy's great theme, and there is no place for it in America precisely because we have always been puzzled or embarrassed by lives of contemplation.

—Mary Gordon

In 1972, *Lancelot* wasn't coming off as cleanly as Walker Percy would have liked. He was under intense, self-imposed pressure to produce another critically successful novel. A relatively new empty-nester, he was also drinking more heavily than usual, and was in something of a crisis of faith. Writing to his friend Shelby Foote, he said, "I've been in a long spell of *acedia*, anomie and aridity in which, unlike the saints who write under the assaults of devils, I simply get sleepy and doze off." Percy being Percy, he inserts a wry, self-deprecating note into his reportage, but his travail with the affliction was very real.

Two years later, he was still struggling. His novel was a little closer to being finished, but then he contracted hepatitis. He became depressed. Writing to Caroline Gordon in June of 1974, he told her,

> My hepatitis and depression are better. Maybe one caused the other. Truthfully I don't know whether I've been overtaken by a virus or male menopause or the devil—who I am quite willing to believe does indeed roam about the world seeking whom he may devour. Anyhow it takes the form in my case of disinterest, accidie, little or no use for the things of God and the old virtues. I'd rather chase women (not that I do, but how strange to have come to this pass). I think it has something to do with laziness or the inability to give birth to a 2-year-old fetus of a novel. I don't like it at all and keep tearing it up. I feel like a Borgia Pope, I still believe the whole thing, but oh you Italian girls!

Acedia made its way into modern parlance as sloth, a word we now associate with the supposedly benign vices of laziness or idleness. Percy knew better. In these couple of instances, he does indeed mention laziness and sleepiness, but he does so in the context of acedia's more classic associations: as a complex, subtle, destructive habit of the soul—with a possibly demonic origin—that neglects the weightier matters of love of God and neighbor for more immediately gratifying pleasures. Moreover, he interprets acedia not just as an arcane spiritual malady of early monastics. Rather, it is a widespread, distinctly modern phenomenon that "has settled like a fallout," as he says in *The Moviegoer*, and it is capable of imposing itself upon the modern person regardless of his or her affiliation with the religious life.

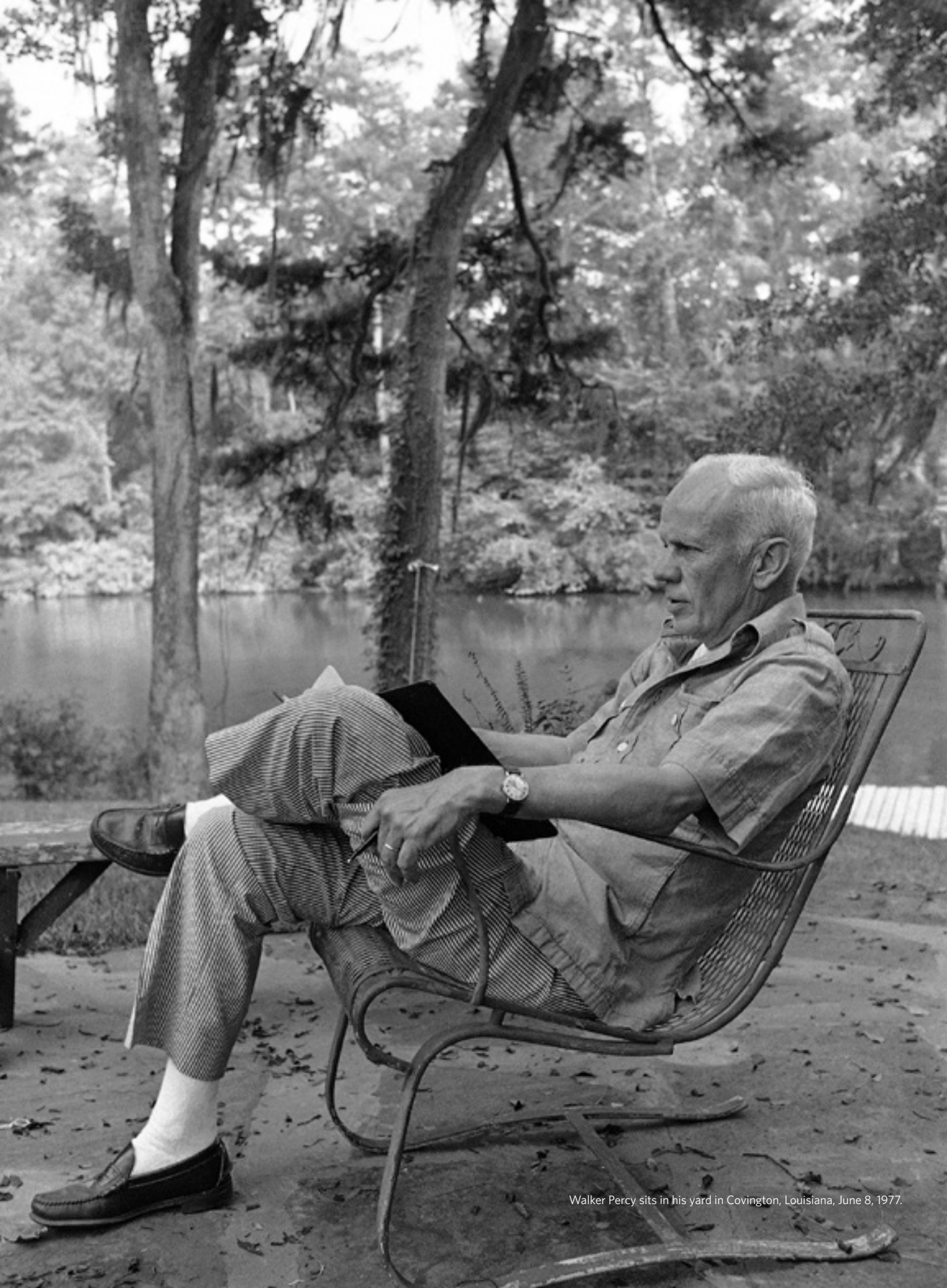
A wily demon, acedia is difficult to pin down. It's a trickster, a shapeshifter, a boggart. It goes out of focus when you try to look directly at it. The term itself defies translation: despondency, sloth, lassitude, ennui, melancholy—each displays an aspect, none the full image.

The desert monks who first wrestled the demon acedia to the ground did so by grinding through their prayers in the pitiless heat of the Egyptian wilderness. In doing so they became superbly intimate with their failures. Evagrius had a theoretical bent and began cataloging the modes and patterns of failure he and his fellow monks encountered. Eventually he placed acedia at the center of a spectrum comprising the "eight thoughts," the fountainhead of the seven-deadly-sins tradition. On the one side of the spectrum, he said, lie our animal or material vices; on the other, the vices of the intellect. Acedia, he said, is "the complex thought" because it stands at the center of the spectrum and thus assimilates aspects of both the material and the intellectual into itself.

Acedia causes the soul, hovering between a person's animal nature and rational intellect, to shrink from contemplation or the possibility of contemplation. Reluctant to ascend to pure intellection, it becomes possessed of lethargy and stupefaction. Aridity and ennui take hold, giving rise to restlessness, mania, indolence, somnolence, discouragement—whatever will do to turn the face away from the fire of God's love. The habit of acedia terminates in the failure of all hope. Acedia in extremis eventuates in despair and in some cases suicide. Thomas Aquinas says acedia pulls apart the constituent parts of the human being and then causes us to mistake the physical, transitory part of human existence for the whole. He calls this mistake "animal beatitude."

The fundamental paradox of acedia lies in the fact that contemplation must be a possibility in order to experience it. Acedia is so dangerous because it involves a denial of the

AP PHOTO/JACK THORNELL



Walker Percy sits in his yard in Covington, Louisiana, June 8, 1977.

possibility that God has in fact saved us in the Incarnation. And it is so subtle because it manifests not as rebellion but by sedimenting into the habit of despair. Aquinas's animal beatitude is not defiance of God but a loss of concern for salvation, a kind of spiritual disintegration. One might even notice one no longer cares about one's salvation, but one doesn't care that one doesn't care.

Earlier in his career, Percy had written about a related phenomenon, what he called "the malaise"—a sense of spiritual illness and alienation. It emerges in *The Moviegoer* as one part of a larger moral taxonomy of the modern world: awareness of everydayness gives rise to the malaise, and the malaise in turn gives rise to "the search."

"The search," says Jack "Binx" Bolling, in some of the most famous lines Percy ever wrote, "is what anyone would undertake if he were not sunk in the everydayness of his own life." Binx goes on, "To become aware of the possibility of the search is to be onto something. Not to be onto something is to be in despair." The malaise, by contrast, occurs when one becomes aware of everydayness and finds it unbearable. Hence the book's epigraph, from Kierkegaard's *The Sickness Unto Death*: "The specific character of despair is this: it is unaware of being despair." And despair, says Thomas Aquinas, "is the first and most terrible daughter of acedia."

So the malaise, which is no picnic, at least indicates that something is off, like a moral "check engine" light, alerting us to the distance between our desires and the world indifferent to them. Binx, by giving everydayness a name, has unmasked the demon of acedia. "Losing hope is not so bad," he says. "There's something worse: losing hope and hiding it from yourself." The search in turn becomes a mode of contemplation.

Binx tells the reader early on in *The Moviegoer* that he used to read only "fundamental" books, such as *War and Peace* and Schrödinger's *What Is Life?*—books that he thought would give him mastery over the world. Percy identifies two types of modern people: the theorist and the consumer. Theorists master the world according to abstract generalizations, eliminating the individual person. Consumers, Percy says, participate in "the goods and services of scientific theory"; but as passive, second-tier actors with regard to the ascendant philosopher-kings of modern science, they remain latently dissatisfied. Binx might be said to have renounced the life of the theorist only to have taken up the life of the consumer. Having been involved in scientific research on kidney stones in pigs, he instead became enchanted by the wonder of the world around him, gazing at dust motes in shafts of late-afternoon sunlight. Binx's renunciation of the life of a theorist resulted from his encounter with something that was calling him beyond everydayness. But he failed to heed the summons of the search and instead slouched into the life of the consumer, pursuing money and women and hiding his despair from himself. Only years later does he notice the failure. The novel turns on his waking himself up from acedia, from the death-in-life of everydayness, and embarking on the search.

The product of both theory and consumption, Percy says, is "sadness and anxiety." Aquinas says in reference to acedia that "no one can remain in sadness"; we can't bear it, so we resolve it in some other action. One route we take away from sadness and anxiety is harm—of ourselves and others. Percy says that the denizen of the modern world, whether theorist or consumer, "can become so frustrated, bored, and enraged that he resorts to violence, violence upon himself (drugs, suicide) or upon others (murder, war)." But acedia, or everydayness, presents an opportunity not only for violence but also for real contemplation. Those cast out from both theory and consumerism have the opportunity to open themselves to the risk of something more. "In the old Christendom," Percy says, "everyone was a Christian and hardly anyone thought twice about it. But in the present age the survivor of theory and consumption becomes a wayfarer in the desert, like St. Anthony; which is to say, open to signs."

Acedia, once overcome, gives way to prayer. "Prayer," Evagrius says, "is the elimination of sorrow and dejection." In a way, then, acedia is the threshold of contemplation, provided one is willing to sit with it rather than flee from it. Spending the night at his mother's cabin, Binx says he is "locked in a death grip with everydayness, sworn not to move a muscle until I advance another inch in my search." When he does advance, it is by overcoming his "invincible apathy"—another daughter of acedia.

Though *The Moviegoer* focuses on Binx's interior life, there are scattered notices throughout that the everydayness of acedia is the generalized condition of the modern world. Binx clearly believes that his own battle with everydayness and malaise is emblematic of a larger spiritual death at work. "For some time now," Binx says, "the impression has been growing on me that everyone is dead." While a cousin talks to him earnestly of her "enduring values" and how she loves reading Kahlil Gibran in front of the fire, Binx wonders to himself, "Why does she talk as if she were dead?" Their brief exchange having ended, she and Binx part ways, "laughing and dead."

Percy's gaze turned outward in his subsequent work. In 1971, he said that *Love in the Ruins* "deals, not with the takeover of a society by tyrants or computers or whatever, but rather with the increasing malaise and finally the falling apart of a society which remains, on the surface at least, democratic and pluralistic." By 1986, in fact, when asked by an interviewer, "Is there any concrete issue that engages your attention most in connection with what is going on in America at the moment?" he could answer, "Probably the fear of seeing America, with all its great strength and beauty and freedom…gradually subside into decay through default and be defeated, not by the Communist movement, demonstrably a bankrupt system, but from within by weariness, boredom, cynicism, greed, and in the end helplessness before its great problems." The interviewer follows up: "In connection with what is going on in the world?" Percy's response: "Ditto: the West losing by spiritual acedia."

If Binx Bolling is set apart by his awareness—and ultimate overcoming—of everydayness, Tom More in *Love in the Ruins* is emblematic of a generalized modern malaise, as much a victim of the dystopian American landscape as an observer of it. More, a psychiatrist in Paradise, Louisiana, suffers from acedia and has settled for animal beatitude. Here is how he introduces himself:

> I, for example, am a Roman Catholic, albeit a bad one. I believe in the Holy Catholic Apostolic and Roman Church, in God the Father, in the election of the Jews, in Jesus Christ His Son our Lord, who founded the Church on Peter his first vicar, which will last until the end of the world. Some years ago, however, I stopped eating Christ in Communion, stopped going to mass, and have since fallen into a disorderly life. I believe in God and the whole business but I love women best, music and science next, whiskey next, God fourth, and my fellowman hardly at all. Generally I do as I please. A man, wrote John, who says he believes in God and does not keep his commandments is a liar. If John is right, then I am a liar. Nevertheless, I still believe.

This passage—which strongly echoes Percy's description of his own experience of acedia—presents the central issue of Tom More's moral development in the book. Most interpreters of Percy's novels identify pride as More's besetting vice, which is true as far as it goes, but the Christian moral tradition places pride at the root of *all* sins, and the seven deadly sins in particular. More's flippant little hierarchy of loves, however, bears all the hallmarks of acedia, particularly the indifference toward the things that make for one's salvation. More tells his colleague Max Gottlieb, for instance, that he is troublingly untroubled by his own fornication. Max, a behaviorist, assumes that Tom is troubled by feelings of guilt. But More insists it is precisely the "not feeling guilty" that troubles him.

At the end of the novel, when More has mostly overcome his acedia, he has a similar, in fact almost exactly parallel, conversation with a priest named Fr. Smith. Although the spiritual progress he has made has gotten him as far as the confessional, More still can't drum up enough contrition to make an adequate confession. He apologizes for not feeling sorry for his sins. While Max was concerned for Tom but didn't understand his predicament, Fr. Smith understands it but isn't much concerned, offering stock moral advice that Tom doesn't find helpful. When they've just about had enough of each other—Tom frustrated with Fr. Smith's formulaic answers and Fr. Smith exasperated and bored with this troublesome, self-centered parishioner—the priest finally snaps at Tom:

> Meanwhile, forgive me but there are other things we must think about: like doing our jobs, you being a better doctor, I being a better priest, showing a bit of ordinary kindness to people, particularly our own families—unkindness to those close to us is such a pitiful thing—doing what we can for our poor unhappy country—things which, please forgive me, sometimes seem more important than dwelling on a few middle-aged daydreams.

This little tirade, which could have come out of the mouth of a desert father, scalds Tom and shames him, and he and Fr. Smith are both surprised and delighted to find that it has produced a true sense of contrition in Tom—not simply for his lust but for the root failure to love his neighbor. Hard work and service to others, moreover, are classic remedies for acedia.

The two aspects of human nature, animal and spiritual, have been split like Jekyll and Hyde, then ungracefully stitched back together.

Equipped with his "ontological lapsometer," More believes he can overcome the Cartesian split between body and soul. But a scientific instrument designed to address spiritual-metaphysical problems is something of a category error. Imagining in his hubris that he can address humanity's spiritual problems by means of a technology, More is—literally, as it will turn out—of the devil's party without knowing it.

More's repeated references to angelism and bestialism, or to the compound problem of angelism-bestialism, correspond to the literal disintegration of the human person wrought by Cartesian modernism. The two aspects of human nature, animal and spiritual, have been split like Jekyll and Hyde, then ungracefully stitched back together. Because the two parts are not actually integrated, man is alienated from himself. "How can a man spend forty-five years as a stranger to himself?" More asks. "No animal would, for he is pure organism. No angel would, for he is pure spirit." This is what More calls "Lucifer syndrome," which results from the abstracted, angelic self's "envy of the incarnate condition and a resulting caricature of the bodily appetites."

More hopes his lapsometer will be able to reintegrate these two parts of human nature: "What if man could reenter paradise, so to speak, and live there both as man and spirit, whole and intact man-spirit, as solid flesh as a speckled trout, a dappled thing, yet aware of itself as itself!" Such a man would not thrash destructively between his angelic and animal nature but would be perfectly integrated, perfectly himself. He would be a "sovereign wanderer, lordly exile, worker and waiter and watcher."

It's possible Tom More understands the problem with his plan better than he is willing to admit, even to himself. Prior to the events of the novel proper, More slashed his wrists on Christmas Eve and was saved by Max Gottlieb. His suicide attempt followed a tragic series of events—events that give the novel a deep undercurrent of pathos beneath the frothy surface of dystopian farce. First, More's daughter, Samantha, died slowly from a brain tumor. Then his wife left him for a New Age spiritual guru. In the psych ward recovering from his wounds, More comes on to his nurse, but later repents:

> Lust gave way to sorrow and I prayed.... Dear God, I can see it now, why can't I see it other times, that it is you I love in the beauty of the world and in all the lovely girls and dear good friends, and it is pilgrims we are, wayfarers on a journey, and not pigs, nor angels. Why can I not be merry and loving like my ancestor, a gentle pure-hearted

Percy maintained throughout his life that, "to the degree that a society has been overtaken by a sense of malaise, the vocation of the artist…can perhaps be said to come that much closer to that of the diagnostician."

knight for our Lady and our blessed Lord and Savior? Pray for me Sir Thomas More.

While More himself dismisses this insight with an ironic "etcetera etcetera," it is exactly what Percy wants the reader to see: all our loves are coded signs for the presence of God in creation. Or, as Percy puts it in an essay, More catches a "glimpse of the goodness and gratuitousness of created being"—even if he is incapable of fully recognizing it as such.

What does all this have to do with acedia? As the ultimate antidote to acedia, Thomas Aquinas recommends nothing less than the Incarnation itself. Acedia is a malady that pulls apart the animal and rational parts of our nature and pits them against each other. As the archetype of humanity, the incarnate Christ, fully God and fully man, not only perfectly joins body and mind and thus heals our deformed, schizoid human nature but also bears in himself the fullness of God's sacramental presence in creation.

More's daughter is repeatedly associated with his lost happiness and ability to love. In remembering going to Mass with Samantha, More speaks of the Eucharist in the very terms he uses to describe the intended effects of his lapsometer, the reconciling and reintegration of the angelic and bestial tendencies of sinful humanity: "It took religion to save me from the spirit world, from orbiting the earth like Lucifer and the angels," he says. "It took nothing less than…eating Christ himself to make me mortal again and let me inhabit my own flesh." The healing of acedia is mediated primarily through Christ's perfect humanity in the Eucharist.

More is finally able to overcome acedia by confronting the latent pain of loss that he has been unwilling to address. Thrashing around for scientific solutions to metaphysical problems, devoting most of his idle thoughts to sexual liaisons, drinking Early Times, having it out with the diabolical Faustian interloper Art Immelmann (has More conjured the demon of acedia?)—all of this is the avoidance of despair caused by acedia, a failure to rise to the demands of love of God and neighbor.

Nicole Roccas, who has written perceptively on acedia, connects the vice with pain. Those who experience deep pain avoid probing the memories, just as one hesitates to touch a tender wound. Remember Aquinas: no one can remain in sadness. Just before he "exorcises" Art Immelmann, More is interrupted by his memory of Samantha, and he admits that it broke his heart when Samantha died. What's more, he recognizes that he has used her suffering and death as a pathetic justification for his destructive desires, and he apologizes to her. Then he asks: "Is it possible to live without feasting on death?"

Five years later Tom More is breaking up the dirt in his garden. He has learned one of the desert fathers' primary remedies for staving off acedia: work. Though all is not perfect—he is still occasionally visited by morning terrors, and liaisons with women are still a temptation—things are better. He wakes up early in the morning, hunts, runs a trotline, hoes the ground, and raises a family. He describes his new routine as "watching and waiting and thinking and working." These are the earthy things that keep a person from spinning off into a pseudo-angelic orbit or sinking into the malaise of despair, things any desert father would endorse.

Percy would eventually overcome his own acedia and finish writing *Lancelot*, the darkest of his novels and to this day the least read. Although written under the influence of acedia, so to speak, *Lancelot* describes not so much the affliction's own ambivalences as the nihilism to which it can lead. In the novel's protagonist, Lance Lamar, acedia's lethargy has given way to a blinding rage at the decadence of the modern world.

Percy maintained throughout his life that, "to the degree that a society has been overtaken by a sense of malaise, the vocation of the artist…can perhaps be said to come that much closer to that of the diagnostician." The artist's work, in other words, is not an autopsy but a diagnosis made in the hope of recovery—an attempt, he says, to "give the sickness a name, to render the unspeakable speakable." Even when he is at his bleakest, Percy manages to counter despair with the possibility, however elusive, of hope. The fact that Lamar is speaking about—even confessing—his vengefulness and violence indicates as much; and the novel closes on the possibility of dialogical counterpoint, maybe even absolution. What will Percival the psychiatrist-priest say in response to Lancelot's confession? The novel doesn't tell us. But there are signs, even amid the darkness of *Lancelot*'s infernal vision, that Lamar could still move into the realm of contemplation. The question is whether we, the readers Percy is ultimately addressing, are able to recognize those signs.

Percy believed that the world is strewn with such signs, if only we are looking for them, and know *where* to look. It is all too easy to miss—or even blind ourselves to—the signs of the transcendent shot through the world of the everyday, and therefore to miss everything. But it is exactly in that world that we find Walker Percy, a voice in the wilderness crying out like a prophet, "He that hath ears to hear let him hear."

JEFF REIMER *is an editor at* Comment *magazine.*

KUMQUAT

Danielle Chapman

A kumquat bush crouches in the sedge
at playground's edge
and I stand in the sand

mashing one of its persimmon thumbs
till oil prickles perfume
pills on its wax skin.

If I bite into this thin bright hide's
sweet zest no marmalade
can pickle or preserve

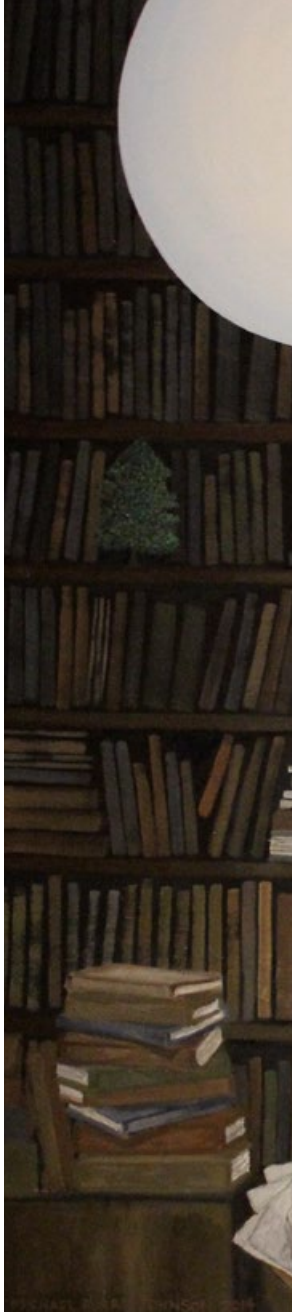
until the fruit itself squirts acid over
those segments like
an orange's in miniature

yet sourer than a lemon's for
pretending not to be
and cankered by

tiny twisted pits, aborted kindnesses
one might call specks
in a neighbor's eye

might I be able to swallow this
fruit of spite?
Might I like it?

DANIELLE CHAPMAN *is a poet and essayist. Her collection of poems,* Delinquent Palaces, *was published by Northwestern University Press in 2015. Her poems have appeared in the* Atlantic *and the* New Yorker, *and her essays can be found in the* Oxford American *and* Poetry. *She teaches literature and creative writing at Yale.*



No Turning Back

David Bentley Hart

The German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk argues that the "psycho-political" arrangements that once sheltered us are now irretrievable. He's right: the old Christendom is gone for good. What might a new one look like?

The celebrity philosopher, which is an endangered species in continental Europe, is already extinct in our Anglophone world. True, occasionally an enterprising denizen of one of our philosophy faculties (Daniel Dennett, for example, or David Chalmers) succeeds in cultivating a public profile, and in selling an appreciable number of books to stand unread on shelves in the backdrops of Zoom conversations. Sometimes an exotic foreign theorist with a knack for performance art (Slavoj Žižek, for example) catches our attention, at least out of the corner of an eye. But, since the days of Bertrand Russell, no native English-speaking philosopher has achieved any real popular prominence. Partly, no doubt, this is attributable to a general cultural decline in intellectual aspiration, but it is mainly the result of the dominance among us of the analytic tradition, which is so often a perfect combination of formal tediousness and conceptual banality. Having rendered our philosophy boring, we have also rendered it inconspicuous.

