A Review of Religion, Politics & Culture

Commonweal

JANUARY 5, 2018

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PLUS

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LETTERS

Dr. King, Donald Justice, Vietnam

KING & CHRISTIANITY

Reading Gary Dorrien's "King and His Mentors: Rediscovering the Black Social Gospel" (October 6) allowed me once and for all to uphold my own critique of Steven Pinker's characterization of Dr. King. In his book *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* Pinker credits the civil-rights movement with being an important precursor to the women's liberation movement, gay rights, and other struggles for the rights of minorities. But he dismisses the role of Christian faith in these progressive movements and makes the following outlandish claim (p. 677): "MLK rejected mainstream Christian theology and drew his inspiration from Gandhi, secular Western philosophy and renegade humanistic theologians."

When teaching recently at Manhattan College, I asked my students to critically evaluate that claim after having read and worked through King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" with them. I told them it counted as one of the most important statements to come out of American Christianity. Dorrien's nuanced account of the impact that King's teachers had on him should put the last nail in the coffin lid of Pinker's reductively secularist reading of King's love for his ministry and for the church.

PAUL DINTER
Ossining, N.Y.

UNJUST TO JUSTICE

Kevin Cantwell's poem "Old Miami" (October 20) includes the lines "Levine used to say if you remember one of his readings / that Donald Justice had never seen / a worker" and then goes on to recount Justice, during a childhood piano practice session, catching only a glimpse of a "sunburned man with a bucket of masonry trowels." Presumably this "Levine" is the poet Philip Levine, Justice's one-time classmate at the Iowa Writer's Workshop (they were in John Berryman's class together). Did Levine really say that? Actually, Justice saw plenty of workers, including his father, who made a living as a carpenter. When, as a child, Justice had to miss a year of school because of his osteomyelitis, his father worked after the hours of his regular job, building a house pretty much on his own. My friend Donald Justice revered his father and held in high regard people who do manual labor for a living.

JERRY HARP
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ADULTS IN THE ROOM

Bernard G. Prusak's article "A Right Not to Fight" (December 1) was curiously litigious about a young man's ethical options when seeking to avoid fighting in Vietnam. Never once, however, did he mention the egregious moral culpability of President Lyndon Johnson, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, and Secretary of State Dean Rusk for prosecuting the Vietnam War.

I had an acquaintance during that era who received his draft notice. He was a gentle, timid, bookish youth passionately opposed to the war. He told me he didn't know what to do in response to the draft notice. I told him to go to one of our parish priests and seek advice on how to become a conscientious objector, selective or otherwise. Having not heard from him for a while, I kept wondering whether he took my advice. Several months later I read in the local paper that he had immolated himself. An empty wine bottle and gasoline can were found next to his burnt body.

Prusak's article mentioned the word "kid" twice when alluding to the prospective youth seeking exemption from military service. Grown men sending youth off to that war makes them guilty not only of the Vietnamese deaths but also of the deaths of thousands of American youth. Count their names on Maya Lin's Vietnam Memorial.

JOHN BUCKLEY
Hingham, Mass.

From the Editors

Salt in the Wound

Israel's annexation of East Jerusalem has never been accepted by the international community. Fifty years ago, UN Security Council Resolution 242 demanded that Israel withdraw from the territories it occupied during the 1967 War, including East Jerusalem. The following year the Security Council passed a resolution demanding that the Israeli government stop expropriating Palestinian property in the eastern part of the city. A resolution in spring of 1980 condemned the construction of Jewish settlements in East Jerusalem and other occupied territories. Later that year, when Israel officially claimed all of Jerusalem, "complete and united," as its capital, yet another resolution declared that claim "null and void," and called on all countries with diplomatic missions in Jerusalem to withdraw them.

As a permanent member of the Security Council, the United States could have blocked any of these resolutions, but chose not to, despite its strong support for the state of Israel. While many U.S. presidents have promised during their campaigns to recognize Israel's sovereignty over the Holy City and to move the U.S. embassy there from Tel Aviv, none has kept that promise once elected. They have all understood that, on this question at least, what makes for good domestic politics would make for bad foreign policy. It would violate decades' worth of UN resolutions and thereby alienate many of our closest allies. More importantly, it would undermine whatever's left of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

But Donald Trump is different. He doesn't mind alienating a few allies now and then, and has always worried more about politics than policy. When it comes to the peace process, he is both ill-informed and overconfident. He promises that, with the help of his son-in-law Jared Kushner, he will succeed where everyone before him has failed, brokering what he calls the "ultimate deal" or "the deal of the century." Back in May, during a visit to Washington by the Palestinian president, Mahmoud Abbas, Trump remarked that such a deal is "frankly, maybe, not as difficult as people have thought over the years." Fools rush in where angels fear to tread, and God knows Trump is no angel.