Michael J. Johnson, *Dreamtime of Reason*, 2014—portrait of Peter Sloterdijk

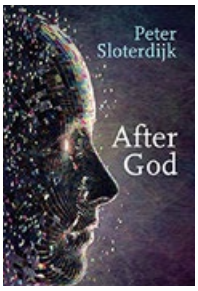
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

So there really is no phenomenon in the Anglosphere today comparable to that of Peter Sloterdijk. In Germany and in much of Western Europe, he enjoys the kind of public visibility that we now reserve for bad popular novelists or second-tier entertainers, even though he makes little effort to accommodate his thought to the limitations of demotic culture, and even though he is so prolific that scarcely anyone can keep pace with his work. Part of his appeal lies in the sheer flamboyance of his ideas, and just how many of his readers truly understand him is impossible to say. But that flamboyance should not be mistaken for superficiality, and his fame should not be dismissed as something accidental or unearned. Sloterdijk poses genuinely interesting questions that provoke one to think in new and sometimes uncomfortable ways about oneself, or one's culture, or the world as a whole; and the answers he provides are often fascinating, or at least fruitfully infuriating.

There is also a kind of ostentatious world-weariness in his writings that can be oddly enchanting. In one sense, his thought is burdened by that deep historical consciousness that seems to be the peculiar vocation of continental philosophy in its long post-Hegelian twilight. As a result, he possesses too keen a hermeneutical awareness of the fluidity, ambiguity, and cultural contingency of philosophy's terms and concepts to mistake them for invariable properties that can be absorbed into some timeless propositional calculus in the way so much of Anglo-American philosophy imagines it can. But, in another sense, it is precisely this "burden" of historical consciousness that imparts a paradoxical levity to his project. Many of his books feel like expeditions in search of secrets from the past: forgotten cultural ancestries, effaced spiritual monuments, occult currents within the flow of social evolution. Whether one admires or deplores his thought—or

has a distinctly mixed opinion of it, as I do—no one could plausibly claim that it is dull.

The appearance of this volume, therefore, naturally excites certain expectations. To a great extent, sadly, the book itself disappoints them. Ideally, *After God* would be a continuous, concentrated, and definitive statement on the religious themes that Sloterdijk has addressed often in the past but only obliquely. Instead, it is a collection of disparate essays and lectures, some of them previously published, and as a result it suffers from more than a few needless repetitions, exasperating lacunae, and tantalizingly abortive streams of reflection. Nonetheless, if read with a degree of patience, it does provide a fairly full vision of Sloterdijk's understanding of the cultural and historical situation of modern humanity. His is definitely a picture of the world that comes into being "after God"—which is to say, after the "death of God," modern culture's loss of the encompassing horizon of ultimate meaning that formerly shaped and sustained human existence. And even if the picture as given here is incomplete, it still abounds in interesting and occasionally dazzling details.



AFTER GOD

PETER SLOTERDIJK
Trans. by
Ian Alexander Moore
Polity
$24.95 | 280 pp.

Sloterdijk is himself, I should note, manifestly incapable of religious belief, and to some extent he clearly regards such belief as a culturally and psychologically exhausted possibility (even if, as Nietzsche noted long ago, not everyone has yet heard the news of the Old Man's demise). But there is nothing triumphalist about his atheism. His project—controversially so when he first appeared on the scene—is very much in the tradition of Nietzsche and Heidegger, and he is keenly aware that the story of the genesis of modernity is also the genealogy of an all-but-inescapable metaphysical nihilism. Like his two problematic predecessors, he is disdainful of the canonical narrative of "Enlightenment," and wants to think his way past the complacent "humanism" of the modern age, with its destructive anthropocentrisms, egoisms, and obliviousness to the mystery of the world. He is neither as apocalyptic nor as militantly melancholic as either Nietzsche or Heidegger, but at the same time he is perhaps more conscious than they were of the real peril of an age in which the faiths that once provided our cultural and psychological paradigms have been evacuated of their power to persuade or inspire.

The inseparability of those paradigms—the cultural and the psychological—is a guiding principle of Sloterdijk's thought. He employs the language of psychology and psychotherapy with far more comfort than most philosophers do, but he feels free to do so in large part because he does not limit the psychological to the realm of individual temperament. For him, the course of cultural development and the course of psychic evolution are one and the same process as viewed from different vantages. Thus he frequently speaks in terms of "psycho-political" history or of the different epochs of human "ensoulment." He sees human history not merely as a chronicle of changing material and social conditions, but also as a record of the changing forms of interiority that define the human "essence." We are historical beings; even our most inward souls are historical constructions; and this is principally because we possess language. "The doctrine of the human as the being through which there is speech inevitably assumes a radicalized mediumistic form." Sloterdijk even speaks sympathetically of the traditional Catholic practice of exorcism, rooted as it is in "pre-Christian shamanism," because it wisely presumes a concept of the soul as a house or open ravine through which spiritual forces come and go.

Given the essential plasticity of our nature, the primary question we ought to ask ourselves is how we have come to be "ensouled" as we have. How have we arrived at our understanding of ourselves as self-creating subjects, beings whose proper essence is absolute rational autonomy, inhabiting a world that exists for us only as an object to be exploited by our will to power? And then we should ask ourselves the further question of whether, in consequence of this psycho-political story, we have now effectively destroyed our capacity for what Sloterdijk calls "co-immunity" against the historical pathogens that threaten us.

Just about any summary of Sloterdijk's larger philosophical project is likely to sound a bit preposterous. I suspect he fully intends that it should. But behind the carnival mask he often chooses to wear there is a serious philosopher with his gaze fixed on the real predicaments of our nature and of our historical situation as late-modern human beings. His *magnum opus* (to this point, at least) is his sprawlingly immense, compulsively engrossing, and occasionally bizarre trilogy, *Spheres*, a work of impressive originality and wanton idiosyncrasy. It is impossible to summarize, but at its heart lies a kind of psycho-physical

version of the myth of Eden. We all begin our existence in the safety of the womb, the "intra-uterine" space where we float serenely in our little amniotic seas, enveloped in the sheltering spheres of our placentas. Our first experience of otherness—our first intuition of ourselves as differentiated from the cosmos as a whole—is in fact the experience of the tissues that enclose and protect us. This state is then succeeded, but not necessarily superseded, by a maternal embrace, and then by countless other sheltered clearings in the darkness of being. But that first home will always remain a potent memory pervading and shaping our individual, social, and spiritual lives.

The drama of human existence, therefore—both personal and social—has always been the search for, and the creation of, new, more durable spheres of immunity from the world's bare, inhospitable essence; and the scope of these spheres, over the course of time, has expanded, from the most animal and local to the most ideal and universal. The den, the village, the state, the empire, the international liberal order; nature's capricious bounties, the cultivated field, the clustered village, the ramifying city, the City of Man; the local *temenos*, the tribal cult, the gods and spirits of nature, the higher powers in the heavens, the ever-more universal spiritual authorities, the ever-more "vertically" transcendent spiritual principles—God Most High. All are spheres of community and "co-immunity." All have their "psycho-historical" causes and occasions and calamities. And all of them can be—and in fact have been—shattered in the course of our journey toward our present state.

No doubt there is more than a hint of playful perversity in Sloterdijk's "placental" interpretation of human history and psychology; but there is also a powerful moral intuition regarding the nature of human dependency, on others and on the world around us. Moreover, it is not his intention to provide a clinical diagnosis of some "illusion" that must be overcome. As Freudian as Sloterdijk's language sometimes sounds, he has little patience for Freud's dourly "enlightened" belief that we must mature beyond this nostalgia for the womb, or beyond the "infantile" fantasies that sustain us. By the same token, as Heideggerean as his sense of humanity's historical essence is, Sloterdijk shares little of Heidegger's lugubrious devotion to the myth of a lost first moment of ontological purity. In fact, he regards his "spherology" as a corrective to Heidegger's curiously lonely picture of *Dasein*'s place in the world. It is a "spatialization," as he puts it, of Heidegger's narrative of human "thrownness" (*Geworfenheit*). We arrive in existence not within the featureless "there" of the displaced man wielding his hammer in indigent or heroic solitude; rather, we are *placed* from the beginning within sites of relationship, both interpersonal and inter-animal—sites that nurture whatever powers of fruition we might possess, and shelter us from the "monstrosity" of a world encountered *an sich*. For just this reason, even the homelessness of late-modern humanity is not an inescapable destiny from which "only a god can save us."

The drama of human existence has always been the search for new, more durable spheres of immunity from the world's bare, inhospitable essence.

That said, Sloterdijk believes that humanity has experienced no more consequential "psycho-historical" transition than that of the Axial Age, which was the beginning of a history of progressive estrangement from the most primordial and particular forms of human belonging, and therefore also the beginning of humanity's incessant search for ever-more exalted and secure spheres of immunity. Sloterdijk's pointedly sardonic view of the tale of "Enlightenment" is directed not only at the pontifical privileges the tale is meant to confer on its tellers—the sort that flowered in the Jacobin Terror, as well as in all the "rationalist" atrocities and coercions that followed. It is directed also at the naïveté of those who do not recognize that modern "Enlightenment" is, for both better and worse, the culmination of a very long history of religious revolutions and liberations. For at least two and a half millennia, humanity has been the psycho-historical product of an ancient impulse to move away from barbaric superstition toward a "high culture" of rational adherence to some elevated and unified spiritual principle—Brahman, Tao, the Good beyond Being, the One God—and thus to move out of the ritual slaughterhouses of cult and into schools of doctrine.

From the start, this process has involved a certain impulse of the soul away from its first organic, local shelters and toward more abstract citadels of certitude. With this, inevitably, has come a certain estrangement from life. Hence this impulse has often expressed itself as the pursuit of a wisdom that transcends the world, a quest for release or *moksha*, a *contemptus mundi* that frequently becomes a neurotically fastidious fear of being touched. The impulse reaches an extreme expression in those virtuosos of despair whom the developed religions regard as holy or wise or uniquely illumined. These are souls for whom the absolute exaltation of a single incorruptible principle of spiritual "truth" is a call to unremitting remorse, a measureless psychic labor of repen-

tance, a search for ultimate release only in a realm beyond the triviality of common humanity. The mystic in a state of fused contemplation has returned to something like that aboriginal, intra-uterine state of "floating"—but now in the "womb" of the One God, which is the most impregnable sphere of immunity imaginable.

The chapter of *After God* devoted to Gnosticism, while the most uneven in its scholarly grasp of the materials, offers an acute interpretation of the gnostic impulse as the characteristic gesture of this "Axial" ascent into an ever-more vertical transcendence. It is the same drive or pathos that one finds in the Johannine distinction between being "in" the world and being "of" it. All the high dualisms of the Axial Age contributed to humanity's increasing mastery over any number of instrumentally useful distinctions: soul and thing, soul and mechanism, subjectivity and objectivity, purpose and tool, and so on. And the "monotheologizing" process by which higher levels of divinity progressively subordinated and expelled intermediate divine realms and powers—a process that reached one of its most consequential zeniths in the first creation account in Genesis, where the creator God is depicted as radically superior to his creation—was also the progressive ensoulment of human beings as isolated sovereign selves, individuals in the image of the one God Most High, fully realized persons, and finally modern subjectivities.

The Christian story brings this history to one of its epochal watersheds. In the Gospel there is a radical assault upon all the mediating structures of patriarchal authority—all the religious and social institutions, all the established offices of pedigree and privilege, all the nested stations of kin, people, kingdom, empire, and priesthood—by the individual soul's claim of an immediate filiation to the One God. For Sloterdijk, Christ is "God's bastard," the Father's natural child, as it were, conceived and born outside all legitimate lines of inheritance and all licit structures of authority. And

In the Gospel there is a radical assault upon all the mediating structures of patriarchal authority by the individual soul's claim of an immediate filiation to the One God.

his anti-patriarchal revolt became in time a license granted to every soul: now each of us, in our individual humanity, liberated by this social and spiritual apostasy, can become God's bastard too, someone in whom God directly dwells as Father. At the same time, and by the same logic, a new order of social and political desire was implanted in human nature: that of "infinite egalitarianism," a passage from the psycho-politics of command and obedience to one of equal self-determination, the transformation of vertical into horizontal difference.

Here again Sloterdijk's favored image is exorcism, which should be understood, he believes, as a kind of purification of a sacred space, a cleansing of the Temple. The soul was once conceived "neither as a theater nor as a factory, as is typical of the modern age, but rather as a sanctuary in which no image was allowed to be on display except that of the god-man—whose image, in turn, had to represent an indescribable God." In driving out the more elemental spiritual forces that once reigned with such capriciousness in nature, society, and the soul, the One transcendent principle of the Axial Age also became the source of a sovereign selfhood. This is because the expulsion of evil spirits from the soul had to be completed by the subsequent "entrance of a bright principle, which, as warden of the purified soul, became its new monitor and source of inspiration." The soul thus underwent a change of possession: now it was the Spirit of God himself that was at work within it.

This purification of the self's inner precincts may have been a thoroughly religious experience, but it was also a crucial episode in the history of Enlightenment, and thus of secularization. For, when that most elevated of sheltering spheres finally shattered—as it had to do—the sovereign self became the sole remaining sanctuary of whatever mysteries might be left. All the other possibilities of shelter had been successively exhausted, and had then been assumed into that ultimate transcendence, and had finally disappeared with it.

Not that the longing for those other shelters has ever abated. In the aftermath of God's departure, humanity's attempts to retreat again into a protective sphere have taken many forms. For some, the holy liberty of God's bastards became an idealist and then psychotherapeutic struggle to fortify the besieged ego against the divine depths of the unconscious. All the offices of religious comfort now had to be discharged by the soul itself, through a ceaseless self-invigilation and self-absolution. For others, the withdrawal of religion in advanced societies made it possible for faith to become an individuated experimental regime—a "will to believe," understood as a kind of private, constructivist therapy or psychic hygiene, naturally tending in the direction of mysticism. (Sloterdijk considers William James the most impressive advocate of this post-religious, thoroughly Americanized religion-as-vitamin-supplement.) For others, there are fideistic fanaticisms and reactionary dogmatisms to fill in the absences left by the withering away of a living faith.

In any case, the old pieties and enchantments are irretrievable. With no God to watch us, there really is no sin to be resolved before his gaze, and so no power that can reconcile us to, or rescue us from, indecipherable fate. The modern human being wants not to obey a higher power but to *be* that power. As soon as God and the soul had been liquidated, we were left with only the world as a brute event. In this "hyper-immanent" space, a purposeless energy idly unfolds around us, with no fingerposts to guide us across the featureless terrain. The world has truly become a monster to us, and we, far from finding shelter in any redoubtable spheres of co-immunity, discover only that the controlled exodus toward final freedom that was promised to us by the myth of Enlightenment has proved instead to be a precipitate slide toward social and ecological disintegration, psychic vagrancy, and what Sloterdijk calls an unsheltered "heteromobility."

The sciences, of course, may take no note of the world's monstrosity, but philosophy must, and then must ask what we should now do. The answer is elusive, though. Religion, clearly, will not return to resume its old authority. Such religions as still exist among us are at most, in Sloterdijk's view, local social subsystems at the edges of civic life. Even the churches, rather than truly organic associations of souls occupying the center of things, are marginal sodalities whose only real purpose is to nurture and control a deep melancholy over the impossibility of the church that was. Various simulacra of organic religion—therapeutic spiritualities, fundamentalisms, apocalyptic sects, integralist authoritarianisms, and so forth—may thrive for a time here or there. Religious yearning may briefly increase wherever the welfare state begins to withdraw or civil society becomes too chaotic. But we have found no true sphere of social co-immunity adequate to our era of globalized "hyper-polities" and ecological crisis. And even private immunity can be preserved over time only within the embrace of such a sphere.

Sloterdijk identifies three kinds of immune system that he regards as necessary for human existence: the biological (naturally), the social (which consists of solidarity and shared support), and the symbolic or ritual (which grants human beings power from higher sources whenever they feel themselves to be powerless). The third of these has been weakened irreparably by secularization and individualism, while the second has been subjected to continuous dilutions and dissolutions. We still have not discovered any efficient system of co-immunity for the global society that is now emerging, or devised any new shelters against the monstrosity of a world of empty fate.

If I have given the impression that Sloterdijk's grand narrative is simply a tale of decline, it is only because I have confined myself to his critique of a certain standard narrative of the modern. He believes, it is true, that in an age of global ecological crisis and of social and political fragmentation, something like religion's power for creating community and solidarity is dearly needed. He notes the melancholy, long, withdrawing roar of faith with a certain wry ruefulness. He heartily detests, for instance, the irreverent consumerism of tourists wandering through cathedrals dressed for the beach and taking photographs. But he has no desire to return to the myths or hierarchies of the past. Nor does he rage against technology in the abstract, or even mournfully resign himself to it in a fit of Heideggerean anomie. From the moment a human being cracked one rock with another, our destiny was to employ ordered force against disordered force in order to achieve our ends, and we cannot hope for a better future that will not also be a feat of technological prowess.

The modern human being wants not to obey a higher power but to *be* that power.

Rather than an attempted retreat into an irrecuperable past, what Sloterdijk believes we really require is a new sphere of solidarity that can encompass all life, a shelter strong enough to create a robust co-immunity for the defenseless whole: global society, animal and vegetal life, nature, the earth itself. Religion has been irretrievably lost as a binding system of values, so we need a new piety devoted to, and sustained by, the oneness of the earth that we inhabit, share, and depend on. As far as Sloterdijk is concerned, moreover, the history of revelation—if one may use that word—has continued to the present day, and there are many things we have learned on the way to modernity, such as the nobility of the individual soul's "proud" search for a system of personal freedom. These are lessons we must not forsake or let ourselves forget if we are to create a habitable future. For him, they constitute a "Newer Testament."

Here, for me at least, the details tend to become a bit nebulous. I find Sloterdijk's politics largely unintelligible, though I concede that it may all have some sort of deep coherence that I have simply failed to grasp. All I can hear are the dissonances. At times, he can sound as childishly inane as any American libertarian fulminating against social-welfare provisions. At other times, he gives voice to a healthy disdain for the liberal democratic cult

of mediocrity, as well as the prison of routine in which the modern state and modern economy hold so many people captive. At yet other times, his Nietzschean dread of the age of the "Last Men" seems to overwhelm his vision of global solidarity and his sense of our pathetic human dependency on spheres of co-immunity. And yet it is that vision and that sense, as well as the essential, unpretentious humanity of both, that illuminate and guide his thinking at its best. Still, because I remain as unconvinced of the real existence of Sloterdijk's greater political vision as of the real existence of snarks, I am no more disposed to dilate on the contents of the former than to speculate upon the biology of the latter.

What might Christians make of any of this story? Why should they care? Well, to begin with, they should acknowledge that Sloterdijk, in confirming Nietzsche's diagnosis of God's death in the developed world, is doing nothing more than stating an evident fact of history. The disappearance of that transcendent horizon of meaning and hope within whose commodious embrace just about all persons and cultures once subsisted is simply a *fait accompli*. The frantic extremism of the fundamentalisms and religious nationalisms and crypto-fascist integralisms of our current moment poignantly attests to the inconceivability for late modern culture of a God who is anything other than the construct of either the will to power or a desperate emotional need. None of them is a true sign of a revival of faith; all of them are only the hideous contractions of a deepening rigor mortis. And inasmuch as the genuinely living Christianity of the past was the vital wellspring of "Enlightenment" in the Western world, the departure of that Christianity from Western culture has carried away all those earlier possibilities of "co-immunity" that it had summed up in itself.

The Christendom of the empire or the nation state, being an alloy of two ultimately irreconcilable principles, inevitably subverted itself.

Epochs of the spirit are not reversible, or even susceptible of recapitulation. This is an Hegelian insight that no one should doubt: great historical and cultural transitions are not merely ruptures, but also moments of critique. The rationality of history lies in the ceaseless triumph of experience over mere theory, and so in the impossibility of any simple return to pre-critical naïvetés. Sooner or later, just about every cultural economy is defeated by its own inner contradictions, barring interruption of this natural process by a sudden foreign conquest. And the new order that succeeds it is probably no freer from contradictions of its own, which will be exposed in their turn. More to the point, every cultural order's collapse is also the exhaustion of the synthesis that that culture embodied. Innocence yields to disenchantment, and disenchantment cannot revert to innocence.

Certainly this has proved so in the case of Christendom and its sequel, secularization. The Christendom of the empire or the nation state, being an alloy of two ultimately irreconcilable principles, inevitably subverted itself. It persisted for as long as it did by virtue of a genuinely organic cultic devotion with a durable practical and theoretical infrastructure. But its inherent contradictions ultimately destroyed that basis. The language and principles of the Gospel frequently illuminated the society that cherished them; the offices and powers of the state consistently sheltered, preserved, and advanced the religion that legitimated them. But the alliance was a suicide pact. The most devastating solvent of Christendom, in the end, was the ineradicable presence of Christianity within it. The corrosive force most destructive of Christianity as a credible source of social order was in the end the crushing burden of Christendom upon it.

Resistance to this destiny has always proved fruitless, precisely because it has tended to proceed from within the rationality of the old Christendom. In Catholic culture, for example, since at least the time of the Council of Trent, the struggle against the reality of the old order's intrinsic fragility has been constant and utterly futile. It has been like an attempt to save a house already swallowed by the sea by adding new locks to its doors. Despite the countless cultural and social riches created by the unstable accommodation between the Gospel and empire—and even though many of those riches could yet perhaps be recovered within a new Christian synthesis—still the Christendom of the past was a fruitful catastrophe and its inevitable terminus was always secularism. And in the fullness of time, this secularism had to become a fully self-conscious metaphysical nihilism.

As for the liberal secular order that succeeded Christendom, its own inner stresses and volatilities are all too obvious. In the economic realm, it has created prodigies of material production and destruction, as well as forms of power and oppression on a scale formerly unimaginable. In the social realm, it has created ceaseless struggles among incompatible visions of the good while providing no clear transcendent index of values for adjudicating their conflicts. For better or

worse, it has eliminated or marginalized almost all mediating or subsidiary forms of social agency and reduced meaningful social order to the interdependent but necessarily antagonistic claims of the state, capital, and the sovereign individual. And Sloterdijk is quite right: under such conditions, we have little defense against the ecological and social calamities that we have created for ourselves. So, again, given these realities, what ought Christians to do?

Certainly, what they should *not* do is indulge in sickly nostalgias and resentments, or soothe their distempers with infantile restorationist fantasies. History's immanent critique has exposed too many of the old illusions for what they were, and there can be no innocent return to structures of power whose hypocrisies have been so clearly revealed. There are any number of reasons, for instance, for dismissing the current vogue of right-wing Catholic "integralism": its imbecile flights of fancy regarding an imperial papacy; its essentially early-modern model of ecclesial absolutism; its devotion to a picture of Christian social and political order that could not be any less "integralist" or any more "extrinsicist" and authoritarian in its mechanisms; the disturbingly palpable element of sadomasochistic reverie in its endorsement of various extreme forms of coercion, subjugation, violence, and exclusion; the total absence of the actual ethos of Christ from its aims; its eerie similarity to a convention of *Star Trek* enthusiasts gravely discussing strategies for really establishing a United Federation of Planets. But the greatest reason for holding the whole movement in contempt is that it is nothing more than a resentful effort to reenact the very history of failure whose consequences it wants to correct. Secularity was not imposed upon the Christian world by some adventitious hostile force. It simply *is* the old Christendom in its terminal phase.

To this extent Christians have much to learn from Sloterdijk's narrative, even if they might demur from some of its details. That said, the lovely burden of historical consciousness of which I spoke above can also incapacitate the political and moral imagination. Too much "genealogy"—too much history, as Nietzsche warned—can produce a paralyzing fatalism. Sloterdijk himself is acutely aware of this, but it is notable how parochial is his assumption that the current situation of the West must determine the future of religion, or even just the Christian "sphere" of immunity. He may be right, of course, but I think he sometimes fails to appreciate the degree to which history is always also a realm of radical novelties. Genealogy tends to create the impression that cultural evolution is governed by an inflexible law of efficient and material causality, but in fact historical processes are constantly redirected by formal and final causalities that simply cannot be predicted.

The configurations of the old Christian order are irrecoverable now, and in many ways that is for the best. But the possibilities of another, perhaps radically different Christian social vision remain to be explored and cultivated. Chastened by all that has been learned from the failures of the past, disencumbered of both nostalgia and resentment, eager to gather up all the most useful and beautiful and ennobling fragments of the ruined edifice of the old Christendom so as to integrate them into better patterns, Christians might yet be able to imagine an altogether different social and cultural synthesis. Christian thought can always return to the apocalyptic *novum* of the event of the Gospel in its first beginning and, drawing renewed vigor from that inexhaustible source, imagine new expressions of the love it is supposed to proclaim to the world, and new ways beyond the impasses of the present.

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The ultimate result, if Christians can free themselves from the myth of a lost golden age, may be something wilder and stranger than we can at present conceive, at once more primitive and more sophisticated, more anarchic in some ways and more orderly in others. Whether such a thing is possible or not, however, it is necessary to grasp that where we now find ourselves is not a fixed destiny. It becomes one only if we are unwilling to distinguish the opulent but often decadent grandeur of Christendom from the true Christian glory of which it fell so far short. The predicaments of the present are every bit as formidable as Sloterdijk's diagnosis suggests, and our need for a global sphere of solidarity that can truly shelter the life of the whole is every bit as urgent as he claims. But it is also true that we are not actually fated to live "after God," or to seek our shelter only in the aftermath of God's departure. In fact, of all the futures we might imagine, that might prove to be the most impossible of all.

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Gordon Warnecke and Daniel Day-Lewis in *My Beautiful Laundrette*

Velvet & Pus

Eve Tushnet

A queer Catholic imagination

When I was in high school, I spent hours hunting for any hint of homosexuality in music, poetry, art—all the places people drop their hints. Is this guy singing, "Once a lover, and *his* last"? Is the "Oscar" he name-checks…*our* Oscar? In seeking precedents, my friends and I were trying to figure out what possibilities our futures might hold. Slowly, we built an imagination for ourselves: an extremely mid-nineties imagination, overrun with drawling, white British men and violent death, but a treasury and an ancestry nonetheless.

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A few years later, I discovered the Catholic Church. Even at that time there was already talk of a distinctive "Catholic imagination"; people threw around words like "incarnational." I fell in love with the Church and was baptized in 1998. The Church, my beloved, is bigger than "the Catholic imagination." I hope I didn't swoon for that abstract and desiccating daughter of the critical class. But even this abstraction holds some truths and beauties behind its facade. And only now, decades later, I'm realizing how much "the Catholic imagination" and one familiar form of queer imagination have in common. These traditions don't simply overlap because Oscar Wilde and Steven Patrick Morrissey happened to be baptized in the Church (if such a thing could "happen to be"). They overlap because queer culture preserved and exemplified countercultural truths and unwanted beauties. What I found in the Church was at once strange and familiar—and the familiarity, more than the strangeness, was the result of my experience in queer cultures. You may shape your tongue to Church Latin only to find that the words come out in Polari.

The first overlap I noticed was, of course, the Church's sensuality. Even before I became Catholic I noticed this insistence on the meaning of the body—"meaning" in the sense that the body could be interpreted, that you could not only feel it but understand it (or misunderstand it). But also "meaning" in the sense of importance: the body means a lot. In high school, I wrote a self-indulgent short story called "The Church Is the Body" about a congregation that rejects a woman due to her chronic illness. This is the teenage victim fantasy, I know. But where did I get that title, and why did I like it so much? I hated the gory paintings and statues in Catholic churches, which is weird since "morbid" and "masochistic" have never been terms I use pejoratively. But I loved reliquaries. I didn't even love them because they were comic ("Look, they put a foot in a foot!"). What I loved was the luxury and tenderness poured out on corpses. The bodies by themselves are enough to love. The febrile insistence on the flesh: the marble flesh of statues, the wounded flesh of martyrs, both changed and somehow justified by the sacred Flesh broken between our teeth. To encounter the Catholic Church is to touch and smell and taste; to shiver.

So too in the queer world. If you are suspected, taunted, targeted for violence, denied jobs, harassed, and made to doubt yourself because you have what others consider the wrong sensual reactions—if you react with longing and surrender to the wrong physical forms—then your own sensory reactions will become an object of your intense study. As you try to understand why the physical world doesn't mean to you what others think it should (why do certain physical forms glow red-hot when you've been told they should be dull to you?), you spend a lot of time observing, assessing, and contemplating your own responses to physical forms. The physical world is now a problem to you. Your skin, so used to blushing at the wrong times, in the wrong presences, now brushes against the world always *ready* to react. You begin to interact with the physical world with an intense awareness of your own capacity for arousal. You are pretty much on high alert all the time, and it's confusing and terrifying and also very hot.

Gay people learn early how often those we respond to won't be able or willing to respond to us in kind. "I Want the One I Can't Have" and all that. Meanwhile in the nineties—and often still today, in many more places than well-meaning heterosexuals realize—we were despised and targeted and we learned to love one another as criminals. We learned to love one another as inescapable, as damaged, as dangerous. We learned to love not *in spite of* but *because*. Our wounds became shelters and our humiliations crowns.

So much queer art honors the stripped, the suffering. Yukio Mishima wrote about the sexual fascination of St. Sebastian—although the narrator of *Confessions of a Mask* insists that he found in Guido Reni's portrait of the martyr "only the springtime of youth, only light and beauty and pleasure," it seems clear that the "tranquil and graceful shadows" of the arrows against his flesh are necessary for the painting to have its catalytic effect. And his stilted postscript about Magnus Hirschfeld's interpretation of St. Sebastian as a figure "in which the invert takes special delight" adds, with its scientific distance from intense emotion, the palpable vulnerability of shame. There is a self- and other-destructive impulse at play in these collisions of desire and suffering, a resignation to unhappiness, or resentment of it. But there are also Oscar Wilde's fairy tales, "The Happy Prince" and "The Nightingale and the Rose," images of sacrificial love in which happiness is the fruit of kenosis.

Camp itself requires a certain spotlit vulnerability. In "An Aesthetic of Lack, or Notes on Camps," Katie Kresser writes, "In drag, so proudly artificial, there is no attempt to seem edenically perfect and complete. There is no attempt to appear innocent

We learned to love not in spite of but because. Our wounds became shelters and our humiliations crowns.

and unmarked." She says that the halo which artists use to signify sainthood, "with its flagrance and upward pull [says] that no one is naturally complete; to each one is born an intrinsic need, a yawning lack.... Does camp merely say, like every culture in the history of the world before ours, that *humanity lacks*?"

Catholic physicality comes in two kinds: velvet and pus. You can have a surfeit of gargoyles or a stripped desert saint in a single shaft of light. What you can't have is normal, healthy people doing normal, healthy things. Such people might be tempted to believe themselves complete and adequate. And the allure of inadequacy, the exposure and even caricature of our own need and lack, is where much of "the Catholic imagination" gets its power.

To be human is to be shamed, defeated, glamorous, brazen: like the compulsive cheat and liar Adrian Healey in Stephen Fry's comic masterpiece, *The Liar*, adorning himself with an astrakhan coat, lavender gloves, and an orchid in the buttonhole before he faces the horrors of the boys' locker room—or like Perpetua binding up her hair before her martyrdom, "for it was not becoming for a martyr to suffer with disheveled hair, lest she should appear to be mourning in her glory."

In the queer culture I grew up with there was a deep identification with not only the innocent despised but also with the guilty. *My Beautiful Laundrette*, the best gay movie ever made, plays on the parallel between the gay hero Omar and his adulterous uncle. Adrian in *The Liar* does everything from betraying the boy he loves to cheating at cricket, but beneath and prior to these specific acts of perfidy churns an existential shame and guilt: Adrian *is* the guilty party, which is why we identify with him. Oscar Wilde's three morality plays of high society, *Lady Windermere's Fan, A Woman of No Importance*, and *An Ideal Husband*, turn on the Christian Möbius-strip morality in which it is the moralizers whose souls are in the most danger. Wilde liked to be thought wicked (for a while), but these plays don't work if you think extramarital sex or selling state secrets are just dandy. They focus on the moral worth of wrongdoers whose sins earned social condemnation, and the greater sins committed by those who are rewarded by society.

In his 2013 article "The Catholic Writer Today," Dana Gioia named "spiritual self-scrutiny and moral examination of conscience" as a feature of Catholic writing. The television writer Jimmy McGovern corroborates: "I'm a writer because I was a Catholic and I took the examination of conscience really seriously." But Catholicism also demands of us a moral irony: identification with criminals. Virginia Burrus writes, about martyrs like Perpetua, "To be made a spectacle, to be subjected to the gaze of so many eyes, to be publicly marked as a criminal, captive, or slave, to be costumed or stripped, even to have one's very body ripped open and exposed, was to be made vulnerable to shame in a most extreme and visceral manner." And in this very shame the martyrs imitated the shamed Christ and "attain[ed] glory."

I chose Elizabeth of Hungary as my confirmation saint partly because her most famous miracle, the bread changed to roses, reminded me of the titular miracle in Jean Genet's prison novel, *The Miracle of the Rose*. In the book, a prisoner loves a murderer because of his crimes. As the murderer is being taken to the recreation area, curls twisting over his forehead like "the twists of the crown of thorns," the narrator has a vision of his chains turning into white roses. The rose is the queer Catholic symbol *par excellence*: with its heavy perfume and skin-piercing thorns, it is as glamorous as everything that hurts us, as painful as everything that frees us. This life is broken, above all inadequate—but we are to love all broken and inadequate things. Catholics take this as a duty; in camp it's simply assumed.

I experienced these aspects of queer culture almost as an observer rather than a participant. I was too young, too privileged, too well-cared-for by my family to get any real wounds myself. I was not Edward II or the yearning, dishonorable hero of *The Liar*; I was barely the girl with the thorn in her side. The most I can say for myself is that these are the people I loved and the ones who taught me who I was.

Of course, when we say "the Catholic imagination" we're always referring only to *some* Catholics' imaginations, because the Church transcends genre. Would a Byzantine Catholic recognize the "Catholic imagination" of luxury, criminality, moral irony, and lack? I don't know! And the queer imagination I'm describing here is only one piece of even my own limited experience of the queer culture of the nineties. I loved Rebecca Brown's story collection *The Terrible Girls*, whose camp tragedy and jewel-toned, flickering-shadows cinematic physicality resonate with the queer imagination I'm describing here, but stand alongside, rather than within, its almost exclusively male domain. The other lesbian writers who shaped my experience—Dorothy Allison, Sarah Schulman, Audre Lorde—have even less in common with the specific kind of queer imagination I'm describing. (Brown herself has now converted to Catholicism; Lorde was raised Catholic.) My queer imagination was shaped by Leslie Feinberg, Marlon Riggs, Donna Deitch, and Tribe 8, none of whose work is best illuminated by the lens I'm using here.

And yet I know the thing I'm describing is real because I can recognize it when I encounter it anew. In recent years I've discovered two authors who worked brilliantly within the queer tradition I'm outlining, but moved, by sharply divergent paths, beyond its compulsive self-laceration.

José Luis Zárate's novella *The Route of Ice and Salt* imagines the terrible passage of the ship carrying Stoker's Dracula to England. *Route* was originally published in 1998 but translated into English for the first time this year by David Bowles. In its nightmare vision of men being picked off one by one, seen in the embrace of a stranger and then sick and then dead, it is a novel of the AIDS epidemic. Sex and death intertwine in passages that swerve from pornography into graphic horror. Zárate's prose is sensual, starting with the title, and swelling in passages like this: "My tongue a blade, a short finger that

digs into his skin. Rough, earthy, bitter. And at that moment, mine."

It's a threatened sensuality, with the self-policing hyper-awareness of the closet. Zárate's narrator is the ship's captain, all suppressed longing and guilt and responsibility. The terrible sea journey teaches him the blamelessness of his desire. Zárate takes the vampire, creature of forbidden thirsts and symbol of sexual excess, and makes him instead a symbol of the homophobic mob. The vampire dissolves into fog, breaks up into a horde of rats. *Route* plays with the question of whether the vampire is target or hunter, outcast or lord. It comes down on the side of the vampire as abusive community: his eyes are the torches of the citizenry. Meanwhile the homosexual, whom both artists and Catholic theologians have often imagined as consumed by lust so excessive that he cannot confine himself to the proper sex, here becomes a figure of selfless responsibility.

By the end this is a didactic book: "'I am not a monster,' I told the *Demeter*, gripping the helm in the midst of the fog.... '*But they are*.'" The captain sheds the old guilt that has haunted him. "I know that Thirst is not evil in and of itself," he declares, and extends this moral neutrality to "even Sin." Thus acquitted, he dies trying to thwart the monster, clutching a rosary. The captain claims personal moral superiority over those who once treated him as morally inferior—a posture of pride versus humility, not merely pride versus shame. I disliked these moral lessons. If I wanted to be taught my moral goodness, which I do not, I would not be reading a sexy vampire book.

But Zárate is writing for gay people who had been taught that our sexual desires barred us from responsible love. He says: *You are not and were never the disintegrating, destroying vampire. In fact, when you were captured and violated, it was the mob whose teeth began to lengthen and gleam*. This moral judgment on the moralizers is the kind of overturning performed by Jesus in the Gospels, as well as Wilde in his plays.

Moreover, the evidence of our senses is not simply to be denied. God did not allow us to experience the shocking beauty of another woman, or another man, as a trick or a cruel joke. When we are pierced by beauty, it isn't always the vampire's fangs; sometimes it may be the arrow that pierced Teresa. The grotesquerie and inadequacy of the flesh, while real, are not the *only* truths. The created beauty and the *imago Dei* are real too.

Dunstan Thompson's journey ran parallel to that of Zárate's suffering captain, but found a different harbor. Thompson is an American poet whose work reflects the stages of his life: first tormented, writhing poetry about anonymous sexual liaisons edged with violence; then scholarly, reflective poems written after he attained domestic happiness with his life partner; and at last, when first Thompson and then his partner began to practice the Catholic faith of Thompson's youth, devotional poetry of rare gentleness. Thompson's early work is all like this: "The red-haired robber in the ravished bed / Is doomsday driven." It's heady stuff, hot and rough: "This tall horseman, my young man of Mars /...takes / Me to pieces like a gun." And then Thompson discovered that love was not the enemy of peace. Suddenly he can write:

> The end of love is that the heart is still....
> Here I have found, as after thunder showers,
> The friend my childhood promised me.

Thompson's later poetry doesn't argue for the moral worth of anything in particular—not his own life, not his Church. His Heaven is not a reward for good behavior. Heaven is the place where no company is more desirable than that of the despised and the sinners, "among the wrecks / Of life." It's the place where the rescued can laugh in relief: "Oh, the saints with the lollipop eyes / Are getting us out with our lives." Heaven is home, Thompson insists, and kindness: "By kindness, write the mystics, here is meant / The daily going up of self in smoke." Above all Heaven is friendship, with the Beloved and a beloved, both found after long desperate wandering.

The later poems have not only gentler subject matter than the early poems, but a wider emotional range and *much* more variation in meter. But they don't feel like repudiations. In several poems Thompson suggests that obedience to God restores us to ourselves: the immolated self rises from the ashes splendid and laughing. So too his own poetic voice remained artsy and ardent, but insouciance and gratitude replaced much of the anguish.

For all its beauties, the queer imagination that formed me found it hard to picture refuge. It was a violent time and we did not know where to find peace. The churches were more often sites of violence for us than sanctuaries. Thompson's Heaven is one possible flowering of that gay aesthetic: at once flamboyantly Catholic, and traditionally queer.

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The grotesquerie and inadequacy of the flesh, while real, are not the only truths. The created beauty and the *imago Dei* are real too.

Show Me Your Dantes

i.

For my interview, the old man brought me to a sitting room on the main floor of his house, with floor-to-ceiling windows looking out at a big, flat snowy field that ended at a thick stand of evergreens. There were neatly stacked copies of *National Review* and *Time* on the coffee table. The mantel above the gas fireplace had photographs in black frames—a bride and groom on the front steps of a small-town church; a little boy with big lips in a two-piece velveteen suit and knee socks; two young men in army fatigues, arms around in each other, smiling and smoking and squinting in tropical sunlight; a younger old man surrounded by workers, everyone in light-colored jeans and company T-shirts cutting a giant cake shaped like a clamshell and decorated with spaceships and laser beams.

"You have a very nice house," I said.

"Thank you, Prin. It's new. Truth be told, I had it built after my wife died a couple of years ago. The old place, over in town, where we raised Hugh, who I know you met in Indianapolis, was just too big for one man. I would have been rattling around in there. Can I get you anything? Keurig? Diet Coke?"

"I'm fine, thanks."

"Take a seat. So, I understand you're a professor. I actually read something of yours, about seahorses and male anatomy in Canadian literature, I think. Pretty specialized stuff, I have to say. It was published in…"

"*PMLA*."

"Which stands for?"

"*Papers in Marine Literature and Art*."

"Right. And I also know about your situation in the Middle East and that you were involved in an educational business venture there that didn't work out."

"Yes."

"At least, I know what can be known about it."

"I had to sign something."

"I'm not looking for details. But I do commend you for going over in the first place. Whatever you did to get out of there, well, it's none of my business, but congratulations. I know getting out of hell's a lot harder than getting into it. Vietnam."

"Your son mentioned you were a veteran."

"Hugh's a National Guardsman."

"Yes. He mentioned that as well when we spoke."

"Trying to impress you! With that!"

DAVID SANKEY/ALAMY/SHUTTERSTOCK

"I actually gave a public lecture on Kafka while I was there, kind of like the Dante talks I gave last month. That's when I met your son."

"I saw the emails about it. Also, you're Catholic, and a family man, correct?"

"Yes."

"Did Hugh say that's what I would ask when I brought you in for this?"

"He did."

He leaned across the coffee table.

"What else did he say?"

"He said that if I'm hired, I would have to move to Terre-Haute, and that the position involves a Dante-related construction project, and that I'd be working closely with you."

"Working with me, or working for me? Which one?"

"Working for you."

"Because I don't need a babysitter with a PhD."

He stood up.

Was the interview over?

"Is the interview over?"

"Follow me."

We walked to the garage. Inside, behind two old Cadillacs in pristine condition, was a staircase to the second floor. Above a solid-wood door was a woodworked sign, the letters burned in florid Germanic script. *Mantua Cave*.

"Up there, behind that door, my friend, is the finest private collection of Dante editions and Dante memorabilia in the entire Midwest. Would you like to take a look?" said Charlie.

"Sure," I said.

"That didn't sound as enthusiastic as I was expecting, Prin. You know, I used to get requests from all over the place—England, Germany, even from the East Coast schools."

"Mr. Tracker, I think I'd be more enthusiastic if I had a sense of what this is all about."

"Fair ball. And look, if this is going to work out, just call me Mr. Tracker in front of my people from the plant—not for me, for them. But otherwise, it's Charlie."

"Understood, Charlie."

"Good. Why don't we go for a drive and you can see for yourself what this is all about? If you're not interested, you can call Uber to come pick you up. If you are interested, and I think you're going to be interested, Prin, I really do, then we can come back here and talk, and I can show you my Dantes."

WE DROVE INTO TERRE-HAUTE. the day was cold and bright and blue. Chimney stacks, exhaust pipes, mouths all steaming and smoking. Charlie told me his company was America's largest family-owned packaging company still operating west of Pittsburgh. He founded Tracker Packaging after Vietnam. He'd started with a few employees, and now five hundred people worked for him. Worked for Hugh, he corrected. There had been plenty of offers over the years to move to Arizona and that kind of thing, and the unions had tried to get in there, and multinationals and pension funds from Connecticut and Spain were always trying to buy them, but Charlie and his people had stuck it out in Terre-Haute. Most of the other manufacturers around town—Coke bottles, CDs, DVDs, ICBMs—had either moved or shut down. All the new business was in treatment centers, retirement homes, prisons, and retraining programs. The people were still the same.

"What do you make packages for?" I asked.

"Prin, that's the big question these days. When it comes to clear packaging, and a company our size, the machines can really only handle a few molds at the scale the client's looking for, and if you pick the wrong one, you're in trouble. Before they went completely offshore, we used to work with toy companies a lot—action figures, baby dolls, toy guns, miniature tea sets. Turn of the century, we won the sole U.S. clamshell contract for the new Star Wars line. We've held our own against South Korea, then Taiwan, and now China. But that Jar-Jar Binks almost killed us!"

"I see."

"But we survived. And these days, it's mostly clamshells and tubes for ladies' cosmetics. Rigids are an option, more masstige cosmetics is another."

"Massage cosmetics?"

"Masstige. Industry term. Mass-market prestige. Hugh really wants us to go into medical. Not just medical. He wants us to go into pharmaceutical."

"Pills?"

"Pills."

A man and a woman were walking along the avenue just ahead of us, where the downtown seemed to start—auto-parts stores and Walgreens and Wendy's were giving way to bail bonds and pawnshops and liquor stores and lime-washed bunker bars, their Budweiser signs glowing red against dim, narrow windows trailing scraggy old tinsel. The man was carrying a black garbage bag that bulged with dirty laundry and the woman was pushing a stroller. They were wearing ski jackets over pajama bottoms, plaid and pink. Both had long hair that looked like overcooked pasta, and they walked with a languid-to-rickety bounce, as if their bodies were built of clattering coat hangers. When Charlie drove past, I turned and saw their bony and pocked faces, the deep wells around their vacant eyes. Their mouths were moving like they were chewing gum and chatting, but they were doing neither. They were neither young nor old. Two little kids in washed-out snowsuits sat in the stroller. The older one had her arms around the younger one, who was sitting in her lap holding a Spider-Man.

"Pills," said Charlie.

WE CONTINUED ON THROUGH TERRE-HAUTE'S LITTLE DOWNTOWN—rows of brick buildings chipped and discolored and broken up here and there by vacant lots. Downtown Terre-Haute looked like the mouth of a retired hockey player. A few blocks further on was the Wabash River, the cold January air raising steam from its still water.

"I'd quote Dante on the Arno to you, but the people he connects to his river he also puts in hell. I'm long out, thank God!" said Charlie.

"Which puts you where, now?" I said.

"I like that. No one asks me questions like that, Prin. They just humor me because I'm the boss."

"You're either in Purgatory or Paradise, to think in Dante's terms."

"What I think isn't what I believe though, friend. I'm a Christian. I'm not a Catholic."

"No Purgatory."

"For a couple of reasons. But what about you?"

"Well, as I mentioned earlier, I'm Catholic."

"Right. So you get to think in Dante and believe in what you think. That situation in the Middle East, I take it that was your inferno."

"You could say that."

"And now you're in Terre-Haute and you're looking at a job that might keep you here for a year. What about your wife and kids?"

"They're living in Milwaukee while some work's being done on our house in Toronto."

"I'm sure we could find a family-sized place here for all of you."

"I don't expect they'd move."

"Don't want to pull them out of their dance classes and all?"

"Right."

"Sure."

He kept driving. Past a hospital complex we came to a great paved plaza. It led to two basketball arenas. One was old. One was new. A few cars were parked near the entrances. A traffic-attendant booth was set up between the arenas. A chubby man stepped out and waved.

"Here we are, pilgrim. Welcome to Dante's Indiana."

ii.

"Charlie, what's a Dante theme park?"

"Well sure, everybody has that question."

"And you're the guy to answer it, right?"

He smiled and shifted around in his seat.

"A lot more than the consultants and the professors, I'll tell you."

"So?"

"You ready? You want to hear this? When you do, Prin, you're in for the whole thing."

"Let's hear it."

"Well, you know about Disney World."

"Of course."

"And you know about Genesis Extreme."

"Genesis Extreme? No."

"Doesn't your family watch *America's Got Jesus*?"

"I've heard of it. Something about a boycott, last year.'

"They won't even let us have a TV show anymore."

"I'm guessing you have something in mind that's somewhere between Disney World and a biblical talent show?"

"More like, a cross between Disney World and a biblical theme park."

"Okay."

"I don't know how much Hugh told you, or how he put it. How'd he put it?"

"He said this was your retirement project."

Charlie snorted.

"Makes it sound like I'm painting a sailboat or something. Anyway, I know he wants to keep me busy and away from the company. But I'm also looking at this as a businessman, Prin. As a way to help out a town and a lot of folks in need. Because, if we get this right, well, I think there's a lot in Dante that would appeal to a whole lot of people. Different types of people."

"Masstige."

He tapped his nose.

"Can I clear?" said a young Hispanic woman.

She was wearing a black-and-ketchup apron over a white shirt and black bowtie. Charlie thanked her. We were having lunch in an empty Steak 'n Shake. We hadn't gone into either arena. I'd wanted to, but Charlie said it was premature and that we would startle the horses. I asked what horses, and Charlie had suggested burgers.

"People like her, Prin. She can't take her kids to Disney World on Steak 'n Shake money, but she can take them down the street, to a real American theme park. Couple of rides, some games, maybe learn a little, too. And she's not alone, trust me."

I nodded and sipped my malt. Charlie's eyes were bright, his pale cheeks red. Sitting against the hardback booth in his red-plaid hunting shirt, his face flushed, it looked like the restaurant's deep-red walls were bleeding into him.

How convincing was I, so far?

"Prin, we should play poker sometime. I can see it all over your face. But hear me out. A couple of years ago, when I was getting ready to leave the company, I leased our town's two empty basketball arenas for a dollar-a-year for fifty years. Hugh and I talked it over, went back and forth, back and forth, you know. Anyway, eventually we landed on a plan. City Hall was probably just happy we cleared out the addicts from the arenas after they built the new one to attract a WNBA team. Which, news flash, didn't work out. What I'm doing isn't some crazy old man idea. Or just a retirement project."

"Of course. Hugh didn't just say this was your retirement project, Charlie. He told me this was serious. A big deal."

"Did he say that too?"

"Absolutely."

"Glad to hear. Not the kind of thing he'd say directly to me, of course. No fault there. Fathers and sons."

"Yes."