It was dismaying, then, but not entirely surprising when the president announced on December 6 that the United States would formally recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, and eventually relocate its embassy there. "This is nothing more or less than a recognition of reality," he insisted. "It is also the right thing to do."

No one outside of the United States and Israel appeared to agree. Both China and the European Union quickly distanced themselves from the new U.S. policy. António Guterres, secretary general of the United Nations, warned against "any unilateral measures that would jeopardize the prospect of peace for Israelis and Palestinians." The governments of Muslim-majority countries throughout the world issued statements criticizing the move, in tones of caution or outrage. A spokesman for Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan called it a "grave mistake," while the king of Saudi Arabia told Trump it would only complicate future negotiations between the Israelis and the Palestinians. Speaking at his weekly general audience, Pope Francis expressed "deep concern for the situation" in the Holy Land and, without mentioning Trump, urged world leaders to "avoid adding new elements of tension in a world already shaken and scarred by many cruel conflicts."

The president's supporters and even some of his critics predicted that his announcement would be met in the Muslim world with no more than a bitter sigh of resignation. The main conflict in the Middle East, they said, was no longer between Israel and the Palestinians but between Shia Iran and the Sunni states. And, besides, didn't everyone understand by now that the two hundred thousand Israeli settlers in East Jerusalem were there to stay? Who could be surprised that the Trump administration, beholden to Evangelical voters and hardline Jewish groups like AIPAC, favored Israel's claims over those of the Palestinians?

There may have been sighs, but there has also been plenty of anger and unrest—mass demonstrations from Lebanon to Indonesia, clashes between Israeli soldiers and Palestinians protesters in the West Bank, missiles launched from Gaza followed by Israeli air strikes. Several Palestinians were killed and hundreds injured in "three days of rage." All for an empty gesture, a pointless "recognition of reality" that does nothing to advance the cause of peace or security in the Middle East, and gratuitously reminds the Arab Muslims and Christians of East Jerusalem that they remain unwelcome guests in their own home, dispossessed of land and deprived of dignity. As long as this wound remains open, anything worth calling diplomacy will at least avoid rubbing salt in it. For the past seven decades, U.S. presidents of both parties have understood this. They have also understood that the status of Jerusalem must finally be determined as part of a peace agreement, not in advance of one. But these considerations appear to be lost on President Trump. He seems to care only that he is the first president who has dared to keep this irresponsible campaign promise—the consequences be damned. ■

December 12, 2017

E. J. Dionne Jr.

A Recipe for Autocracy

OUR INSTITUTIONAL CRISIS IS UPON US

Our democratic republic is in far more danger than it was even a few weeks ago. Until this point, there was an underlying faith in much of the political world that if Robert Mueller's investigation of Russian collusion in the election of Donald Trump turned up damning material about the president, Republicans in Congress would feel obligated by their commitment to the country's well-being to take him on. We would often hear recollections of how Republicans during Watergate—Sen. Barry Goldwater would inevitably come up—decided that the smoking guns were too smoky and that Richard Nixon had to go. They made clear to him that he no longer had the support of his party. Surely, said the optimists, we have not drifted so far from decency that this sort of patriotism is beyond us.

Well, it sure seems to be. It's not surprising that Trump and those on his payroll want to protect him at all costs. But we learned last week that congressional Republicans are deepening their complicity in derailing Mueller's investigation and burying the facts. The more Mueller imperils Trump, the more McCarthyite the GOP becomes.

The apotheosis of Republican congressional collusion with Trump's efforts to hang on at all costs came at a hearing of the House Judiciary Committee. One Republican after another attacked Mueller and the Federal Bureau of Investigation as if the latter should be placed on a new compendium of subversive organizations. The occasion was testimony before the committee by Christopher Wray, the Trump-appointed FBI director. It was heartening to see Wray stand up for his colleagues, which made you wonder if Wray may soon go the way of his predecessor, James Comey.