"And believe me, I'd love to learn a little more about you. But first, business. Just think about this like I do, for a minute. Basically, the value proposition is this: anybody in Middle America who'd go to both Disney and Genesis Extreme can cut the difference and save money by coming to Dante's Indiana, instead. Did you know, Prin, that something like half of all Americans who call themselves middle-class—and by way the way, *all* Americans call themselves middle-class—live within a day's drive of right here, Terre-Haute, the middle of the middle of the middle of

America? That's the main market. And then there's homeschoolers and private-academy types, wanting to bring their kids to something entertaining and educational, and then there's your unicorn-blood types who think *Inferno*'s the only thing he ever wrote, and general amusement-park people, who'll go anywhere, and then the regular people from around here who're looking to go somewhere safe and clean. There used to be lots of good places you could drive to and get home the same day, but now there's only one left. It's outside town. I used to take Hugh there in the summers. No one takes their kids there anymore. Did Hugh really say that?"

"Say what?"

"That this was serious? A really big deal?"

"A sequenced investment in the town and company."

Charlie gave me a funny look.

"That's the way he put it?"

"Something like that, yes."

He nodded.

"Charlie, I'm still having trouble imagining what this is."

He half stood up and stretched out his arms.

"Picture a Great American Heaven and Hell!"

I looked around the empty restaurant.

"Everything will be based on something in Dante but also make sense for your everyday American. Masstige, remember? So there's going to be rides, floor-shows, I don't know, acrobats, sorcerers, spaceships, choirs. People walking around dressed like angels, devils, demons, fireworks, light shows, ice capades. We'll get some iPads set up so you can learn more about Dante, serve some devil dogs, angel-food cake. I'd like to donate my collection and have a dedicated room for it—"

"Your Dante stuff, from above the garage?"

"Not stuff, Prin. Believe me, not just stuff."

"Sorry."

"I want to do it, and he won't let me. Says it's too valuable to let the public see it."

"Hugh?"

"No. Somebody else you'd be working with."

He crossed his arms.

"Anyway, the theme park consultants who worked up the initial feasibility report pitched staying on all the way through—the turnkey model, and I was tempted, and obviously Hugh wanted me to do that, but I like going with my own people. So we compromised."

"Which means?"

"They retrofitted both arenas for indoor-theme-park use. To qualify for the state credits, they had to hire 50 percent local labor, and Prin, they hired 50.1 percent. But still, those were good jobs, and there's more to come. The next step is to fit out the arenas with rides and concessions, and then hire the service staff and park performers. But we're behind schedule. We've already missed the summer market and so now we're pegged for the fall. Inferno will open on Halloween, and Paradiso twenty-four hours later."

"What about Purgatory?"

"Fair ball. Look, there were only two vacant arenas, and, well, everybody gets Heaven and Hell, Prin, and no offence, but Purgatory is more of a, well, you know."

"Yes."

I looked around the empty restaurant, the smudged daylight, the listless streets outside. How long was I going to be in this place?

"Anyway, at the current pace, that's not going to happen either. But before I call in the consultants to take over, I want to try one more approach. Hugh agrees. I need to add someone to my team. Make a change."

"You want me to replace one of your own people?"

He made a sour face.

"Not exactly one of my own. The guys and the young lady are fine. More than fine. Good people. The problem is, when this all started, we found out that we'd also qualify for a stack of tax breaks if the project could be designated as educational. It made good sense, business-wise, and

so I asked the fellow who helped me put together my Dante collection to sign on as the academic resource. He said yes right away. Maybe too fast. But I can't blame him. As usual, he was between teaching jobs, and the private-rare-books-library-building business isn't booming these days, and it turns out we don't even have to pay him. He qualified for a state retraining program and asked me if he could bring along a couple of his friends. I said sure. Didn't touch our bottom line and we could list them and their PhDs on our reports. Everybody's happy. But then things went sideways."

"How?"

"You ever watch mob shows, Prin?"

"A few."

"So you know what a no-show job is?"

"Yes, I know about no-show jobs."

"Well, tell them then! They show up, every day, and they think they owe it to the taxpayers of Indiana to make sure that every part of our park is educational and based on Dante. They keep saying this is their 'stated academic duty to the project.' Must be in the fine print somewhere. And guess what? There's a problem with every idea! Nothing from the consultants is educational enough or faithful enough to Dante!"

"And you don't want to be arguing with them, yourself."

"Me, in the same room with them? Telling old stories and bringing the donuts? Now *that* would be a retirement project."

"But you can't get rid of them without losing your tax credits."

"Exactly! See? You get it. I wish we'd found you earlier."

"So it's a good thing I'm not a Dante scholar? I mean, I'm no expert."

"Which is the last thing we need in this country! Look, you're a believer but you don't swing your rosary around, and you can read a footnote without sounding like a footnote. A Catholic professor but not too much of a Catholic professor. Am I right?"

I nodded.

"So I'd be working with the other professors?"

"More as part of the main team. You'd be working with the project manager and the other team leaders already working with her—in operations and procurement—and you'd check in with me once a week or so. I'm looking for a one-year commitment. Six thousand a month, and all the help you need with taxes and immigration. We'll give you an apartment and a car and a travel allowance to see your family or bring them here. That's up to you. There's also a budget for research," said Charlie.

Seventy-two thousand dollars for a year. American. Most of that I could bank. I'd live on jerky and water. Molly and the girls would come home to a new house, a new pool, new life savings.

"Prin?"

"Sorry. You said a budget for research? You mean books?"

He snorted and jerked his thumb at the restaurant window.

"I have all the books you need."

"Then what?"

"Well, if you want to visit Disney or Genesis Extreme to get some ideas."

"Wasn't Dante from Florence?"

"Good one. I once dragged a teenaged Hugh there with me. Maybe I've had my Purgatory already, right?"

"He mentioned the two of you were going back this spring," I said.

"He said that, huh? Who knows? Maybe it'll actually happen. You travel a lot with your kids?"

"Not lately. As I mentioned, they're in Milwaukee."

"With?"

"With their mother. My wife. That's right. I mentioned this to Hugh as well."

"None of our business, of course. And Hugh's one to talk about family life."

"So what now?" I said.

"Well, it's four o'clock and the Sycamores are playing Valpo tonight and I want to vacuum the car before tip-off. Or I can TiVo it and tell you why, I mean really why, I'm doing this. Decision time. What's it going to be, Prin?"

"Show me your Dantes."

iii.

"I went to Vietnam in 1971. My father was at Normandy. My grandfather fought in the Argonne Forest, under Black Jack Pershing himself. You can find Tracker tombstones in Union and Confederate cemeteries. Military service is something we take seriously, and always have. Hugh could have gone to Afghanistan, even Iraq. He gave out sandwiches at the Superdome during Katrina. Which is neither here nor there, I know. Anyway, I'm telling you this so you'll know that when I went to Vietnam I was a different kind of cherry. I was ready to do what was needed, like my father, and his father, and his fathers, but what a mess. By 1971, nobody who wasn't a career officer could say what was needed in Vietnam, except more drugs and don't be the last man to die for no good reason. And the career officers just said shoot more of them. I won't use the term. I always hated it. I didn't like that shoot-first, shoot-always attitude any more than I liked the lack of discipline with the other grunts. So I was kind of in no man's land.

"Two weeks after I arrived—picture a tailgate party in the jungle, but you were always waiting for somebody to shoot you—our firebase was attacked in the middle of the night by fifty little guys in swim shorts and grease. We were supposed to hand over the base to the South Vietnamese at the end of the month, and they already had a small detachment with us. They weren't touched. Zero casualties, and zero shots fired from their position. Eighty of us were killed. Bodies burned all over the place. To this day, Prin, I cannot be anywhere near a pig roast. It was suffering and burning hell and nobody, not even Dante, *not even Dante,* has anything on the real thing. I know they say he saw men being burned alive in Florence, and that he would have been sentenced to the same thing if he ever came home, but in the poem—in your *Purgatorio*—the most he says is that he remembers the sight of it, not the smell. I don't think anyone can say what it smells like. I don't think anyone should. Anyway, while the brass were planning investigations and who to relieve of duty and that kind of thing, the ARVN guys, the South Vietnamese, wanted to prove their innocence. They wanted to prove they were on our side. Remember, the VC didn't go anywhere near their part of the base, and during the attack they didn't defend. They had a big howitzer mounted, and no shots fired.

"A while after the attack, I don't remember how many days anymore, two Arvins came up to me and another cherry, an Italian fellow from Brooklyn. I didn't really know him at the time. I never did, really. Other guys called him Kelly Blue Book because he obviously wasn't Irish and he was always reading this little blue book. The joke was—he was Italian, and probably a greaser, a mechanic, so what else would he be reading? All I knew was that whatever he was always reading wasn't the Kelly Blue Book and it wasn't the Bible. Anyway, the Arvins wanted to show us something in the village down the road, but there was no way we were leaving the base, or what was left of the base. They kept saying we should come with them. We said no. They went hooch to hooch. Nobody budged. You could tell this was driving them a little crazy. They stopped asking for a couple of days but then started all over again, this time just to come to *their* part of our base. The Italian from Brooklyn puts his book in his pocket and says to me, 'Let's go see.' I said we might be killed, captured, or court-martialed. He said we were already sitting ducks for all three options. He said he was going. Don't ask me why—maybe I was feeling bad I didn't do much of anything except save my own life in the attack, maybe I was thinking about what my father and my grandfather would have done—but I was twenty years old and pretty sure I wasn't going to see twenty-one. So I went."

"And?" I said.

We were sitting in leather chairs in Charlie's private library above his four-car garage. The place hummed with a humidity-optimization system meant to preserve the collection, and was lit by warm yellow library lights. The walls were lined in bookcases that shone like dark molasses. It felt like we were sitting in a honeycomb.

The bookcases were filled with editions and commentaries and divided by blown-up photographs of Charlie with Robert Hollander, Roberto Benigni, Tom Hanks. One wall had four clocks, showing the times in Jerusalem, India, Spain, and Indiana. Another wall displayed honorary degrees from Wheaton, Baylor, Grove City, and Dordt, and also elaborate, fat wax

citations from the Dante Society of America and Casa Dante, Firenze. In between the bookcases and the leather chairs were tabletop vitrines. They held large, very old books, their covers red and black and dented along the edges, the titles embossed in flaky gold letters, the inside pages frittered here and there. In two other vitrines, long, yellowy sheets rested on pillowy white fabric: dense writing, in black ink, with tendril- and talon-wrapped giant first letters facing drawings of dark woods, lost faces, roiling and torqued bodies.

"So we go, and there's a bunch of them standing around a hut. Inside, all you can hear is a man, and he's crying. Sobbing. Just heaving and crying. Crying and crying. We figure out that they've taken someone from the village that they say knows who attacked us, where they are now, that kind of thing. They're keeping him in the hut until he tells them, so they can prove it wasn't them. What they did in that hut, they did for us. They did *that,* for us."

His voice broke, and he pulled out a handkerchief and blew his nose. His cheeks, so red at lunch, were bone white.

He looked away, nodded to himself, smiled at me, and took a deep breath.

"You alright? Do you want to take a moment?"

"Thanks. Happens every time I tell this part. What we did to them, during the war, I mean, you've probably seen pictures. It was awful. What they did to us, same. Same. But what they did to each other during the war…the things you heard about. Back then, I thought they were just trying to scare the new grunts with stories of burying people alive and cutting off men's heads in front of wives and children and that kind of thing. Plus half the guys telling the stories were drunk. The other half were drunk and high. So I just thought they were trying to shake us fresh cherries from the tree. That's what I thought. But then there we were, at the Arvin part of the base, and the man in the hut was crying and it was a weird crying, a bad crying. Two of the Arvins yelled into the hut and the man kept crying as if he didn't hear them or didn't care, and they opened the door and yelled again, kind of like for him to come out. He didn't. They told us to come closer. We didn't. Now these Arvins are getting nervous and twitchy and we weren't given sidearms or anything, and I'm thinking maybe we should go back, but then Kelly Blue Book from Brooklyn says to me 'Keep an eye,' and he goes up to the hut and he thinks about it, and then he looks inside. 'Jesus! NO!' he says, and flies out of there and bangs into me and holds me at the shoulders like he's drunk, and he heads back to his hooch. He stopped and threw up. Threw up again. I watched him go. Then I looked back at the hut. The crying hadn't stopped. The Arvins are telling me to look, too. They're calling me to come and see."

"Did you go? Did you look inside?"

"Two boys and a girl. His kids. His children. They put his children in there with him and starved them to death right in front of him so he would tell who did it, where they were, whatever. Little kids. He probably didn't know anything about the attack. Or he knew everything, but the cause mattered that much. Which is bull. Three little kids, right in front of you? Your own little kids? No cause matters that much. He didn't know anything about the attack and those kids didn't know anything, but they wanted us to see, the Arvins, they wanted us to see they didn't know anything about it, either. This was their way of showing us.

"I went back to find the guy from Brooklyn and he was sitting in his hooch with that blue book on his lap. He wasn't reading. He was just looking down at it, kind of catatonic. It was this blue book, right here," said Charlie.

He handed me a clear plastic bag. Inside was a piece of very soft, butter-yellow leather, wrapped around a small royal-blue book. There was maybe a bird embossed on the front cover; it was hard to make out through the fading and mold. The spine was broken and the cover boards were held in place with a rubber band. You could see some of the loose papers between the boards: Italian on one side, English on the other.

"He was reading Dante in Vietnam," I said.

"Not just reading it, Prin. He was seeing it all around him. He saw Dante in there, in that hut," said Charlie.

"Ugolino."

"Ugolino."

"But the village man, he didn't, he didn't—"

"No. He didn't eat his children like Ugolino in the tower. He just watched them starve to death."

"Why do you have his book, Charlie? Is that how you started collecting?"

"Look. I mean, really, look. Over there. In that middle case, I have a 1529 Venetian edition, Prin. Jacopo Da Borgofranco, at the request of the great Lucantonio Giunta. The only other copy in all of America's up the road, at Notre Dame. And a few more editions as good as that. But that little book in your hands, that falling-apart 1958 reprint of the seventeenth edition of J. M. Dent and Sons. Temple Classics. Wheeler translation. Probably sells for pennies over on Amazon. That book matters more to me than anything else in this room."

"Because of who read it before you?"

"Good. You're really listening. The next morning, I woke up and there it was, the book, on the ground beside my cot. He must have left it there before he, well, all we know is that he walked off the base in the middle of the night and even with all the extra watches and the new tripwires after the attack, nobody noticed. I like to think he's still alive out there, somewhere. Maybe I'll run into him at a car show some summer. I mean, if he knew Ugolino's story, he knew the rest of *Inferno* well enough to know what happens to suicides in the next world."

Neither of us spoke for a while.

Money for the house. The pool. Bring them home.

But what was he asking for?

"Still with me, friend?"

"Yes. Yes, I am."

"I thought so. That look."

"What look?"

"The look a man gets when there's more to something than he thought. Am I right?"

"Go on, Charlie."

"Yes. I thought so. I did, Prin. Now, if this works out, about this thing between us: Whatever Hugh says about it, whatever goes on outside this room, it needs to be about more than just you getting the job. None of the other professors I've interviewed have gotten this far. Have made me want to get this far. Go this far. Sure, I've built this room and still read a canto a day every day and I've visited Florence and taken the tours and all. But for me, I started reading Dante in country, and I didn't understand a damned thing except that a man could live or die from reading it, which I'd thought was only true of the Bible. But I wanted to read it, to live. So forget the PhD. Have you ever felt like that, Prin, just from reading a book?"

"Yes."

"From Dante? The Bible?"

"No. It was from *A Christmas Carol*, a couple of weeks ago."

"Come again?"

"My kids were in a pageant. I hadn't seen them in a while."

"I see."

I put aside his blue book and rubbed the scars on my forehead. Knuckled my eyes. A pulling had started.

"What do you want to say, Prin? I mean, what do you really want to say?"

"When do I start? I want to start."

"Is that all, Prin? Really? Or is it that you can't because you had to sign something?"

"No. It's not that, Charlie."

"What is it, then, Prin?"

"Something else."

"Someone else?"

"Yes. More than one. I want this job so I can bring them home. So I can go home."

"Good. You've already started. See you next week."

RANDY BOYAGODA *is a professor of English at the University of Toronto. His new novel,* Dante's Indiana, *from which this excerpt has been adapted, will be published in September.*

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Baseball, Journalism, and the Big New York City Novel

An interview with Christopher Beha

Christopher Beha's 2020 novel, The Index of Self-Destructive Acts *(newly released in paperback), follows Sam Waxworth, an ambitious young Midwesterner who comes to New York to write a data-driven blog,* Quantified World, *for a magazine called the* Interviewer. *The story takes place over eight months in 2009, in the aftermath of the financial meltdown, and is built around Waxworth's interactions with Frank Doyle, a seventy-year-old baseball-writer-cum-political-columnist for a* New York Times*–like paper. When Waxworth undertakes a magazine profile of Doyle, he ends up getting involved in unexpected ways with the Doyle family: Frank's investment-banker wife, Kit; their daughter, Margo, a grad student and would-be poet; their son, Eddie, a disaffected veteran of the Iraq War; and their close family friend, Justin, a Black hedge-fund manager. The* Financial Times *praised* The Index *as "a big, sympathetic book about the follies and failings of elite New Yorkers," while* Buzzfeed *lauded its "masterful interplay of big, fraught themes of privilege, race, wealth and ethics."*

Beha is the editor of Harper's Magazine *and the author of two previous novels,* What Happened to Sophie Wilder *(which critic D. G. Myers lauded for "perhaps the best conversion scene in an English-language novel since* The End of the Affair*") and* Arts & Entertainments *(a media satire featuring a thirtyish former actor who teaches at a tony Catholic prep school). A lifelong New Yorker, Beha lives with his wife and two young children in Brooklyn. He was interviewed by* Commonweal *contributing editor Rand Richards Cooper as part of an online literary series sponsored by the Mark Twain House in Hartford, Connecticut. Their conversation has been edited for length and clarity.*

RAND RICHARDS COOPER: *The Index of Self-Destructive Acts* is a novel about ambition, marriage, money, New York City, baseball, and, I guess, the poetry of life versus the math of life. One of the things I love about the book is that it commands a range of tones, from the mirthful and satirical to the sympathetic and elegiac. But first I want to ask you about writing short versus writing long. Your novel is not only massively enjoyable, it's also massive. Why did you write such a long novel? Did you supersize *The Index* from the start, or did it just happen?

CHRISTOPHER BEHA: I love really long books. Many of my favorite novels are ones that create worlds that you spend a lot of time in. I love *The Recognitions* by William Gaddis—a 900-page book and a great New York novel. I love Proust. I love the long Thomas Mann books, *Buddenbrooks* and *Magic Mountain* and *Doctor Faustus*. This morning I finished reading the galleys of Jonathan Franzen's new novel, which is called *Crossroads* and is 580 pages. Every single Franzen novel is 580 pages. Not 579, not 581. He spends five or six years or more on a book, and when they come out, they're all 580-page, multi-character novels, and they're all very good. But he always works long.

I'm not that kind of writer. My first novel [*What Happened to Sophie Wilder*] was the kind of idea that made sense as a

Opposite page:
Christopher Beha

ALEXANDRA BEHA

250-page book. I didn't try to turn it into a 400-page book. The same held for my second. But it had been an ambition of mine, at some point, to write a big book. I wanted to see if I could do it. I also wanted to write a book that provided the kinds of satisfactions that big books provide. I wanted to paint a big-canvas portrait of this moment in time within this particular world, the world of New York media and finance. What I didn't want to write is a book that had a lot of needless stuffing in it, that felt like it was trying to be long for its own sake. One of the things about this book, which is unusual for a novel of its length, is that almost every scene moves the plot forward in some way. If I'd handled it in a loose way, it would have been a baggy 800-page book. Instead, it's a tight 500 pages. Bagginess can be a very appealing feature in a novel, and I actually wish mine had more of it. But what I wrote is a 500-page novel in which exactly 500 pages worth of stuff happens.

RRC: In a *New York Times* review, Benjamin Markovits commented that yours is "the kind of long novel that begins to occupy its own time zone in your life." To me, that's the characteristic pleasure of reading long novels. But I'm also interested in short, tightly focused novels. I think about *Desperate Characters* by Paula Fox, the hyper-minimalism of early Nicholson Baker novels, or William Maxwell's *So Long, See You Tomorrow*. It seems like a categorically different kind of reading experience from a big novel.

CB: Well, if my book is a 500-page book with 500 pages' worth of stuff in it, Nicholson Baker—who I love—writes 150-page books with *five* pages' worth of stuff! *The Mezzanine* is a novel about a guy taking his lunch break and moving from the escalator to the mezzanine in the office park where he works to go to the food court. There is an old line about Henry James—that he chews more than he bites off. That is something Baker is quite conscious of doing, I think. By the time you finish one of his novels, you feel like you've been in the character's head for a long time, even though it's a short book, because you are so deeply in his thoughts for that period. He's great, but we're obviously doing very different things.

RRC: Reading your book, I thought of George Packer's early novel *Central Square*. I also thought, funnily enough, of Jane Austen—those scenes in your novel where Margo and Sam are jousting about ideas, and it's both argumentative and flirtatious. But most of all I thought about Tom Wolfe. Thirty years ago, in your magazine, Wolfe wrote an essay, "Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast," an 8,000-word literary manifesto that served as an advance apologia for his big New York City novel, *Bonfire of the Vanities*. Wolfe complained that young writers with literary ambitions were no longer interested in what he called "big rich slices of contemporary life." He viewed modernism as having taken a wrong turn into interiority and psychological states, and he looked back to late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century realists—to Sinclair Lewis, and further back to Balzac and Zola—for a picture of individuals in society. Wolfe wanted writers to go out and do reporting, then write realist novels based on their reporting. Can you talk about Tom Wolfe vis-a-vis your own big New York City novel, and also other writers who have influenced you?

CB: To be honest, Wolfe has not influenced me at all, though I know that essay well, and we like some of the same people. I love Balzac. I like Zola a lot less. Wolfe preferred Zola to Balzac. Zola knew everything about the worlds he was writing about; he's really rich in detail. If you read *The Rougon-Macquart* books, you feel like you know Second Empire France. He gives you such a full picture! But Balzac does something far greater, I think. His achievement in creating characters is enormous. He's really one of the towering figures of the novel. Zola, who modeled himself on Balzac, is very much a reporter. Do you just want to know historically what late nineteenth- or early-twentieth century Paris was like—what it was like to work on the railroads or in the meat market, or how class functioned? You get that from Zola, because he really was self-consciously a reporter. He would go out in the way that Wolfe went out, report on some area, and bring it back to you. But he doesn't write great stories with great characters in them.

RRC: Let's discuss *your* two main characters, Waxworth and Doyle. Sam Waxworth started out with a baseball forecasting algorithm, then succeeded in picking every state in the 2008 election correctly. I think of him as a combination of Gradgrind, the pedantic schoolmaster from Dickens's *Hard Times* who loves facts, and Nate Silver of the *New York Times*. Then there's Frank Doyle. His politics have drifted rightward over the years, and his career is in shambles after he made a maladroit and arguably racist joke about President Obama while drunk in a broadcast booth at a Mets game. With Frank I thought a little bit about George Will. Also Christopher Hitchens, with his outsized personality. And maybe a shot of Mike Barnicle?

CB: Frank is a largely invented character. Personally he's nothing like George Will, who is bowtied and tweedy, but like Will he's a political columnist who has this sideline as a baseball writer and manages to find in baseball validation for a lot of his political views. Frank's downfall is something we're familiar with now under the rubric of "cancel culture," but stories like that have played out on the public stage for a long time. The inspiration was actually Don Imus, who made some really nasty comments about the Rutgers women's basketball players and lost his radio show. Imus had all these Washington connections, and he thought his powerful friends insulated him, but as soon as he crossed a line, everyone cut bait. I wanted to have some sense of that. As for Hitchens, yes, in going neocon on the Iraq War, obviously. And also that *bon vivant* quality, of basically being a high-functioning alcoholic.

RRC: Both Waxworth and Doyle are baseball fans, and you delve extensively into their disagreement about how to understand baseball. Waxworth is an avatar of the algorithm, with a bloodless decision-making apparatus that he applies methodically to everything, whether searching for an apartment or deciding on marriage. Your novel begins with a comical correction to this approach. Before moving from the Midwest, Sam thinks he has found the best-value apartment anywhere in New York. It turns out to be so cheap because it's next to a poultry processing plant, and so it stinks. His algorithmic approach to living his life is upended by chickenshit! Frank Doyle, on the other hand, is the avatar of analog. And analog in the novel means, what, poetry? Can you talk about these two characters and what you were after in posing them as both dramatic and philosophical antagonists?

CB: I don't mean simply to take these two worldviews and put them in competition with each other to see which one wins. One of the preoccupations of the novel, I'd say, is the extent to which we can even live according to a worldview in the first place. Sam has this idea that you can manage the risk of life by using cost-benefit analyses and game theory to work out all life's choices. Part of the point of the novel is that you can't actually outsource living your life to some algorithm. The biggest mistakes Sam makes are, in fact, not mistakes like the one about moving in above the chicken plant—you know, where he inserted some bad data into his algorithm, and the result is what programmers call garbage in, garbage out. The bigger mistakes are the times where he acts impulsively, or his body won't do what his mind thinks it should do. Or where he believes he knows what the rational thing to do is, but for some reason that he himself doesn't understand, he's incapable of acting in that way.

So it's not simply that he's got the wrong worldview. It's more that you cannot develop a worldview that will answer all life's questions for you. There's a long tradition of these kinds of characters. A lot of the comedy of Saul Bellow's novels, for example, involves highly intellectual characters who do a lot of really stupid things—characters who can tell you all about what Hegel says about ethics, but can't keep their marriage straight. I wouldn't strictly describe my novel as a comic novel. But there is comedy in it. And to me, one of the great drivers of comedy is the gap between a character's expectations for the world, or a character's sense of how the world is, and reality. And it's not just Sam. There is a wide gap between Frank's view and reality too. There's a wide gap between the Doyle kids' views and reality. But it seems particularly acute in Sam's case because he really feels that as an empiricist he has mastered that problem, or ought to have.

RRC: That gap in Sam's view of the world leads him into different kinds of problems than the gap in Frank's view, doesn't it? You say you weren't after a win-lose confrontation. But I think about the power of the closing pages of the novel, with their Proustian evocation of memory and time through Frank's point of view. The deep intuitions of meaning that are at the core of Frank—however badly they fail him—have a power that almost nothing in Sam has. When something like that *does* exist in Sam, he either doesn't understand it or he actively tries to extinguish it—like when you have him go back to an early memory of his mother, and of loving baseball as a child, a memory he's trying to flee. On the other hand, there's the beautiful passage, which will appeal to the neo-Luddites among us, when Frank recalls the sound of tickets at the baseball game being torn, and thinks how disappointing it is that it's been replaced by a digital beep. Sam constantly tries to break experience down into the quantifiable, while denying that there's anything more than that. I felt at the end, Frank's view—the view of poetry, tragedy, and memory—does win. But maybe that's just me wanting it to.

CB: I'm probably more sympathetic to that view than Sam's, ultimately. It's important you mention memory. One of the huge differences between the two is the use to which they put the past. Sam has a very instrumentalist idea about the past. The past is where you gather the data that will tell you about the future. And you test the truth of your beliefs by making predictions and seeing whether they come true, so in that sense, meaning is embedded in the future. For Frank, meaning is embedded in the past. He's nostalgic. He's constantly referring to the past—not for any particular lessons, but as the place where real life was, the real thing, the thing we've lost now. The root of things.

Neither of these views, taken to its extreme, is a proper view of the world. There's another view that would say that meaning is in the present—that it's what we're going through in any given moment. In the end, there's probably some way of balancing all of those. You know, so that you don't become completely amnesiac about the past or use it merely as raw material for getting you to the future. But you also don't become so stuck in the past that you can't live the life that you're in now.

RRC: You're the editor of *Harper's*, but the picture of journalism in what your novel calls our "digital churn" isn't exactly pretty. There's a great passage where Waxworth's editor cautions him against trying to be a writer. He says, "Three-quarters of our readers can't tell the difference between good writing and bad writing, and the rest actively prefer bad prose." What are you saying about the state of journalism? Is this the best of times for journalism, or the worst of times?

CB: There are various things in the book that have real-world analogs. The *Interviewer*, the magazine where Sam works, is a longstanding legacy publication that has been bought by a social-media billionaire, and that has a lot of similarity to Chris Hughes buying the *New Republic*. Of course, that eventually blew up in his face, and he sold it. None of the novel is based on *Harper's* at all. People who know the magazine will know it is the opposite of being in the daily digital churn. We put out a monthly magazine, and that's pretty much all we

do. Nobody is doing verticals of any kind with *Harper's*, and no one is putting out two posts a day and all that.

When I started out in literary journalism, the people I came up with weren't doing a lot of hard reporting. The ambition was not to be Bob Woodward, but Joan Didion. They wanted to write beautiful stuff that would last, and they wanted to speak big, important truths about the way we live. They weren't about getting a scoop or uncovering something. That work of hard journalism, reportorial work, is extremely important, and I think we remain in a good place as far as it's concerned. A lot of that still happens and a lot of it happens online. So in that sense, I don't know if it's the best of times, but we're in a pretty good place.

But the people who went into the field with ambitions to create lasting, meaningful works that happened to be built out of reported facts—people who wanted to write great New Journalism–type literature—a lot of those people wound up writing for various online-only publications in a way that, I think, was really pretty destructive, both socially and personally. It warped people. So there's that element too, in my novel and in real life. I wouldn't say that I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by Gawker. But I saw a lot of people who were really talented and ambitious—ambitious in the right way, in terms of caring about quality—who wound up using all their chops and their intelligence and their passion on writing snarky commentary about news stories that would be forgotten in two days. At a certain point, you lose sight of what made you want to do this thing in the first place.

RRC: Your book is haunted by the prospect of writing unfulfillment. Margo wants to be a poet, but she's not doing it. Frank has this "big book" he keeps not writing. Sam should be writing, but he's actually just plagiarizing from his own earlier work in order to meet deadlines. Your novel suggests that the ranks of young people who go to New York and try to find their destiny includes a lot of casualties.

CB: Read Balzac—you'll see that in *Lost Illusions*. That's part of why I call the first section of the novel "The Young Man From the Provinces," in a knowing way. We tend to have a kind of presentism, a sense of exceptionalism about our own moment—the feeling that there's all these unprecedented things happening. But even the stuff I just talked about, the stuff I'm saying that the internet did to a lot of my peers, that has always happened to smart, ambitious young people. This is why it's good to be a little more like Frank, to study history and read literature that's more than six weeks old.

RRC: Baseball plays an important role in your novel, as part of that philosophical tug of war between Frank and Sam, and there's a lot of wonky analytics stuff at the core of your story. But there's also this sense of baseball as the game of life. What fascinates you about baseball?

CB: There's obviously something about baseball that is ripe for the kind of mythologizing that Frank does. It has gotten more of that than any other sport. One huge thing is the role luck plays. You can hit the ball square on, as hard as you can, and happen to hit it right at someone—or you can have a broken-bat blooper that barely clears the infield but wins the game. There are 162 games over a season—ten times as many as football—and over that long season, the Sam Waxworths of the world say, all that luck will average out, and you'll have an enormous amount of data at the end that allows you to judge the underlying quality of players in some objective way that isn't context specific. That's why it's so good for the analytics crowd. At the same time, on the individual level, for a single at-bat in a single game, the role of luck is enormous. That tension is really interesting to me.

RRC: I think about how almost all of baseball, in terms of batting anyway, exists in that little gap between not getting a hit eight times out of ten, which makes you a poor hitter, and not getting a hit seven times out of ten—which makes you a *great* hitter! Baseball is this mythic American game, and yet the amount of failure that you are required to embrace as a player is a great antidote to the American ideology of success. I think your novel addresses this paradox brilliantly.

CB: William Gaddis—I keep coming back to him—wrote an essay, "The Rush for Second Place," which incidentally also appeared in *Harper's*. Dale Carnegie shows up in a lot of Gaddis's novels, and this American obsession with success was very, very interesting to him. Gaddis himself spent the first chunk of his writing life on *The Recognitions*; it was his first novel, and he was already about thirty-five when it came out. The book sank without a trace, and Gaddis basically understood himself as a failure for the rest of his life. His next book, *JR*—which took him twenty years to write, because he had to spend that time making a living—is a wonderful study of the theme of failure in a culture like America's that's so obsessed with success.

RRC: Last question. As a baseball fan, are you a stat head or a poet?

CB: I'm kind of both. Growing up, my twin brother and I—the book is dedicated to him—were obsessed with the Yankees teams from the 1950s. That was because we grew up in the late '80s and early '90s, when the Yankees had one of their few periods of truly sustained mediocrity. They were really bad teams. But they had so much history. So, we loved the history of the game in a way that is very much in that Frank mode. We romanticized it—it was this lost thing, that we had not seen Mickey and Yogi and Whitey. But at the same time, we were really interested in the stats side. And our favorite book was the *Baseball Encyclopedia*, which is pure statistics. We would look players up and learn important things, like how many doubles Ducky Medwick hit in 1934. Or whatever.

RAND RICHARDS COOPER *is a contributing editor to* Commonweal.

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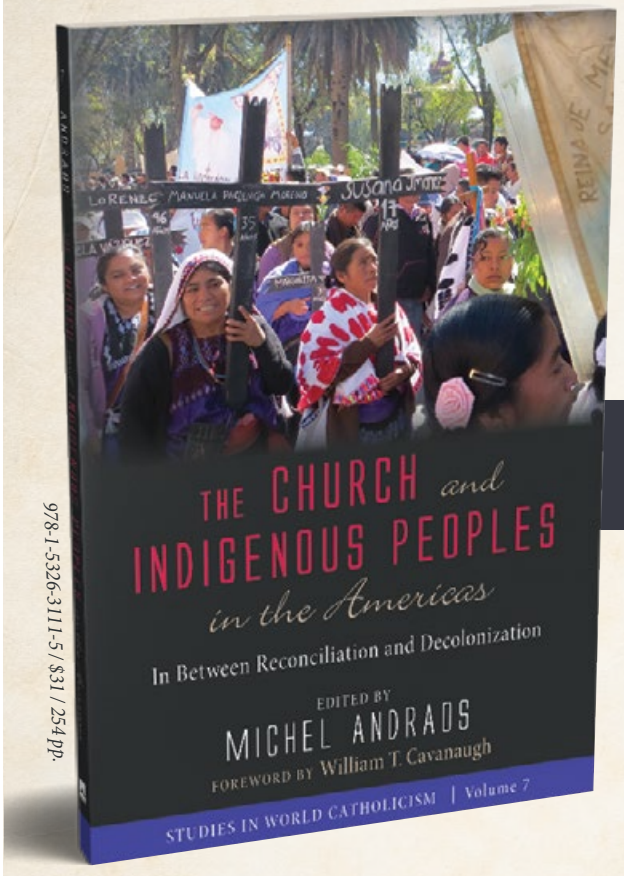

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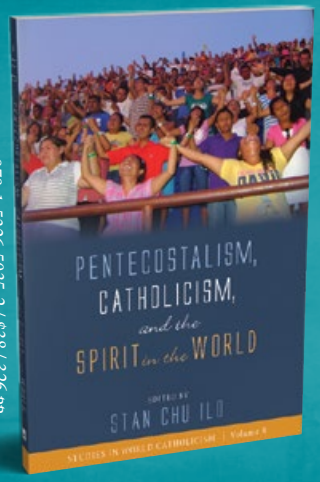

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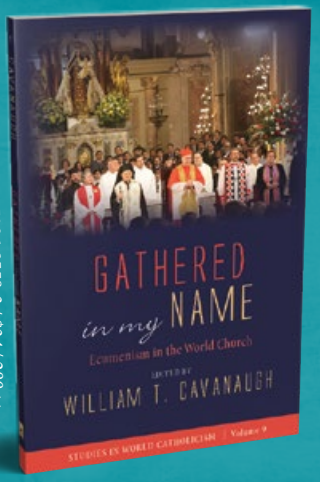

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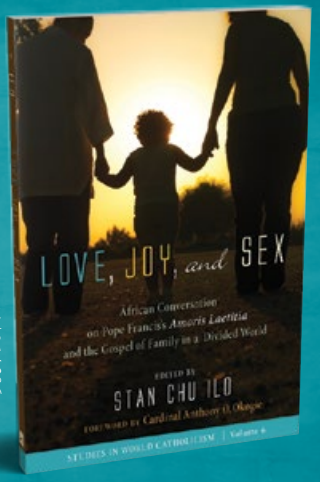

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Unlocked Affinities

'Soutine/de Kooning: Conversations in Paint'

In 1952, the Dutch-American artist Willem de Kooning found himself in the Philadelphia suburb of Merion, Pennsylvania. Taking a break from his studio in New York, where he was at work on his experimental *Woman* series, the abstract expressionist had come to see the famed collection of chemist-turned-connoisseur Albert C. Barnes. Among the many meticulously arranged works by masters like El Greco, Renoir, Matisse, Cézanne, and Picasso, one artist's quietly kinetic paintings—portraits, landscapes, and still lives—seemed to "glow from within," striking de Kooning with "a special kind of light."

The works, de Kooning learned, had been painted by another expatriate. His name was Chaïm Soutine, a Russian Jew who left a shtetl near Minsk and emigrated to Paris in the 1910s, where he lived until his early death in 1943. Likening him to a "juicier," more electric Van Gogh, Barnes was convinced that Soutine's art was revolutionary; he bought scores of his paintings in the 1920s, helping launch the artist's career in the United States. De Kooning evidently agreed with Barnes's assessment: speaking during a 1977 interview in terms at once erotic and religious, de Kooning cited Soutine as one of his chief influences, praising the painter's "fleshiness" and suggesting that his works were capable of enacting "a kind of transfiguration."

Now the Barnes Foundation in Philadelphia has brought the two artists—whose lives and careers partially overlapped, but who never actually met—together for a set of "conversations in paint." The show is small, featuring just forty-two paintings and spread over five galleries. (Co-organized with the Musée de l'Orsay and the Musée de l'Orangerie, it will travel to Paris in August.) But it also feels like the perfect size for a post-pandemic exhibit. Arranged with a light yet incisive curatorial hand by Simonetta Fraquelli and Claire Bernardi, *Soutine/de Kooning* largely dispenses with wall labels and critical analysis, and instead rewards close examination of the paintings themselves. What emerges, more than theory about the tensions between figuration and abstraction, or the vicissitudes of art history, are the tactile, visceral quality of Soutine's and de Kooning's canvases, where the former's dabs and globs complement the latter's smears and scrapes. Staring at them side-by-side—the show opens subtly, with just a single pair of paintings—unlocks a seemingly infinite set of affinities, divergences, and connections.

It's not hard to see what first drew Barnes and de Kooning to Soutine. His arresting portraits from the 1910s and '20s, the first works on view, reveal both a wry distrust of himself and a sure confidence in his capacity to observe and render the inner lives of other people. In his laconic 1918 *Self-Portrait*, he's clothed in a rumpled blue smock and stares straight ahead at the viewer; another portrait (evidently by Soutine) covers his right shoulder and fills the left side of the frame. Soutine is clearly channeling similar works by artists like Velázquez and Rembrandt, which he regularly studied in his frequent trips to the Louvre. Yet his own *Self-Portrait*, geometrically and chromatically centered on his puffy, blood-red lips, also evokes the grotesque—so called because it traditionally portrayed subjects best kept out of sight. After Barnes helped make him famous, Soutine began to appear at Parisian salons in elegant clothes (indeed, Polish writer and painter Józef Czapski calls attention to his "expensive felt hats and gleaming leather boots"), yet he remained something of an outsider.

How different his portraits of other people are. Soutine playfully accords his subjects—ranging widely in age, sex, and occupation—palpable dignity and respect. Not that they were always pleased with the results: Soutine's *Portrait of Madeleine Castaing* (1929), his wealthy patroness, shows a fidgety, nervous woman whose thick fur coat seems to swallow her whole. (She promptly sold it.) Other portraits, though, like *The Little Pastry Cook* (1922–1923), were better received. It shows its exhausted, uniformed subject slouched against the back of his wooden rocking chair. Underneath his drooping baker's hat (which could also be mistaken for a jester's cap), the

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boy's weary eyes gaze down at his hands, which are gripping a red napkin. Soutine's curvy, elongated brush strokes mimic the motion of sagging dough and help infuse the painting with subtle poignancy: the young baker's broad shoulders and thick chest are out of proportion with his tiny head and slender waist, suggesting a moment of tension and transition in which he aspires to, but cannot yet achieve, independence and adulthood.

For all his skill in portraiture, Soutine was best known for his pioneering landscapes, which used a mix of frenzied brushwork, lavish color, and distorted perspective to produce a double effect of familiarity and estrangement. His views of the small Catalan village of Céret and its countryside (in the foothills of the Pyrenees) are alternately enticing and unsettling; in *Landscape* (1922–1924), bright blue skies and windswept green trees fuse with maroon roof tiles and beige stucco walls to suggest a healthy symbiosis between nature and civilization. *Hill at Céret* (1920–1921), though, conveys just the opposite: a towering peak, as if sculpted with smudges of washed-out greens, browns, and yellows, seems to want to rid itself of the single, barely discernible house poised precariously atop its summit.

Chaïm Soutine, *The Little Pastry Cook*, 1922–1923

It's here that the show begins to shift to the equally agitated works of de Kooning, who liberally borrowed Soutine's brush movements, color schemes, and subject matter as he blended portraiture, landscape, and abstraction into a single genre. One gallery features a few of de Kooning's famous *Woman* series, including *Woman II* (1952), *Marilyn Monroe* (1954), and *Woman as Landscape* (1954–55). Their jarring, collage-like features, which seem to dance about the canvas, would be equally at home on a spray-painted mural or a graffiti-covered subway car. The technique is Soutine's, but the preoccupations—desire, dissatisfaction, the emptiness of pop culture—are de Kooning's.

A subsequent gallery features a series of bright, pastel-colored paintings, some made directly on driftwood and the backs of old doors. They were composed by de Kooning after his move (in the 1960s) to East Hampton, Long Island, whose low-lying, watery landscape reminded him of his native Holland. Here de Kooning's swirling drips of pink, orange, and yellow, which capture women in various states of aquatic distortion, manage to convey a greater sense of serenity and ease than did the *Woman* series, even as they take up the same themes of eroticism and evanescence. (De Kooning claimed, according to the catalog, to have been equally inspired by female clam diggers in the Hamptons and the rice-picking *mondine* of Italian director Giuseppe De Santis's *Bitter Rice*, starring the heartthrob Silvana Mangano.)

At this point, it's worth asking whether de Kooning's interest in Soutine ever extended beyond the former's admiration for (and adaptation of) the latter's formal technique. Is the conversation envisioned by the show's curators really so one-sided, and is it strictly limited to "paint" alone? *Soutine/de Kooning*'s final gallery attempts a provisional answer.

The room begins with four of the "fleshiest" of Soutine's still lives: hanging carcasses of beef and poultry that the artist painted from life in the late 1920s. (Legend has it that Soutine would douse the motifs in his studio with fresh

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Willem de Kooning, *...Whose Name Was Writ in Water*, 1975

© 2021 THE WILLEM DE KOONING FOUNDATION/ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK

blood from the butcher shop each day.) Despite their foregrounding of death, these images are so visually lively—glowing, de Kooning might say. Signs of violence, like chains and hooks, are tangentially present, but here Soutine deliberately darkens and blurs the backgrounds and edges so that the carcasses radiate an aura of stillness and peace. It's as if by insisting so forcefully on the raw material Soutine wants viewers to ponder the spiritual: not the prior death that now lies before their eyes, but the as-yet-unseen future life that such sacrifice nourishes and makes possible.

Time and death, too, are at the heart of de Kooning's monumental ... *Whose Name Was Writ in Water* (1975), titled after the epitaph engraved on poet John Keats's gravestone in Rome. Like water, the imagery is both figural and symbolic: dark green, blue, and violet streaks ripple gracefully across a multihued field of light yellow and rose. The longer you stand in front of it, the more you feel absorbed and immersed—even baptized—in the medium of paint itself. Of course, nothing is permanent, especially not paint. Still, what de Kooning and Soutine manage to do with it is to suggest, gesture at, perhaps even provide a foretaste of what lies beyond death, and outside of time.

GRIFFIN OLEYNICK *is an assistant editor at* Commonweal.

The longer you stand in front of it, the more you feel absorbed and immersed—even baptized—in the medium of paint itself.

Two Poems by Michael Miller

THE COUNTING OF STEPS

She borrowed her dreams
From yesterday,
Never forgetting the woman
Who danced without a partner
To the music within,
The melody only she could hear.
Now the decades have led her
To the tap-tapping
Of her cane on the sidewalk,
The counting of steps
When she crosses the street,
Her blindness guiding
Her day, leading her to
The dreamworld of sight.

VISITORS

It was decades ago
When the red fox wove
Between the gravestones
In Wildwood Cemetery
As we stood in the silence
Of sunlight before your
Mother's name cut into stone.
The fox paused, lifted its
Left foreleg and stared—
You said it was a sign.

Far from that cemetery,
In a town beyond
The mountains, we live
In the ripeness of old age
As death breathes
Inside us, around us.
We visit our garden each day,
Touch the strong petals
Of a crimson lily,
Never wanting to let go.

MICHAEL MILLER'*s poems have appeared in the* Sewanee Review, *the* Yale Review, *and* Raritan.

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COMING UP:

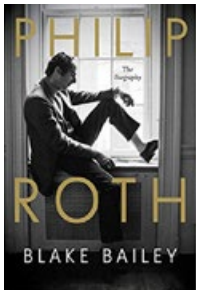
The 2021-2022 CSS is in development! Just in time for fall, the new CSS will be available for purchase on August 16, 2021. Learn more and download the CSS at **www.cwlmag.org/css**

Bio Hazards

DOMINIC PREZIOSI

Near the beginning of Philip Roth's 2000 novel *The Human Stain*, narrator Nathan Zuckerman contemplates the unlikely tattoo worn by classics professor Coleman Silk, forced out of his job on false charges of racism. The words "U.S. Navy" are "inscribed between the hooklike arms of a shadowy little anchor.... A tiny symbol, if one were needed, of all the million circumstances of the other fellow's life, of that blizzard of details that constitute the confusion of human biography—a tiny symbol to remind me of why our understanding of people must always be at best slightly wrong." It's a basic reminder about human complexity but also a poke at readers and critics holding the view that Roth's fictional narrators—from Zuckerman to Portnoy to Kepish to a meta-"Philip Roth" in 1990's *Deception*—are stand-ins for the author himself, and that the public image of Roth from interviews and gossip sheets conveys his entire measure. But was anyone ever going to get Philip Roth completely right? Many thought that if someone could, it would be the esteemed literary biographer Blake Bailey, especially with the extensive and intimate access Roth granted him in the years before his death. Yet with both the highly anticipated arrival of Bailey's *Philip Roth: The Biography* and what's transpired since, it's actually harder to know what to think—about either's life.

By way of recap: after much advance publicity, W. W. Norton released Bailey's Roth biography in April to great fanfare. It was the culmination of a project that began years ago, when Roth retired from writing and, after dismissing several hopefuls, anointed Bailey—the self-described "gentile from Oklahoma"—as his official biographer. The expectations, critical and commercial, were high. Bailey had already authored well-received biographies on Richard Yates and John Cheever, and now here he was with a book—*the* book—on Roth, one of the most towering figures in American literature after World War II. The early reviews were mostly glowing, the author interviews mostly fawning, the book itself immediately best-selling. Yes, there were some murmurs of dissent: Bailey seemed more interested in Roth's already well-chronicled personal dramas than in his work. He seemed to be taking sides with his subject on various disputed matters and settling scores on Roth's behalf. He seemed, even, to be in posthumous, casually misogynistic cahoots with Roth, biographer and subject figuratively yukking it up over female anatomy and tales of sexual conquest. But these were largely swept aside by the tidal wave of praise, which reached its height with Cynthia Ozick's paean on the front page of the *New York Times Book Review*.



PHILIP ROTH
The Biography

BLAKE BAILEY

W. W. Norton & Company
$40 | 912 pp.

Then it all came crashing down. Bailey was accused by multiple women of grooming them when they were adolescent students of his, one also charging that years later he sexually assaulted her. Next came a rape allegation from a woman who said that Bailey attacked her at the home of a mutual acquaintance in 2015. The scandal was sudden and spiraling, and three weeks after *Philip Roth: The Biography* was released, Norton announced it would discontinue its printing (though the book has remained available for purchase at Amazon and elsewhere) and donate proceeds to organizations fighting sexual abuse. In May, Skyhorse Press—which has made a name for itself by taking on "canceled" books like Woody Allen's 2020 autobiography, *Apropos of Nothing*—picked up the title, ensuring that it will have a paperback run. Whether people will read it is another question. Bailey is now considered toxic; the biography and Roth have suffered by association. But at least people will still have the chance to read the book if they want, and so decide for themselves what to make of things.

For many, that may depend on how kindly disposed (or not) they already are to Roth, and how much more they want to know about him. Because Bailey delivers quite a lot. He gathers and processes vast amounts of information, then assembles and arranges it for maximum narrative effect. The result is a work of scope and significance, one that

Philip Roth

REUTERS/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

happens to be highly readable over the course of its nine hundred pages—even if it now must trundle along with the freight of what its author has been accused of, and renewed attention to what its subject regularly got away with.

Bailey begins before the beginning, laying the groundwork for his examination of the writer's life to come. A genealogy introduces us to Roth's paternal grandparents, Galician Jews who arrived in America in the late 1800s, and his maternal grandmother, who fled the pogroms of Kiev, along with assorted other ancestors and relatives. He segues into snapshots of Roth's 1930s and '40s upbringing amid extended family in the Jewish ward of Newark, New Jersey—kindly neighbors, kosher meals, doting parents. His method is straightforward, his tone unsentimental. "That Roth was cherished even by the standards of Jewish boyhood is beyond doubt," he says. "The degree to which this was a good thing is another matter." He writes that Roth, as a teacher of literature years later, would often discuss Kafka's *Letters to His Father*, about which "he once made the following note: 'Family as the maker of character. Family as the primary shaping influence. Unending relevance as childhood.'" From 1959's *Goodbye, Columbus*, and 1969's *Portnoy's Complaint*, to the work that defined his later career, that influence reveals itself with vivid insistence—even if in the psychologizing opinion of some, it might also have played a part in the real Roth's notorious womanizing. (In time, Roth would come to describe his personal religion as "polyamorous humorist.")

Through meticulous layering of commentary, interview, and reportage, Bailey keeps the unfolding past in constant conversation with what lies ahead, echoes sounding in all directions. The familiar stories get their biographically necessary due. Family health histories serve to foreshadow Roth's own debilitating and sometimes nearly fatal maladies (bad back, appendicitis, heart-bypass surgery, allergic reactions to medication) later on. Formative experiences in engaging with literature at Bucknell and the University of Chicago help illustrate blooming and long-lasting intellectual relationships—friendly, fierce, and

contentious—with Alfred Kazin, Bernard Malamud, Saul Bellow, Irving Howe, John Updike, and many others. American anti-Semitism announces itself to Roth via the broadcasts of Fr. Charles Coughlin ("Filthy bastard!" Philip's father shouts at the radio one night), but for a long and painful part of his career Roth is criticized by prominent Jewish religious figures and intellectuals—"What to do with a Jew like this?" they ask, scandalized by what they discover in *Goodbye, Columbus*, "Defender of the Faith," and *Portnoy*—while ordinary readers, including members of his family, wonder why he can't be more like Leon Uris. Bailey is good on Roth's small, personal kindnesses and financial generosity toward friends and on his long campaign to bring the work of dissident Eastern European authors like Milan Kundera to readers in the United States—and sometimes to bring the authors themselves. Bailey provides smaller, less familiar details, too. Four years before *Nostra aetate*, for instance, Roth and Kazin were featured in a symposium at Loyola University (Chicago) on the state of Jewish-Catholic relations. And long before writing *God: A Biography*, a former Jesuit named Jack Miles sublet Roth's Manhattan apartment, leading to a long friendship. Miles helped Roth craft the Anne Frank sections of *The Ghost Writer*.

Given the volume of Roth's output—thirty-one books of fiction—complaints about Bailey's scanting of the work seem overblown. Might more have been better? Perhaps. But what's here also seems like enough, and Bailey's reading of the fiction is generally sound. (A minor but annoying exception: in summarizing the early story "The Conversion of the Jews," which begins with two boys arguing about the virginity of Mary—"To have a baby you gotta get laid…Mary hadda get laid"—Bailey describes the exchange as a debate about the Immaculate Conception.) Throughout his career, Roth was never less than blunt about his "determination to 'let the repellant in,'" a phrase, Bailey writes, "that would assume the force of manifesto." You needn't read more than a handful of Roth's books to realize the extent of that determination. But it wasn't gratuitous; it came tightly coupled with what James Wolcott recently called the "ruthless audit of the way Roth Man managed to intricate himself between the interlocking teeth of social-historical-psychological-sexual forces." This is something that set him apart—significantly so—from such contemporaries as Updike.

What there *is* a lot of in Bailey's book is detailed attention to Roth's romantic and sexual relationships, beginning with his early youthful liaisons and tracking everything from the bad marriages and multiple affairs to his aggressive pursuit of much younger women late in his life. And it's not entirely clear where Bailey stands on some of this behavior. In a podcast that aired when the biography came out, he recalled interviewing Roth: "Sometimes I'd be sitting there and he would be telling me a story and I would be thinking, 'I can't believe he's telling me this.' Because it was tasteless and unflattering to him." In the book itself he occasionally acknowledges the problematic aspects of what he describes. But elsewhere….

I had mostly finished reading the biography before the accusations against Bailey emerged, and later, in returning to my notes, was struck by the number of passages I marked as "odd," "creepy," and, indeed, "tasteless." One describes how a friend of Roth's "played the crucial role" of helping select attractive women to enroll in Roth's classes, performing the part of, "'pardon the expression, pimp'" (in the friend's words). Well, Bailey breezily declares, "it was a different time to be sure." Some passages feel like winks at Roth's leering, lecherous cracks; others cruelly echo some of Roth's own harshest criticisms of his first wife, Maggie Martinson, killed in a car wreck in 1968. A footnote identifies the biochemist whose work led to the development of Viagra, for the purpose of, well, what exactly? Mentioning "Viagra," it seems. Later in the book Bailey appears to praise Roth's "impulse to mock a certain kind of bourgeois piety," calling it "among his most pronounced traits, both as a writer and a man" (strange how that "and a man" reads). But he doesn't square this with his nodding approval of Roth's supposed efforts to live by his favorite Flaubert dictum: "Be orderly and regular in your life like a bourgeois." We don't expect an authorized biographer to cast his subject in too harsh a light or challenge every inevitable contradiction. Yet there's a feeling of complacency, if not complicity, about Bailey's failure to interrogate more forcefully the most troubling parts of Roth's behavior—which even in a cultural-sexual moment much different from this one drew criticism. At the time, Roth would often respond by complaining of being hauled off to "feminist prison," and in this light, Bailey's treatment of his calamitous marriage to and divorce from the British actress Claire Bloom comes off as an amicus brief on Roth's behalf (which is perhaps why it's also the least interesting part of the book).

Roth proposed the phrase "the terrible ambiguity of the 'I'," which he'd used in *Deception*, as a title for the biography. Compassion compels us to make room for ambiguities and contradictions, to refrain from judgment of what Bailey saw in Roth as "the vastly different needs of vastly different selves." We tend to be more generous in this way with artists, particularly male artists, whom we credit with possessing creative and intellectual powers far beyond ordinary reach. But it's easy to see how a construct like "the terrible ambiguity of the 'I'" can also be used to rationalize any array of harmful behaviors. If there's anything to be gained from this book's likely inseparable linkage of author and its subject, it may be heightened alertness to the indemnifying and self-exculpatory possibilities contained within such artfully advanced propositions.

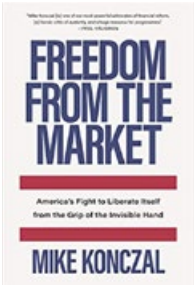
DOMINIC PREZIOSI *is* Commonweal*'s editor.*

Polanyi-ish

MATT MAZEWSKI

Everyone has an opinion about "the free market." To some, it's a shining ideal; to others, an anarchic nightmare. But even for many of those who associate *laissez-faire* with the law of the jungle, it's only the idea of a *completely* free market that causes alarm. By this way of thinking, as long as the market is tamed with the right regulations, it can be channeled in ways that promote the common good. What both of these views seem to take for granted, however, is that there is always a tradeoff between economic liberty and state intervention. Both advocates and critics of the free market often tend to operate from the same assumptions about what "freedom" really entails.

A new book aims to upend the axiom that limiting the scope of market activity necessarily involves a constriction of freedom, and to show that such beliefs are in fact an historical anomaly. In *Freedom from the Market: America's Fight to Liberate Itself from the Grip of the Invisible Hand*, the Roosevelt Institute's Mike Konczal sets out to demonstrate how, "for all the language about how markets open up opportunities, they also create dependencies as well."



FREEDOM FROM THE MARKET
America's Fight to Liberate Itself from the Grip of the Invisible Hand

MIKE KONCZAL

The New Press
$25.99 | 256 pp.

"People have used markets for trading and exchange for centuries," he writes, but "what is unique today is how the economy has been restructured to extend our reliance on markets into all aspects of society." He quotes an observation by the historian Ellen Meiksins Wood: "What defines our current way of dealing with markets is not opportunity or choice, but, on the contrary, compulsion. The things we need to live our lives"—healthcare, childcare, pensions—"are forced into markets where we are compelled to obtain them, at the mercy of private, profit-seeking actors and our own ability to pay."

In his introduction, Konczal lays out five key reasons why "freedom requires the suppression of the market": (1) markets allocate even essential and life-sustaining goods on the basis of ability to pay, rather than need; (2) they are less effective and efficient than the state at providing certain goods and services, such as health insurance, because of the logic of what economists would refer to as "market failures"; (3) market interactions, and in particular the employment relationship, can often be occasions of "domination by the will of others"; (4) the creeping commodification of everything "leaves no reward for things that don't function as commodities," such as the unpaid labor of those who raise children or care for elderly or disabled family members; and (5) markets themselves cannot function without state action, like that required to enforce contracts, protect property rights, or maintain a stable currency.

ARCHIVE IMAGE/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

Illinois homesteaders, 1916

Each chapter of *Freedom from the Market* takes up a different domain of public policy and shows how social reformers have historically fought for progress in that area by "articulating a different idea of freedom," one rooted in "resisting dependency on markets." In "Free Land," Konczal traces the history of movements for the redistribution of land and the wealth of landowners, from Thomas Paine's 1796 pamphlet, "Agrarian Justice," which argued that landowners owed the public treasury a "ground-rent" and that taxes on land inheritance should be used to finance what amounted to a universal basic income, to the passage of the Homestead Act of 1862, which provided 160 acres of free government-owned land to anyone willing to build a dwelling on the tract and live there for at least five years.

The Homestead Act constituted one of the largest wealth transfers in U.S. history: in the decades after its passage, a total of 246 million acres was granted to 1.5 million people. This represented about one-sixth of all land in the public domain at the time, or almost the entire area of Texas and California combined. And although Konczal acknowledges problems with the law—including that much of this "free government land" was "only 'free' when it was taken, with force, from the people already living there," namely, Native Americans—he nevertheless credits it with providing "a floor of opportunity for all those who were able to use it." Republican politicians always like to remind everyone that the GOP is the "Party of Lincoln," but can anyone imagine a modern Republican president overseeing such a gargantuan redistribution of wealth to ordinary Americans?

In a chapter titled "Free Time," Konczal examines how labor organizers in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries fought for, and ultimately won, shorter working hours and a shorter workweek. One of the greatest obstacles to progress in this regard was a conservative judiciary that routinely struck down limits on working time, most infamously in the 1905 Supreme Court decision *Lochner v. New York*, on the grounds that they interfered with "freedom of contract"—that is, the freedom of capitalists to dictate the terms of contracts to workers. But those agitating for reform were not content to cede the mantle of liberty to their opponents, often framing their demands as efforts to *increase* the freedom of the working class by countering the tyranny of bosses. The "Ten-Hour Circular," a manifesto released in 1835 by a group of laborers in Boston calling for a ten-hour workday, solemnly declared that "we claim, by the blood of our fathers, shed on our battle-fields, in the War of the Revolution, the rights of American Freemen, and no earthly power shall resist our righteous claims with impunity." Even the most florid progressive rhetoric today generally stops short of depicting the labor movement as an extension of the American Revolution.

In "Free Health," Konczal highlights not only how public provision of health insurance can make everyone more free by reducing the prospect of destitution or bankruptcy in the event of illness, but also how it has been used historically as an instrument to combat other forms of inequality and discrimination. Most of the chapter is devoted to recounting how the implementation of Medicare gave progressives an opportunity to force the racial integration of hospitals in the Jim Crow South, by threatening to bar from the program any medical institution that remained segregated and thereby deprive it of a lucrative income stream. According to Wilbur Cohen, who worked in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, "on the day that Medicare went into effect in the South, all those signs [reading "White" and "Colored"]…began to come down. This I think was a singular achievement of Medicare. In one day Medicare and Medicaid broke the back of segregated health services."

In the book's acknowledgements, Konczal credits an acquaintance with helping him to refine his "Polanyi-ish, and Pollyanna-ish, thinking," a reference to the twentieth-century Austro-Hungarian political economist Karl Polanyi, whose ideas permeate the book. Although Konczal only explicitly references Polanyi a handful of times, he has written elsewhere about the enduring relevance of his thought. "Karl Polanyi for President," a 2016 article in *Dissent* that Konczal coauthored with Patrick Iber, is a useful companion piece to *Freedom from the Market*, and helps illuminate the intellectual genealogy of its arguments.

As Konczal and Iber explain, Polanyi's most famous work, *The Great Transformation* (1944), is devoted in large part to a critique of the idea that the so-called "free market" is a precondition for, and guarantor of, freedom more generally. "Polanyi's work dismantles this argument in two important ways," they write, first by showing that "markets are planned everywhere they exist." As Polanyi puts it, even *laissez-faire* "was the product of deliberate state action"; the economy is not a freestanding reality that exists apart from the state, but is necessarily structured by it. Even in those areas where government appears to take a hands-off approach, it still plays a critical role in sustaining economic activity by virtue of the fact that it sets the "rules of the game"—for example, by establishing laws governing incorporation, bankruptcy, or labor relations. Without such acts of *creatio continua*, the market would devolve into Hobbesian chaos.

The second key argument of *The Great Transformation* is that, in the words of Konczal and Iber, "the move to markets is inherently destabilizing":

> Rather than a font of liberty and freedom, markets are also a source of coercion, instability, precarity, and worse. Subjecting all of life to the market wouldn't result in the freest society but instead one defined by the collapse of social life…. [P]eople resist being turned into commodities. When they are exposed to too much of the market—when markets try to "disembed" from society—people resist, demanding protection from excessive commodification. Lives are more than commodities for those who are living them.

Polanyi referred to this process as "the double movement": the destabilization wrought by marketization produces backlash, sometimes in the form of socialist or progressive movements that work to provide refuge from the market, but at other times in the form of fascist or reactionary movements.

I'm always surprised at how much of our current discourse treats "the economy" as something wholly separate from society, rather than as the system by which society seeks to meet the material needs of its members. One of the major problems with neoliberalism, according to Konczal, is that its vision is one in which "markets don't serve the preexisting needs of people; people are instead created to serve the market." Talk of how efforts to suppress the pandemic "hurt the economy," when of course society and its members are hurt far more by allowing a deadly virus to spread unchecked, is one example of the absurdities that result from a failure to appreciate the "embeddedness" of the economy. And the idea of double movement is similarly absent from political commentary, which too often treats eruptions of populist sentiment as arising *ex nihilo* and as reversible through appeals to "normalcy," even if underlying economic problems remain unaddressed.

Freedom from the Market offers a refreshing corrective to this kind of "anti-Polanyian" thinking. In this sense, its perspectives on political economy, and even its idea of freedom as requiring far more than just the absence of external coercion, lines up quite well with that of Catholic social thought (though Konczal never refers to Catholic sources). But perhaps this isn't surprising, because others have noted a resemblance between Church teaching on the economy and the work of Polanyi—a Christian convert from Judaism. The late Canadian theologian Fr. Gregory Baum wrote of the "affinity" that exists between the thought of Polanyi and that of Pope Francis, even if there exists no evidence of a direct influence of the former on the latter. Likewise, an article published in the *Atlantic* a few months after Francis's election commented on the efforts to label the pope a Marxist, and instead offered "a case for the pontiff's debt not to Karl Marx but to Karl Polanyi."

Konczal's book excels not just as a work of history and a meditation on political economy, but also as a call to action. Among its many strengths is the strategic advice it offers to progressives, socialists, and leftists of all stripes: specifically, that advocates of a more humane economic system should deliberately steer clear of the framing I alluded to earlier, in which an economy based on solidarity is seen to be necessarily "less free" than the alternative. In fact, as Konczal convincingly shows, exactly the opposite is true.

There are already good examples of egalitarian economic policy being presented in a way that emphasizes how it bolsters rather than limits freedom. One such example was the "Employee Free Choice Act," introduced in Congress during the Obama administration, which sought to reform labor law to make it easier for workers to join unions. Against anti-union proponents of so-called "right-to-work" laws, pro-union activists tried to sell their effort as one designed to expand liberty.

Unfortunately, this type of branding is still fairly uncommon. Attacks on liberals and the Left often involve scaremongering about twentieth-century state Communism or political authoritarianism more generally, but the reflexive response, whether from mainstream liberals like Barack Obama or leftists like Bernie Sanders, has usually been to wave away these guilt-by-association tactics and calmly insist that a progressive program has nothing to do with central planning. In a 2016 speech at Georgetown University defining his understanding of democratic socialism, Sanders laughed off the idea that he would ever propose having the government "own the grocery store down the street."

But this is a defensive reaction, one that reinforces the idea that conservatives are the ones who "support freedom" and that their critics believe in less freedom, even if that still turns out to be somewhat more freedom than the Soviet Politburo or the Chinese Communist Party. Why not turn the tables, and make the Right answer for Chile under Augusto Pinochet, or Singapore under Lee Kuan Yew? If socialists are forced to explain why their ideology does not logically lead to political oppression and the loss of civil liberties, capitalists should be challenged to do the same.

Plus, any social movement that aspires to make real change in the United States needs to reckon with the preeminent place that freedom occupies in the American political imagination. Following the authors of the "Ten-Hour Circular," the modern Left should not shy away from claiming, "by the blood of our fathers, shed on our battle-fields, in the War of the Revolution, the rights of American Freemen." Here's Konczal, in the closing paragraph of the book:

> To succeed we need to harness and build on the proud legacy created by two hundred years of battles to carve out a free space beyond the confines of the market. Battles for the future of our country and society are not won on arguments about market failures, on the balance sheets of accountants, or on narrowly tailored, incremental solutions. They are won on arguments about freedom. We've lost this fight in recent decades.... But we are starting to remember. Freedom is the fundamental battlefield that we fight on, and we need to fight on it once again.

Freedom from the Market is an impressive book, easily one of the best I've read in the past several years. I cannot recommend it highly enough. My hope is that Mike Konczal's careful study of American history can help recover a forgotten tradition in our politics, and that his "Polanyi-ish and Pollyanna-ish" lens can reveal to a wider audience the many ways in which contemporary ideologies obscure important truths about the economy and society.

MATT MAZEWSKI *is a PhD student in economics at Columbia University, the rapporteur of the University Seminar on Catholicism, Culture, and Modernity, and a columnist for* Commonweal.

Rachel Cusk

Near Misses

KATHERINE LUCKY

We've heard this story before: *A stranger arrives, bringing trouble. The stranger leaves. Things have changed.* But in Rachel Cusk's hands, a simple plot becomes deep and mysterious, like the "distant blue shape of the receded tide." The stranger in her eleventh novel, *Second Place*, is a renowned painter named L, whose arrival at the titular "second place"—a cottage for visiting artists built by the narrator, M, and her second husband, Tony—disturbs the peace on the marsh where they live. Middle-aged M is struggling with the sense that her life has "been a near miss." She's written a few "little books" that "hardly made any money." Her daughter, Justine, is all grown up. Where M is restless, Tony, a day laborer, is frustratingly stubborn and good, happy to spend his time working with his hands. Her invitation to L to come and paint at the marsh is an act of resistance to his contentment. L's paintings changed M's life years earlier, when she saw them exhibited in a sunlit Paris gallery. At the time, she was "a young mother on the brink of rebellion," about to divorce her first husband. The paintings gave her courage. They felt like a discovery of her "true origins"—as if she "was not alone in what, until then, I had held secret to myself." Now, perhaps, L will recognize and adore her as a kindred spirit. Perhaps he will change her life once again.

SECOND PLACE
A Novel

RACHEL CUSK
Farrar, Straus and Giroux
$25 | 192 pp.

But the visit doesn't go as planned. L rudely brings a guest without asking, a beautiful young woman who makes M jealous. He takes down the cottage's curtains and paints on its walls. He treats M with scorn; at times, it's as if he despises her. She worries that he finds

REUTERS/FRED THORNHILL

her dowdy, insignificant, controlling. Still, her attraction to L persists; she even puts on her wedding dress to sit for a portrait session with him, though her desire isn't primarily physical. L and his art represent something larger: power, vision, uncompromising amorality. "He allowed me," M thinks, "to realize the extent to which I had let my own life be defined by others," drawing "me with the cruelty of his rightness closer to the truth."

But what is truth, exactly, and is it always desirable? These are just two of the enormous questions—about art and attention, time and desire—that Cusk poses within the novel's deceptively straightforward purview. *Second Place* is so contemplative that it's almost claustrophobic. Addressed to an unknown person named "Jeffers," it mimics Mabel Dodge Luhan's memoir *Lorenzo in Taos*, another book about an artist who comes to visit. (This device, never explained, is by turns innocuous and distracting.) *Second Place* also draws on Cusk's own books—in one of her earlier novels, *Transit*, a character is similarly entranced by an art exhibit. This preoccupation with creativity and influence indicates another set of questions that recur in her work: What is art's purpose, and how is it connected to reality?

Leaving Paris after her transcendent gallery visit, M encounters a man on a train whom she calls "the devil." He is "yellowed and bloated with bloodshot eyes," sweaty and leering, fondling a "barely clothed" girl on his knee. She wants to stop him, but doesn't. Instead, she ignores him, like all the other passengers. Though only briefly described in the novel's first few pages, the man becomes an omen of the "evil that usually lies undisturbed beneath the surface of things." After his appearance, and after her divorce from her first husband, M becomes depressed, even suicidal. In her mind, the events are connected: L's paintings, the devil on the train, her breakdown. On the marsh, she thought she had at last found some respite with Tony—but with her invitation to L, evil is once again disturbed: "What did I do but find fault with the beauty and the peace and try to stir them up!"

Second Place *isn't a simple morality tale about learning to be happy with what you have.*

Still, *Second Place* isn't a simple morality tale about learning to be happy with what you have. All the narrator's confessions—about her unlikeability, her estrangement from others, her perceived ugliness, selfishness, insecurity—don't resolve, even when L leaves. Instead, they simply cease to matter as much. What M desires most is to move past "the illusion of personal feeling"; she wants to become "a clear channel," and by the end of the novel, she's closer to her goal. But the book also isn't a fable about a tyrannical artist who is ultimately punished. Even in his cruelty, L is pitiful, relying on the patronage of others: "Don't mistake my life for anything other than a tragedy," he says. Perhaps he isn't a paradigm of pure, unsacrificed will, a manifestation of that "freedom elementally and unrepentantly male."

It's this freedom that the narrator both seeks and shies away from, which eludes her even as it reveals its own limitations. "Not to have been born in a woman's body," she tells L, was his "piece of luck in the first place." He can travel around the world, cashing in favors, but "a woman could never throw herself on fate and expect to come out of it intact. She has to connive at her own survival, and how can she be subject to revelation after that?" M craves independence and inspiration; and thus, she sees some aspects of herself as male. When L sneeringly asks her, "Why do you play at being a woman?" she replies that she doesn't think she knows how to be one.

Second Place's conception of womanhood could be read as depressing, even backward: a condition of repression, repulsion, and "second-placeness," something to be struggled against if one ever wants to be a great artist or an independent person. But the book's ideas about gender (really, about anything) aren't so straightforward. They're elusive, like the marsh's salty fog. Cusk lets her narrator conjecture, muse, and pontificate. But what does she really believe? "I lost my chance to be free, perhaps, when I became Justine's mother," the narrator posits. *Perhaps.* But there's a sense that Justine can avoid this fate. By the end of the book, she's liberated from her boyfriend and possessed of financial means. She has "the freedom not to look to others for the means of survival that is still so hard for a woman to come by." But if Justine has children, or loses her looks, or her money: What then?

Perhaps (*perhaps*) the book's real truth is that freedom isn't so free. Perhaps "the simple revelation of personal truth" only "leads to so much suffering and cruelty"—any exertion of will at the expense of others is bound to be damned. Perhaps we all need a measure of obedience, and some limitations. (If only the narrator could accept them!) By the novel's end, M has a cautionary example in L. The painter returns to Paris, where their story began, chasing a romance with a younger woman. He's free to do so. But the letter he sends back to the marsh suggests he's far from liberated. "I miss your place," he writes. "I wish I had stayed, but at the time I wanted to go."

KATHERINE LUCKY *is a former managing editor of* Commonweal.

Stirring the Embers of Faith

GERALD J. RUSSELLO

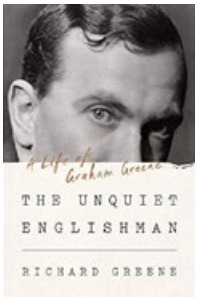
A poet friend of mine has often complained about the common assumption that learning the biographical details about a writer brings us closer to the quality of the work. Learning that a scene in a novel came from a real-life meeting with a Mrs. Smith in Soho or the author's experiences in Vietnam does not inevitably make the scene more appealing, or even more intelligible. A literary biographer must establish or assume that her readers already find her subject's writing interesting. The fact that Tolkien got bitten in a Great War trench by a large spider will be of interest only to those already interested in Shelob from *The Lord of the Rings*.

As it happens, *The Unquiet Englishman*, Richard Greene's sparkling new biography of Graham Greene, would have a lot of interest even if the latter were not an important writer who, twenty years after his death, still has a large audience. Graham Greene traveled widely, through Europe, Mexico, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Vietnam, and the United States, and he wrote about what he saw in all those places. He worked for the British secret service during World War II, and spent a lot of time with Kim Philby, who would later turn out to be a double agent for the Soviet Union. Greene became a Catholic in 1927 in order to marry Vivien Dayrell-Browning, but almost from the start, he had trouble with the practical demands of Catholicism—and in particular, trouble with marital fidelity. Soon after his marriage, he began a long series of affairs, but Vivien refused to grant him a divorce, and he continued to support her.

"There is no understanding Greene except in the political and cultural contexts of dozens of countries," Richard Greene writes. But he does not explicitly say that those contexts are needed to *like* the novels. I knew nothing of Graham Greene's life when I began reading his novels. Only because they were books I could not put down did I want to learn about the life of the man who had written them. Richard Greene, a professor of English literature (and no relation to his subject), does draw out the facts behind Graham Greene's fictions, insofar as these are available. Even more usefully, though, he discusses how the novels work together or draw on the same themes.

We learn, for example, about a dinner Greene and his wife had with T. S. Eliot in 1935. The typically tightly wound poet got to "unbutton" himself when talking about detective stories. Greene liked them too, and the following year would finish a kind of detective novel, *A Gun for Sale*. But Richard Greene points out that some of the themes and techniques associated with detective fiction can also be found in Greene's following book, *Brighton Rock*. In both books, "he put a repulsive character at the heart of the novel and set about making him compelling." This is biographical literary criticism at its best. The Eliot story provides some helpful context, but more important to readers of Graham Greene's fiction is the observation that both *A Gun for Sale* and *Brighton Rock*—very different books in most ways—have the same challenge of dealing with a character a reader may not want to like.

A whole chapter of *The Unquiet Englishman* is devoted to the facts behind *Brighton Rock*. That town was apparently a rough place where murder was not infrequent. Graham Greene had spent a lot of time there and some version of the town is the setting for several of his stories. He wanted his anti-hero, Pinkie, to be a "repulsive" character whose life had "failed utterly." Originally, *Brighton Rock* was meant to be simply another detective story, but after the first fifty pages it turns in a different direction. Pinkie marries a woman named Rose to keep her silent about a crime he has committed. Both are Catholic. Pinkie finally decides that he won't be truly safe until Rose is dead; but, cornered by the police, he ends up killing himself before he can kill her. Rather than feeling relief at having been spared, Rose continues to feel responsible for Pinkie and vows to accompany him into the "country of mortal sin."



THE UNQUIET ENGLISHMAN
A Life of Graham Greene

RICHARD GREENE
W. W. Norton
$40 | 608 pp.

Graham Greene

PICTORIAL PRESS LTD/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

Greene could have written the same story without any confusing religious issues entering into it. For nonbelievers "the country of mortal sin" means less than it does for Catholics. The priest to whom Rose speaks after Pinkie's death refers to the "appalling… strangeness of the mercy of God," suggesting that we cannot know whether anyone is damned, even after committing suicide. At one point, Pinkie says of himself "I suppose I'm real Brighton." Greene's "repulsive" anti-hero thus stands for an entire town, and by implication for our common humanity. If the mercy of God could reach him, whom couldn't it reach?

Critics can continue to fight over the question of whether Greene was a Catholic writer or rather what he called himself: an author who "happened to be Catholic." Some of his characters were good Catholics; many were not. And as Richard Greene reminds us, Graham had a lot of trouble practicing the faith he never quite abandoned. The late Polish poet Adam Zagajewski once said about himself, "I am a failed Catholic, but still a Catholic." Greene could have said the same thing. Though a convert, he was deeply steeped in the culture of the faith from all the time he spent in Catholic countries. It is hard to believe that anyone but a cradle Catholic could have come up with the "whisky priest" in *The Power and the Glory*, but Greene's extensive travels in Mexico and his own struggles with Catholicism allowed him to bring that character to life and to keep him from becoming simply a theological emblem.

Toward the end of his life, Greene said, "I don't believe myself that death is the end of everything, or rather my faith tells me that death is not the end of everything and when my belief wavers I tell myself I am wrong." In a letter to Fr. Albert Huerto, SJ, Greene wrote, "I would call myself at the worst a Catholic agnostic." *The Unquiet Englishman* helps us understand what that might mean. Greene was in Mexico during the suppression of the Church, and took the Church's side in the conflict. He criticized America for its support of troops that murdered Jesuits in other parts of Latin America. The "magic" of the Church continued to hold him even when his rationality was not satisfied. Some part of him continued to believe there was more to reality than rationality.

In any case, Greene knew better than to confuse theological standards with literary standards, and he would not have wanted his novels to be read or admired as apologetic works. Fortunately, his best work succeeds on its own terms, and can be appreciated by non-Catholic readers as much as by his coreligionists. The psychology of Rose and Pinkie is fascinating and convincingly wrought, no matter what you think of their beliefs about the afterlife. *The Unquiet Englishman* is a joy to read for the light it sheds on Greene's novels, but much of their real-life inspiration remains mysterious—which is just how Greene himself would have wanted it.

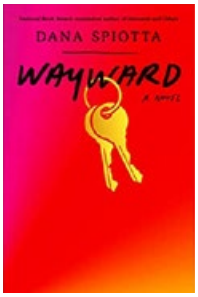
GERALD J. RUSSELLO *is editor of* The University Bookman.

Life as a House

ADAM FLEMING PETTY

A man undergoing a midlife crisis buys a sports car. At least that's the cliché I remember from the nineties. Perhaps the anxious men of today buy pickup trucks or, if they listen to podcasts, cryptocurrencies—unless such men have lost their jobs, which is not unlikely. In that case, maybe they pull a Walter White and earn some extra cash moving narcotics. Everyone has a side hustle nowadays.

But what does a woman buy when she's the one having a midlife crisis? I don't mean to engage in some hack standup routine. Assumptions about what men and women in this stage of life desire can illuminate much about prevalent attitudes regarding sex, gender, and aging. Perhaps this hypothetical woman doesn't buy anything; perhaps, like Madame Bovary or Anna Karenina, she engages in an affair, the love of a younger man rekindling her own youthful spirit.



WAYWARD
A Novel

DANA SPIOTTA
Knopf
$27 | 288 pp.

A doomed love affair, though, sounds very nineteenth century. Today, the average educated woman gets married later in life, and she may not pine for romance as much as a windswept heroine on the Highland moors. She probably works too, and between working out at the gym and performing the lion's share of household chores, likely does not have many occasions for her bosom to heave in the presence of a rugged farmhand.

Allow me, then, to venture a guess. A woman of the twenty-first century, weathering a midlife crisis, will find herself in want of a house. There are now whole industries catering to women's ongoing love affair with real estate: Boomer women, endowed with their retirement savings, watch HGTV and select the perfect backsplash for the kitchen sink; their frugal Millennial daughters, navigating the post-2008 economy, browse Zillow looking for deals on turn-of-the-century homes with good bones. Meghan Daum,

Dana Spiotta

AGENCE OPALE/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

working between these generations as a member of Gen X, neatly summarized this impulse with the title of her 2010 memoir: *Life Would Be Perfect If I Lived in That House*.

Wayward, Dana Spiotta's new novel, dramatizes just such a relationship between a middle-aged woman and her dream home. But while there is certainly humor in *Wayward*, the approach is darker and more obsessive than one might assume, given the subject matter. The dreams that the dream house affords become quite unsettling.

The story finds Sam Raymond turning fifty-three in the year 2017. Her life is comfortable. Her husband, Matt, is a successful lawyer. Their seventeen-year-old daughter, Ally, is a driven, successful student, fond of looking up Latin etymologies on her phone. The family lives in a comfortable house in a suburb of Syracuse, New York. In between working out at the gym and buying salmon at the grocery store, Sam works a part-time job at the Clara Loomis House. Loomis, a real historical figure, briefly lived in the town's Oneida Community, and she went on to write pamphlets in support of birth control and the suffragette movement.

One day, Sam comes across a beautiful old Arts and Crafts home in a rundown neighborhood of Syracuse. The listed price is $38,000, a steal. But the house would need to be completely redone, from floor to ceiling—the kind of job that would require money, time, and the hiring of skilled labor. Sam does something impulsive: she buys the house without telling her husband. Then she does something even more impulsive: she tells her husband that she wants a divorce. She will leave their suburban home and move into the falling-apart house, where she will live, alone.

Why does she want to leave her family? Does she still love them? She loves her daughter, yes. Ally looms large in her life, the locus of many of Sam's hopes and fears. As for Matt, her husband, well—she may not love him, not at the moment, but she doesn't hate him either. The source of her unease, and her need to claim the house as entirely her own, comes from somewhere deeper, a place Sam herself can't easily access. Matt believes the recent inauguration of Donald Trump is what's driving her to such rash action. She's angry, understandably so, and this is the outlet her anger finds. Sam, of course, hates such a pat explanation. There is a political element to her anger, but there's also much more at work. She is angry at life! At growing old! At a society that expects women to accept invisibility with a smile and a nod!

Boomer women watch HGTV and select the perfect backsplash for the kitchen sink; their frugal Millennial daughters browse Zillow looking for deals on turn-of-the-century homes with good bones.

As Sam begins her solitary existence in her empty home, timely subject matter keeps intruding upon her life. Flush with formless rage from the inauguration, she attends a Resistance meeting populated by her fellow demographic cohorts, upper-middle-class white women. While Sam agrees with their politics, she finds their earnestness cloying. Soon, via private Facebook groups, she meets up with more strident groups of women who devote their energies to subverting the impossible beauty expectations of a patriarchal society.

The passages about Facebook brought to mind two recent novels: Lauren Oyler's *Fake Accounts* and Patricia Lockwood's *No One Is Talking About This.* The authors, both white Millennial women, have been praised for capturing "the internet," when what they really capture is Twitter. Media outlets have a habit of treating Twitter as a synecdoche for the internet as a whole. After all, it's the native habitat for toxic swamp creatures—journalists, politicos, and their ilk. But Spiotta, a Gen X author, turns her attention to dowdy old Facebook, suggesting that the disdain the Extremely Online lay at the base of Mount Zuckerberg replicates the generational divides that often mar feminist causes today.

Further trending topics accrue. Ally pursues a clandestine affair with an older man. Sam witnesses an act of police violence. The latter especially feels shoehorned into the story, a grasp at relevance. But as the novel's closing section demonstrates, *Wayward's* concerns are more timeless than we've been led to expect.

Lily, Sam's mother, has been diagnosed with inoperable cancer. She'd told this to Sam well before the events of the story had begun, but Sam hasn't been able to voice the situation to herself, let alone anyone else. Buying the house, and blowing up her life, are a means of evading the grief that is sure to come, and the concomitant reminder of her own mortality. But rather than escape the past, the house brings Sam face to face with it.

One night, alone in her lonesome house, Sam collapses. She hits her head on one of the beautiful tiles that she so admired, and begins bleeding on the hardwood floors. But her blood, like some newfangled caulking agent, connects her to the house. She has a vision of herself. She sees the past, in the form of Clara Loomis, the nineteenth-century feminist whose legacy she stewards. She sees the future, and how it will go on without her. Rather than serve as the capstone of a perfect life, the falling-down house acts as a bridge to the larger forces of time, life, and existence. The vision allows Sam to accept the losses that her life will surely entail.

Wayward is a haunted-house story in reverse: the story of a ghost who enters an empty house, and comes back to life.

ADAM FLEMING PETTY *is the author of a novella,* Followers. *His essays have appeared in the* Paris Review Daily, Electric Literature, Vulture, *and other outlets. He lives in Grand Rapids, Michigan.*

Mushroom as Metaphor

VINCENT MILLER

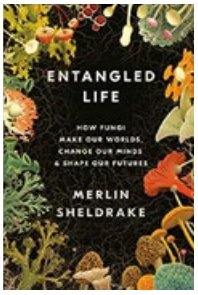
We live in a world being remade by neoliberalism in ways that go far beyond the exchange of goods and services. Convinced that the market is the best way to process dispersed human knowledge, purveyors of neoliberalism seek to apply its logic to more and more parts of our lives: competitive exchange becomes a master explanatory category that they claim reveals the underlying workings of systems as diverse as neurological networks and human society.

Catholic social thought, with its vision of the world as constituted by relationships of mutual obligation, shudders at this neoliberal reduction to competition between individuals. Where might we find evidence to evaluate these two opposing positions?

Ecology is a suggestive place to look. Ecological systems are constituted by astoundingly complex relationships—from the myriad nutrient flows of trophic networks (who eats and is eaten by whom) to the entanglements of symbiosis. For that reason, I was excited to read Robert Macfarlane's interview with a young mycologist with the unforgettable name of Merlin Sheldrake on the topic of forest mycorrhizal fungal networks. Susan Simard's groundbreaking research has shown that different species of trees share resources in the forest via fungal root connections; this science describes something enticingly similar to the common good. In the interview, Sheldrake expressed adamant opposition to what he termed "super-neoliberal capitalist" explanations of these complex relationships. Seeking to understand his thinking better, I consulted his scientific journal articles. But these did not engage questions of interpretation…and he did not respond to my emails.

Sheldrake's recent book, *Entangled Life: How Fungi Make Our Worlds, Change Our Minds & Shape Our Futures*, provides a fuller, scientifically grounded, and poetically effusive account of his thought on these matters. While it covers many fascinating topics, from the parasitic ant-zombie fungus *Ophiocordyceps* to *Psylocybe* "magic" mushrooms (the two have more in common than one might like), the value of the book lies in Sheldrake's wrestling with the difficulty of understanding such profoundly different organisms and their relationships with other species. That also indicates why *Entangled Life* should be of great interest to those, like me, drawn in by this research's resonance with Catholic social thought. It's not new or eccentric to notice such connections: Sheldrake reports the influence of early mycorrhizal research on J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*.

Often confused with plants, fungi occupy their own kingdom which is, in fact, more closely related to animals. The mushrooms we see are analogous to fruit, and the bulk of fungal life actually lies in the labyrinthine "hyphae"—threads that compose the "mycelium" that live beneath the soil or within the wood, bread, cheese, etc. being consumed.



ENTANGLED LIFE
How Fungi Make Our Worlds, Change Our Minds & Shape Our Futures

MERLIN SHELDRAKE
Random House
$28 | 352 pp.

In mycelium, the distinctiveness of fungi becomes apparent. They are surprisingly active. They transport fluids and resources in multiple directions and propagate electrical signals. These microscopic threads can create enormous pressure that allows them to burrow into rock and the hardest plastics. When hyphae combine to produce mushrooms, they can punch through asphalt and lift paving stones. They exhibit problem-solving behavior as they seek resources, avoid threats, and interact with plants and other fungi. The mechanisms of many of these abilities are unknown—they have no centralized structures analogous to brains.

Sheldrake chafes against the limits of scientific language, turning to metaphors to evoke the sheer difference of mycelium from plant or animal forms. Mycelial networks are "processes not things." Noting how fungi expand into the world to live and consume, he describes mycelium as bodies "without plan" and "appetite in bodily form." As for their apparent cognitive abilities, "mycelium is a living, growing, opportunistic investigation—speculation in bodily form." They are "streams of embodiment" as opposed to "streams of consciousness."

Some of the book's most challenging insights come in its discussion of symbiosis. Lichens—those easily overlooked organisms that grow on stone and branch—are, in fact, not a single species, but a mutualistic partnership of fungi, algae, and bacteria. Together, they are able to sing "metabolic songs"

Fungi cap showing gills

SCENICS & SCIENCE/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

that enable them to live in environments where they could not survive alone. Studying them occasioned the creation of the concept of symbiosis itself, the politics of which "have always been fraught." Lichen required a radical rethinking of evolution in the decades after Darwin and has provoked debates about competition and cooperation ever since.

Lichen also contest our understanding of individuals and species. From Aristotle through Darwin, we've imagined organisms as distinct natures possessing the powers to meet their needs in their environment. This conception held despite profound changes in the understandings of their origins. Lichen do not fit this definition. With lichen, the tree of life's branches "intertwine and melt" into one another. "Lichens are places where an organism unravels into an ecosystem and where an ecosystem congeals into an organism."

The insufficiency of thinking of lichens as species or individuals resonates with other, similar insights. Lynn Margulis's widely accepted notion of endo-symbiosis argues that the fundamental structures of plant and animal

What would happen if we imagined the relationship of things in terms of involution and entanglement rather than separation and distinction?

cells—chloroplasts and mitochondria—are the result of a primordial fusion of species. It is hard to find simple boundaries for any organism: plant, fungi, or animal. Humans host trillions of bacterial partners that play essential roles in our flourishing. "Our bodies, like those of all other organisms, are dwelling places. Life is nested biomes all the way down."

The "involution" of different species evident in lichen is also manifest in even more jarring examples of fungal parasitism. Once infected with the fungus *Ophiocordyceps*, zombified ants leave their colony, climb nearby plants, clamp their mandibles to the bottom of a leaf and die. The fungus then fruits from their head and rains spores down on the colony to seed the next generation. Who is acting here, the ant or the fungus?

One of the chemicals active in *Ophiocordyceps* is psilocybin—the hallucinogenic compound in magic mushrooms. Human partakers of psilocybin have profound experiences of loss of individuality and union with the universe. Sheldrake sees here another manifestation of fungi's ability to blur boundaries and facilitate entanglement.

Sheldrake's consideration of mycorrhizal networks builds upon this explanation of mycelium and lichen. There is strong evidence that this symbiosis between fungi and plants dates to the original colonization of land by primitive plants. Mycorrhizal fungi expand plant root networks a thousand fold, and they have the enzymatic abilities to free nutrients such as phosphorus from rock and provide them to their plant partners. The plants, in turn, provide the fungi with carbohydrates from photosynthesis. Simard's research was revolutionary because it proved not only that trees share resources with fungi, but that fungi distribute these resources to other trees, even those of different species. (As it turns out, this is a special case. There are many instances of mycorrhizae functioning parasitically.)

This sharing of resources with other plants through fungal networks raises the issue of altruism—a classic problem for natural selection. Several solutions have been offered. Sheldrake argues that a "myco-centric perspective" provides the best solution. When fungi are viewed as actors rather than passive conduits, their interests in maintaining diverse partner species becomes apparent. Trees exchange with fungi, which then use the resources they receive to cultivate various other partner plants.

While that approach seems to address the altruism debate, Sheldrake is eager to pursue this myco-centric perspective further by interrogating the many metaphors used to describe these relationships—feudalism, socialism, market exchange, the "wood wide web," and neural networks—and finds each to be limiting.

Inspired by Donna Haraway's insight that "it matters which stories tell stories," Sheldrake seeks to develop the narrative possibilities of fungal life: flipping anthropomorphism for "mycomorphism." Sheldrake notes that hidden beneath our debates about anthropocentrism lies the less noticed, but equally profound, dominance of tree-like structures in thought. These appear in examples as diverse as family trees, biological classifications, academic disciplines, and file structures. What would happen if we thought in the logic of mycelia, imagining the relationship of things in terms of involution and entanglement rather than separation and distinction? What if we "let the polyphonic swarms of plants and fungi and bacteria that make up our homes and our worlds be themselves, and quite *un-like* anything else? What would that do to our minds?"

Here Sheldrake runs into the limits of what can currently be analyzed scientifically. Studies of mycorrhizal networks are limited in scope: measuring exchanges among a few plants in pots or test plots. Even larger field studies mapping interconnections are, in the words of a key investigator, "only a glimpse; a small window into a vast open system…a gross understatement of the actual connectivity of the forest."

Previously, Sheldrake was much more critical of "super-neoliberal capitalist" interpretations of mycorrhizal networks. But in this book, resource exchange is a major focus, perhaps because of the analytic tools available. Lacking the ability to study these networks in their complexity, scientists trace single-factor connections and exchanges. As a result, this research is dominated by economic metaphors such as "trading strategies." The "shimmering unceasing turnover" of the larger system remains just as out of reach empirically as it does conceptually.

Thus, rather than finding a hoped-for fungal analogue of the common good, we can learn from science how very difficult it is to perceive and study emergent, collective realities such as common mycorrhizal networks. Sheldrake cites physicists who caution against assuming that we can understand complex systems by breaking them down and studying their component parts: "We rarely know how to put the pieces back together again."

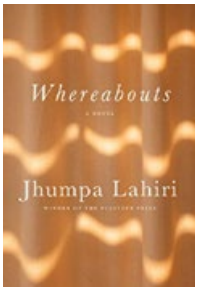
Sheldrake's respect for these fungal entanglements can help us attend to other complexities that elude us. In the end, the crossover lesson may be epistemological humility and moral solicitude for the complex systems that sustain us—from ecosystems to the common good. That is challenge enough to neoliberal hegemony.

VINCENT MILLER *is the Gudorf Chair in Catholic Theology and Culture at the University of Dayton. He is editor of* The Theological and Ecological Vision of Laudato Si': Everything is Connected *(London: Bloomsbury, 2017). He is writing a theological response to neoliberalism entitled* Homo Curans.

The Wanderer

NICOLE-ANN LOBO

Why do we leave where we come from? The question is central to writers of diasporic fiction, a diverse coterie within which Jhumpa Lahiri tends to be grouped. But with *Whereabouts*, her third and latest novel, Lahiri resists this potentially reductive characterization by eschewing all but the most general markers of her protagonist's identity. Made up of forty-six vaguely titled vignettes, one for each year of its nameless narrator's existence, the novel follows the meanderings of a literature professor living in a nameless Italian city. "On the Street," "In the Piazza," "In my Head"—these are the vague coordinates of her whereabouts, both spatial and psychic, as she approaches a crossroads in her life.



WHEREABOUTS
A Novel

JHUMPA LAHIRI

Knopf
$24 | 176 pp.

The vignettes in *Whereabouts* are self-contained, but when read sequentially paint a complicated portrait of a woman burdened by the fixedness of the city where she has lived since her youth. Her connection to this place is challenged by her perception of the "unraveling of time": most of her friends have families, her mother is aging, and the city is changing, leaving the narrator to wonder where exactly her life is headed. In this way, the novel is cloaked in a certain melancholy. The entries sometimes read like litanies of lost opportunity, as the protagonist mourns once-possible futures, dwells on trajectories her life might have taken. She ruminates over chance run-ins with a man she "might have been involved with, maybe shared a life with," and silently envies

Jhumpa Lahiri

AGENZIA SINTESI/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

POETRY

THE SUM OF US

Samuel Hazo

What is heredity but centuries
of births, deaths, journeys,
weddings, wars, surprises
and griefs?
History becomes
no more than outdated updates
of dateless orbits of the earth.
In time these turn irrelevant
or vague as honors and as vain.
Outliving Eden and its myths,
we find in space what
saves us.
Since breath has
no birthdays, I say that Genesis
begins all over every time
we breathe.
Each time I face
a mirror, I'm looking at Adam.

SAMUEL HAZO, *a National Book Award–finalist and former State Poet of Pennsylvania, is the author of novels, essays, and plays. His two most recent books of poetry are* When Not Yet Is Now *and* The Next Time We Saw Paris.

Lahiri's narrator's neurosis comes from ostensibly having everything, but still feeling that something is missing.

the vivacious teenage daughter of a friend, whose escapades fill her with regret at her own "squandered youth, the absence of rebellion."

"In spring I suffer," one entry begins. "The season doesn't invigorate me, I find it depleting." Sharply perceptive, jaded but not bitter, Lahiri's narrator is not the type for decorum, and at times she appears neurotic. "Afflicted by the green of the trees, the first peaches in the market," she recounts feelings "of loss, of betrayal, of disappointment." But it's not all bleakness. She revels in happy memories too, and conveys small joys with elegant intimacy, such as basking on "the balcony off my apartment when the sun is shining and I'm having breakfast," or how much she likes "to sit outside, pick up a warm pen…and write down a sentence or two."

Whereabouts is the first novel Lahiri has written in Italian and then self-translated into English. Perhaps best known for her acclaimed short-story collection *The Interpreter of Maladies*, Lahiri has said that she has long felt in a state of "linguistic exile," which may explain her choice to move to Rome and begin writing in Italian several years ago. The decision also came out of a desire to claim a language for herself, as Lahiri, whose mother tongue is Bengali, described the transition to writing in Italian as a purely personal one, fueled by a desire for artistic challenge, free from the pressures of social representation.

While diasporic fiction typically chronicles challenges inherent in migrating, the central tension in *Whereabouts* is an inability to discover new frontiers. Lahiri's narrator isn't desperate or seeking a better opportunity; she has material comforts, a secure job, caring friends. She is single, though she prefers to be alone. Her neurosis comes from ostensibly having everything, but still feeling that something is missing. But this tension is frequently circumvented by an intense focus on others. The writing is devoid of any meaningful racial or physical signifiers, so we learn about the narrator mostly through the way she perceives passersby, through her insatiable curiosity about the lives of those she encounters.

In her city, she is a perpetual *flâneuse*. From a distance, she follows a woman wearing the same skirt she owns, ponders who the woman is, what she does, where she might be going. Her double helps her realize that "I'm me and also someone else," a realization that "momentarily ruffles my melancholy." A man and woman passing by—are they siblings or lovers? Caught in the background of a photo a man takes of his wife, she feels irreparably ingrained in their lives. When surrounded by strangers, she doesn't "feel even slightly alone," and is "amazed at our impulse to express ourselves, explain ourselves, tell stories to one another." She is deeply in tune with the suffering of others, real and imagined, and serves as a thoughtful, impartial observer, reminding me of the angel Cassiel in Wim Wenders's film *Wings of Desire*.

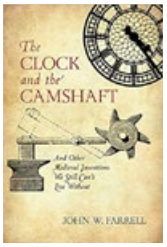
Labor and objects are treated as embodiments of human intimacy. While a manicurist delicately works on her nails, the narrator avoids looking in the mirror and spoiling "the moment, or this contact between us," and strives instead to "focus exclusively on her, acknowledging that though we're united we're two separate people." She moves through the stationery store she visited as a young girl, relishing mundane purchases, "each item validat[ing] my life somehow." When one of her neighbors begins a long-running house sale, she gradually accumulates his old chipped cups, yellow magazines, and a termite-ridden portrait, wondering if its subject liked "being admired as she rushed about doing errands in winter under a chilly blue sky." A scholar with whom she shares an elevator strikes her as "circumspect, detached from his surroundings, absorbed by something else," and she's captivated by "his large eyes…tender, tinged with sadness," so she makes a note to read his book.

The best vignettes in *Whereabouts* are mundane observations that nonetheless are suffused with a sense of wonder. There are descriptions of the verdant Italian countryside and breathtaking narration of the sun rising in the early winter morning, as "golden light highlights a section of the jagged contours of the hills across the way." Her heart breaks as she is confronted by the warm light illuminating her city, leaving her "both ablaze with energy and sapped of it." When a café owner insists she hurry to catch her train instead of waiting to pay, she is moved to tears, left "feeling mysteriously protected by the universe." Even her simple daily sandwich merits reason to rejoice: "As I eat it, as my body bakes in the sun that pours down on my neighborhood, each bite, feeling sacred, reminds me I'm not forsaken."

As translation goes, Lahiri's prose can at times feel sterile, sparse, leaving readers to ponder what's been lost from the original Italian. There are traces of the language, like when the protagonist routinely inquires about decorative objects from a shopkeeper, who "always asks me the same price." She refers to her jewelry box as a "*portagioie* [joy box], which, come to think of it, is the most beautiful of Italian words." But these moments act as reminders that what's missing in translation is nothing compared to the vast expanses lost in moving from thought to speech to written word. All of us unknowable universes, we are at once entirely separate and unassailably connected. And our identities can follow suit, derived less through immutable physical markers or ties to places of origin than through the connections we forge to those who surround us. "Because when all is said and done the setting doesn't matter: the space, the walls, the light. It makes no difference.... Is there any place we're not moving through?" the narrator wonders before making a decision that will change her life forever. "These words are my abode, my only foothold."

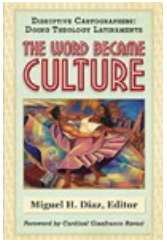
NICOLE-ANN LOBO *writes from London. She was the 2019 John Garvey Writing Fellow at* Commonweal.

BOOKS IN BRIEF



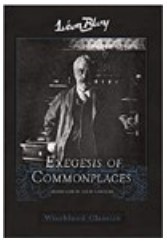
THE CLOCK AND THE CAMSHAFT
And Other Medieval Inventions We Still Can't Live Without
JOHN W. FARRELL
Prometheus Books
$19 | 192 pp.

John W. Farrell wants you to rethink your assumptions about medieval technology: namely, that there wasn't any, and that innovation languished during the Middle Ages, and had to wait for the technological revolutions of later centuries. In *The Clock and the Camshaft: And Other Medieval Inventions We Still Can't Live Without*, Farrell ably upends that assumption and others (for example, that development always moves linearly from the simple to the complex, or that technology drives social change rather than developing to address existing changes). The Middle Ages saw the emergence of agricultural tools like the heavy plow and new kinds of mills; of paper, printing presses, and eyeglasses to read those new pages. Many of these innovations owe their success to clerics and religious orders, like the competitive cathedral-building that led to new infrastructure, the clocks in those cathedral towers, and the legal codification of incorporations, including autonomous universities, preceded by the Church's own fight for autonomy.



THE WORD BECAME CULTURE
Disruptive Cartographers: Doing Theology *Latinamente*
ED. BY MIGUEL H. DIAZ
Orbis
$26 | 152 pp.

"What would Catholic systematics look like if it were done *latinamente*?" This question guides the multivolume project of Latinx theologians titled *Disruptive Cartographers: Doing Theology* Latinamente. The series is a comprehensive attempt to map theology across the plurality of *Latinidad* found in the United States. The first installment in the series, *The Word Became Culture*, provides reflections on a "preferential option for culture" from historical, biblical, anthropological and *lo popular* perspectives. Essays from Miguel H. Diaz, Jean-Pierre Ruiz, Maria Teresa Dávila, Néstor Medina, and Carmen Nanko-Fernández, plus a prologue by Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi, all uplift Latina/o cultural experiences "as an act of resistance against human indifference" and in protection of the dignity of all cultures and peoples.



EXEGESIS OF COMMONPLACES
LÉON BLOY
TRANS. BY LOUIS CANCELMI
Wiseblood Books
$15 | 282 pp.

Léon Bloy is today best known in this country for his two novels, *The Desperate Man* and *The Woman Who Was Poor*, and for his influence on several notable French Catholic intellectuals, including Jacques and Raïssa Maritain and Georges Bernanos. But during his own lifetime Bloy was at least as well known in France for his polemical works, some of which were never published in English. One of these, *Exegesis of Commonplaces (Exégèse des lieux communs)*, is now available in a lively new translation by Louis Cancelmi. Taking his cue from such bromides as "I'm no saint" and "business is business," Bloy lacerates the bourgeoisie for its self-satisfaction, avarice, and hypocrisy. Imagine *The Devil's Dictionary* as written by John the Baptist.

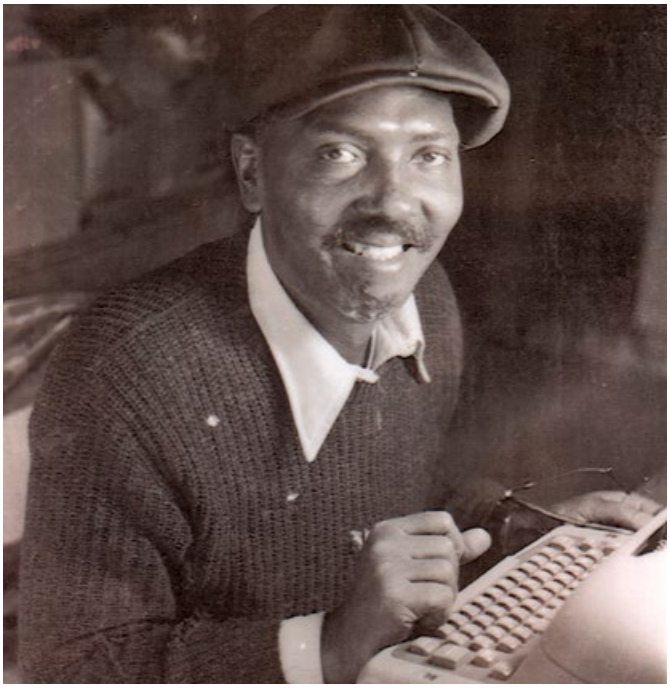
CHRISTIAN WIMAN

‘Drop a Notch the Sacred Shield’

A poem that’s reducible to a message is not a good poem. A poem you can paraphrase in prose is not a good poem. I feel absurd repeating such banalities, but much have I traveled in the Realms of Dull, wherein preachers and teachers and other professional talkers treat poems like wisdom machines or shortcuts to a conclusion. It’s like holding up a river stone far from the river. Dry and dull, the stone gives no hint of the gleam that made one marvel in the first place.

So. Though I do love *what* this poem by Etheridge Knight is saying, and though it gives a jolt of hope to a part of my heart that sometimes seems hardened with despair, what I would first of all draw attention to is the strange, syncopated, joyful, and utterly inimitable music of its meaning. Ultimately the music *is* its meaning.

Etheridge Knight



A Wasp Woman Visits a Black Junkie In Prison

After explanations and regulations, he
Walked warily in.
Black hair covered his chin, subscribing to
Villainous ideal.
“This can not be real,” he thought, “this is a
Classical mistake;
This is a cake baked with embarrassing icing;
Somebody’s got
Likely as not, a big fat tongue in cheek!
What have I to do
With a prim and proper-blooded lady?”
Christ in deed has risen
When a Junkie in prison visits with a Wasp woman.

“Hold your stupid face, man,
Learn a little grace, man; drop a notch the sacred shield.
She might have good reason,
Like: ‘I was in prison and ye visited me not,’ or—some such.
So sweep clear
Anachronistic fear, fight the fog,
And use no hot words.”

After the seating
And the greeting, they fished for a denominator,
Common or uncommon;
And could only summon up the fact that both were human.
“Be at ease, man!
Try to please, man!—the lady is as lost as you:
‘You got children, Ma’am?’” he said aloud.

The thrust broke the dam, and their lines wiggled in the water.
She offered no pills
To cure his many ills, no compact sermons, but small
And funny talk:
“My baby began to walk...simply cannot keep his room clean...”
Her chatter sparked no resurrection and truly
No shackles were shaken
But after she had taken her leave, he walked softly,
And for hours used no hot words.

INDIANA HISTORICAL SOCIETY, M0798

Identity can be liberating and it can be oppressive. This is true for everyone, from secularists to Christians, from ex-cons to cancer patients.

Identity can be liberating and it can be oppressive. It can be liberating to discover and claim who you truly are. It can be oppressive to feel yourself trapped in identities that other people define. This is true for everyone, from secularists to Christians, from ex-cons to cancer patients. This is one of Knight's reasons for foregrounding identity in the title. Nobody wants to be called a Wasp. Nobody wants to be called a Black Junkie. But these designations are not equal. This poem is incredibly generous in spirit—and it is *in spirit*: Knight imagined this event, which I actually find more moving than if it were "real." It seems harder to sit in a lonely cell dreaming such communion without an actual event to draw on. Behind this poem, though, lies a little prose poem that Knight also wrote about prison, where he spent eight years of his life for armed robbery.

Rehabilitation & Treatment in the Prisons of America

The Convict strolled into the prison administration building to get assistance and counseling for his personal problems. Inside the main door were several other doors proclaiming: Doctor, Lawyer, Teacher, Counselor, Therapist, etc. He chose the proper door, and was confronted with two more doors: Custody and Treatment. He chose Treatment, went in, and was confronted with two more doors: First Offender and Previous Offender. Again he chose the proper door and was confronted with two more doors: Adult and Juvenile. He was an adult, so he walked through that door and ran smack into two MORE doors: Democrat and Republican. He was democrat, so he rushed through that door and ran smack into two MORE doors: Black and White. He was Black, so he rushed—RAN—through that door—and fell nine stories to the street.

Here Knight goes to embrace his last identity—which is the only one he was born with, the only one he could never change—and it destroys him. It's a trap set by others. A machinery of language and labels. A symptom of systemic rot, wherein even a Black man who has paid his dues (and armed robbery would seem to warrant some serious dues) and is actively seeking treatment and rehabilitation (Knight did eventually kick his heroin habit) is dropped back into the same absurd, humiliating, and often fatal half-status that drove him to despair in the first place.

Jesus promises both the fulfillment and annihilation of identity. "You are in me deeper than I am in me," says Augustine. "Therefore if any man be in Christ he is a new creature," says Paul. And in Revelation this whole world is both consumed and consummated by and with God's transfiguring love.

Meanwhile, as three officers look on and casually talk, another one slowly strangles a Black man named George Floyd in an American street. Meanwhile, because a metaphorical virus has infected a political party, a real one has killed more than half a million Americans. Meanwhile, for much of last year the whole sky has been on fire in the American West.

What I love about this Knight poem is just how modest its miracle is. No shackles are broken, no hearts are ripped open, no one has some transformative rapture. No, all that happens is one very troubled man in one very dark place has an afternoon without saying "hot words." His chronic anger is eased out of a human connection, out of his own ability to reach out. Note that it's his question that gets their discussion going, his curiosity or desperate politeness that frees them, for a moment, from being only a Wasp and a Junkie.

Note, too, the texture of this truth. "After the greeting, they fished for a denominator, / Common or uncommon; / And could only summon up the fact that both were human." "Denominator" suggests statistics and fractions; "summon" is shadowed by judgment and law; and all of these "common" sounds seem writhing toward the one word that, for both of these people, means freedom. This poem is so playful, musical, and buoyant that you can almost—but only almost—forget the abyss of bad circumstance, intractable misunderstandings, and hellish history that lie behind it. That's no miracle. It's something much more durable, available, *human*.

CHRISTIAN WIMAN *teaches religion and literature at Yale Divinity School. His most recent book is* Survival Is a Style**.**

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- Christianity's essence, which is human beings living the life of the Trinity who are really present in us by grace:

  Of the ways we live God's own life, the Eucharist is the summit. The sole purpose of the Eucharist is the preservation and perfection of the Trinity's real presence in us by sanctifying grace. (*Ecclesia de eucharistia*, 35-36; *Catechesi Tradendae*, 5)

  "Being in our souls is infinitely dearer to Jesus than being in the host." St. Terese of Lisieux, Doctor of the Church.

- The main motivator for Christian behavior in the already evangelized according to Scripture:

  We pursue discipleship and avoid sin because we appreciate the divine dignity grace gives us. Pastors must foster that appreciation as the apostles did. Our fear should be fear of losing the great gift, eternal divine life, we know we **already** have.

  "Other Christians long and pray for you due to the surpassing grace in you" (2 Co 9:14-15). "I have given them our glory **so that** they may be one (i.e., love each other) as we are one (i.e., in the unity of the Holy Spirit)" (Jn 17:22-23; *Gaudium et spes,* 21).

- The primary and most important priesthood, the Royal Priesthood of all Christians:

  Those in grace act *in persona Christi* and are "other Christs" in an infinitely more intimate way than presbyters; they share Jesus' personal worship of the Father. Presbyters in mortal sin do not, but still have their way of acting *in persona Christi*.

  "The Royal Priesthood is the unfolding of baptismal grace; the ministerial priesthood is at its service" (*Catechism,* 1547). "Our great dignity comes from baptism, not ordination" (*Christifidelis Laici,* 51).

- The Church's call to first be a visibly loving family, then a hierarchical structure but only as a means to that end:

  We love all, but are a sacrament, a **visible** sign, of unity by love for **fellow Christians** that shows we believe in Jesus' real presence in them—His plan for saving nonChristians (Jn: 17:23). His New Law made the Mass a meal for a loving family (Jn 13:35).

  "The faithful united by their brotherly love are a sign of unity revealing God's presence to all" (*Gaudium et spes,* 21).

- The two necessary dispositions by which we cooperate with actual grace: repent and believe the Great News ("gospel"):

  Repenting is truly **intending** to avoid sin and do good. Believing is **trusting** that Jesus, not our virtue, will accomplish those intentions in us. "I have no justice of my own, only what comes from faith in Jesus" (Phil 3:9).

  "Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the Great News . . . . to lay the building's foundation" (1 Co 1:17; 3:10).

Anyone ordained should have experienced at least two successful tools for initial personal evangelization, like *Alpha, ChristLife, The Life in the Spirit Seminar, The 4 Spiritual Laws*, etc. He may not need them for himself but needs to know methods God is now using for adult conversion to the **person** of Jesus in the already **churched**. He also needs to know that careful discernment may require him to change his pastoral assumptions and tools as society changes.

Some quotes here are paraphrased for space. For exact quotes, evidence from the Magisterium, and full analysis, read the cover and pp. 1-3 of the *Short Study Guide*, then the two documents under *Evidence,* at www.joyfulshepherdretreat.org.

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Childe Hassam, *New Fields, New Hampshire*, 1916

Things

ALICE MCDERMOTT

The intersection of Route 27 and Main Street in East Hampton, New York, has enchanted me since I was a child. There is the postcard loveliness of it: the town pond reflecting reeds and sky, the swans, the worn cemetery stones set in lush grass. Every summer of my childhood I felt that catch-your-breath thrill at the unchanging sight of it as my father drove us through the town for our two-week vacation in what we always called "the country," never "the Hamptons." The sensation caught me again that day in late June when my husband and I returned to East Hampton after a ten-year hiatus.

As we made the left turn into the village, I felt myself delighted once again by the placid beauty of the scene, the deep colors and the watery light. Passing the Home Sweet Home museum, a preserved cedar cottage from the 1700s, I recalled summer "educational" visits there and a fascination I'd had as a child with an antique checker set that was always on display—the checkers brown or yellow corn kernels, the board set up to suggest that a game was already underway, that the children who played it had only briefly, recently, stepped away.

My obsession with this display involved my certainty that someday, from the corner of my eye, I might actually catch a glimpse of the two children who had played there centuries ago—an obsession spiced deliciously by my absolute terror that I might, someday, actually catch, from the corner of my eye, a glimpse of the children who had played there, children now two hundred years dead.

As we drove through the village again that June, I recalled, as well, church fairs on the green and a delightful "needle in the haystack" game—delightful to me, who had no chance at games of skill—that involved simply searching through a pile of hay until you found a prize.

I remembered, too, an anniversary dinner my husband and I had shared, our fourth wedding anniversary thirty years earlier, at The Hedges Inn, just beyond the pond, where the bartender plied us with free drinks and ghost stories that involved innocent objects—an umbrella stand, a lady's shawl—moving eerily about the upstairs rooms.

That summer thirty years ago was also the summer of the year my father died, the first and last time my mother went out to the country alone.

Driving through the village once again, I was reminded that for me it had always been my father's place, East Hampton. He'd come out here from Manhattan as a child, brought by an Irish aunt who had married a local. He'd bought his first house on Dayton Lane. His older sister lived on Georgica Road. When we were children, it seemed to us that he knew everyone in town, from the policeman at Newtown Lane to the clerks at the A&P to the volunteers in the Ladies' Village Improvement Society shop—another, figurative, haystack for my brothers and me, where we were let loose every summer with a quarter or two to discover among the jumble all kinds of unexpected wonders, old picture books, ancient military medals, a cigar box filled with cat's-eye marbles, a brown paper bag brimming with odd buttons. My husband and I were on our way to Amagansett, to a beach house we had rented years before. I was turning sixty and we were meeting old friends to celebrate, to commiserate. It struck me as we

AGEFOTOSTOCK/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

passed through the village that the years I'd had my father in my life—thirty—were now to be outnumbered by the years I was without him.

The single key was in its usual place at the Amagansett cottage, and once we let ourselves in, I found the two full sets of keys the owner had left for us. I placed one set on the mantel and was suddenly struck with the sixty-something premonition that we were going to lock ourselves out by week's end.

I decided to put the other set in the car. I went out to the short driveway. The trunk was open. My husband was carrying our bags inside. I brushed aside a beach towel to place the keys in a secure corner of the trunk and suddenly saw my father's signature, as familiar as a much-loved face.

I reached in. It was a Florida automobile-registration card, filled out with his last address, dated 1981, and signed with his own distinctive flourish. That car had been sold decades ago. This one was fairly new. For three years I'd opened and closed this trunk daily, filled it with grocery bags, suitcases, my mother's wheelchair. I'd never seen this card before. Nor had my husband. We had no idea why it was suddenly there.

Just before we left for that trip to Long Island, I was putting away the detritus of a completed novel—notebooks, drafts, galleys—when I found a poem I had copied out somewhere along the way, a poem written by the fictional Konstantin Perov in Nabokov's short story "A Forgotten Poet." I'd copied it down to remind myself of something—something about the way objects appear in fiction.

> If metal is immortal, then somewhere
> there lies the burnished button I lost
> upon my seventh birthday in a garden.
> Find me that button and my soul will know
> that every soul is saved and stored and treasured

In *Swann's Way*, Proust tells the reader this:

> I find the Celtic belief very reasonable, that the souls of those we have lost are held captive in some inferior creature, in an animal, in a plant, in some inanimate object, effectively lost to us until the day, which for many never comes, when we happen to pass close to the tree, come into possession of the object, that is their prison. Then they quiver, they call out to us, and as soon as we have recognized them, the spell is broken. Delivered by us, they have overcome death and they return to live with us.

In *The Habit of Being*, her collected letters, Flannery O'Connor says,

> St. Augustine wrote that the things of the world pour forth from God in a double way: intellectually into the minds of the angels and physically into the world of things.... The artist penetrates the concrete world in order to find at its depths the image of its source, the image of ultimate reality.

Whether they contain the souls of the dead or the image of ultimate reality, no inanimate object (or animal or plant, for that matter) in a story or a novel is arbitrary. How can it be? It is not set there by nature or happenstance, by market forces or human need. Objects in a novel or story are created, made up, selected by a creative intelligence (the author), chosen and then hand-delivered via the prose, and as such they all, every one of them, quiver with meaning, or the potential for meaning. Every one of them contains the potential to stir a memory, evoke a metaphor, conjure a ghost, reflect an ultimate reality.

If Proust and O'Connor, and my own childish fear of haunted checkerboards, can't convince you of this, of the potential for meaning inherent in every object you include in your novel or story, think about it this way:

You receive a birthday gift from your partner, spouse, lover, oldest friend, whatever. It is, let's say, a ceramic chipmunk. Your first thought when you unwrap the gift is: Why? Was there some mad, perhaps drunken, moment from your past together that featured a chipmunk? Is there some classical or mythological or contemporary literary reference that you're missing? Doesn't the gift's very specificity—why not a ceramic rabbit or a Dutch boy or a pineapple—imply some message, some joke, some hidden meaning?

You look up from the gift to find that your friend is smiling warmly, knowingly. "Cute," you might say, "but what does it mean?"

If the explanation is good, as in, "If that chipmunk hadn't gotten into your tent at summer camp, we never would have met," if it evokes a forgotten past or connects cleverly to some aspect of your shared experience, your pleasure in the gift, and your admiration for your thoughtful friend, will increase dramatically. If, however, your friend, partner, lover, spouse shrugs and says, "No meaning. I just bought it for you," you surely will be disappointed, nonplussed. You may even suspect that it has been regifted.

No object in a story or novel is arbitrary, because every object, every detail, in fact, is selected by the writer, who has chosen to notice it, to make note of it. Every detail pours forth from the writer in a double way: as something inevitable, because the world being described contains it, but also as something meaningful, because the writer has made note of it, selected it from all the physical objects existing in the world that he or she has chosen not to describe. And because it is chosen, selected, made note of, elevated by the author's attention above all objects that are not mentioned, purpose, meaning, an ultimate, creative intelligence is implied.

And so all objects in fiction, even the most mundane, shimmer with mystery and meaning, with the souls of the dead as well as the image of some ultimate reality. Burnished buttons or shell-shaped cookies, mummified remains in a museum's glass case or a mundane registration card from the Florida DMV, these objects are no longer simply the things themselves, but something transformed by the writer's attention, saved and stored and treasured by the writer's art.

ALICE MCDERMOTT *is the author of eight novels. This essay is excerpted from her latest book,* What About the Baby?: Some Thoughts on the Art of Fiction, *which will be published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux on August 17, 2021.* *Copyright © 2021 by Alice McDermott. All rights reserved.*

Commonweal CONVERSATIONS

Monday, October 18, 2021

Pier Sixty at Chelsea Piers | New York City
6:30pm | Reception with Featured Guests
7:30pm | Dinner & Award Presentation

Our Featured Guests:

Dan Barry
Paul Baumann
Matthew Boudway
Rand Richards Cooper
Dylan Corbett
Katie Daniels
Neomi De Anda
Anthony Domestico
Paul Elie
Massimo Faggioli
Rita Ferrone
John Gehring
David Gibson
Patricia Hampl
Brett C. Hoover
Natalia Imperatori-Lee
Patrick Jordan
Cathleen Kaveny
Paul Lakeland
James Martin, SJ
Fr. Bryan Massingale
Timothy Matovina
Matt Mazewski
Alice McDermott
Paul Moses
Regina Munch
Carmen M. Nanko-Fernández
Mollie Wilson O'Reilly
Griffin Oleynick
Hosffman Ospino
Michael Peppard
Dominic Preziosi
Kirstin Valdez Quade
Valerie Sayers
Matthew Sitman
Peter Steinfels
Kenneth L. Woodward
Plus more to be announced soon!


Massimo Faggioli


Natalia Imperatori-Lee


James Martin, SJ


Fr. Bryan Massingale


Alice McDermott


Kirstin Valdez Quade


Kerry A. Robinson


Amy R. Goldman

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KEYNOTE PRESENTERS

Thursday, September 9, 2021 – 7:00 - 8:30 p.m. (EDT)

Father Dan Horan, OFM, Chicago Theological Union

"The Future Church is Now: Exploring the 'Joys and Hopes, Griefs and Anxieties' of Young Adult Catholics Today"

Friday, September 10, 2021 – 9:00 - 10:30 a.m. (EDT)

Kerry A. Robinson, Leadership Roundtable

"Co-Responsibility: Toward a New Culture of Leadership in the Church"

Friday, September 10, 2021 – 1:30 - 3:00 p.m. (EDT)

Christine Gebhardt, PhD, University of Notre Dame

"Intergenerational Dialogue in, and Moral Development with, Young Adults"

Friday, September 10, 2021 – 7:00 - 8:30 p.m. (EDT)

Kaya Oakes, University of California, Berkeley

"Beyond the Boundaries: How the Pandemic and Online Life are Changing Our Spiritual Lives"

Saturday, September 11, 2021 – 9:00 - 10:30 a.m. (EDT)

Sebastian Gomes, America Magazine

"I Can't Believe It! How Contemporary Catholicism Repels and Attracts"

Additional workshops include:

- Evangelization to Young Adults
- What the Top Campuses Know about Reaching College Students
- The State of Religion and Young People 2021: Navigating Uncertain Times
- New Education Models for Reaching College-Age Students
- Tweeting for Jesus: How Parish Communities Can Utilize Social Media to Reach the Faithful
- How can Parishes Engage with the Young Adult Community? What Comes Next?

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