Deserving an Academy Award for the Most Striking Imitation of a Member of the Old House Un-American Activities Committee was Rep. Louie Gohmert. The hard-right Texas Republican went through a roll call of investigators, name by name, asking Wray if each had shown political bias. Wray defended every one of them he knew, and wryly smiled when he was unfamiliar with one of the five names on Gohmert's hit list. Gohmert might as well have echoed the favored question of the congressional inquisitors of the 1940s and '50s: "Are they now or have they ever been…supporters of Hillary Clinton?" When Republicans are FBI haters who are sidetracking probes into Russian subversion, the world truly is turned upside down.

Note also the statement of Rep. Jim Jordan (R-Ohio) that if every member of Mueller's team who was "anti-Trump" was kicked off, "I don't know if there'd be anyone left." The implication is that even if Mueller's investigation produces unassailable evidence of wrongdoing by Trump, we should ignore the truth, because Mueller's team should have been vetted to exclude anyone who had a smidgeon of doubt about the president.

Robert Mueller

The rationale for this GOP assault is that Peter Strzok, an FBI agent involved in the investigation, exchanged texts critical of Trump and favorable to Clinton with an FBI lawyer. Somehow, Mueller got no props for removing Strzok from the investigation this summer.

But even if Strzok played some role in developing material that ultimately hurts Trump or proves Russian collusion, are Americans supposed to brainwash themselves? Trump's allies want us to say: "Too bad the president lied or broke the law, or that Russia tried to tilt our election. This FBI guy sending anti-Trump texts is far more important, so let's just forget the whole thing." Really?

Because we are inured to extreme partisanship and to the Right's habit of rejecting inconvenient facts, we risk overlooking the profound political crisis that a Trumpified Republican Party could create. And the conflagration may come sooner rather than later, as Mueller zeroes in on Trump and his inner circle. Only recently, it was widely assumed that if Trump fired Mueller, many Republicans would rise up to defend our institutions. Now, many in the party are laying the groundwork for justifying a cover-up. This is a recipe for lawlessness.

We also assumed that Mueller's findings would be respected because of his deserved reputation for fairness and independence. Just last May, Newt Gingrich called him a "superb choice to be special counsel" and praised his "honesty and integrity." Now, pro-Trump politicians feel free to contradict anything they said in the past and to dismiss what they once saw as legitimate authority if those who hold it threaten their power. This is a recipe for autocracy. We are far closer to the edge than we want to think. ■

Thomas Boerman

Throwing Innocents to the Wolves

THE CRUELTY OF THE DECISION TO RESCIND DACA

Concern about President Trump's decision to rescind DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) has focused in large part on how seriously it would affect the U.S. economy and the futures of DACA recipients ("Dreamers") and their families. What's been overshadowed is the grave danger that many of the nearly 700,000 Dreamers from El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, and many parts of Mexico would face if the U.S. government were to deport them.

Dafne Jacobs, a DACA recipient, at a rally in Los Angeles on September 1

Day-to-day life for millions of people in these countries is defined by violent gangs, drug traffickers, and corrupt police and government officials. Gender-based violence and discrimination and persecution against members of the LGBT community are rampant. Navigating these hazards requires skills and understanding that the majority of Dreamers could not possibly possess, having left their countries at young ages and having been away for so long. Knowing the dos and don'ts is critical to survival in these countries; lacking that awareness, Dreamers would be particularly vulnerable to predators and victimization.

Generally speaking, Dreamers would be immediately recognized wherever they settled. They'd be at predictably high risk of extortion, with death the punishment for being unwilling or unable to pay; of kidnapping, with their families then facing exorbitant ransom demands that many could not conceivably meet; of being coerced to join gangs and drug-trafficking organizations under threat of torture and death; of sexual predation, including sexual slavery and forced involvement in the commercial sex industry; of violence based on sexual orientation; and of psychological, physical, sexual, and financial abuse in the labor market.

Despite the presence of many officials of high integrity and professionalism, the capacity, and in certain respects the willingness, of governments to control violence and protect the public in these countries are constrained by extreme resource scarcity, criminal groups that intimidate and terrorize public officials, indifference on the part of many public servants, endemic corruption, and institutional weaknesses within the police, prosecutors' offices, and courts. Together, these conditions make it completely unrealistic to believe that Dreamers would receive protection from the governments of these countries. For example, more than 95 percent of gang-related and organized-crime homicides in El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, and Mexico go unpunished. Gender-based violence is rampant and, relative to its frequency, is rarely investigated or punished; and violent crimes against Dreamers who are members of the LGBT community would almost certainly be ignored because of prejudices deeply embedded in the cultures and institutions of those countries.

Exacerbating Dreamers' vulnerability further is the fact that many have no family to support and protect them during the re-integration process. Within these societies, a family network is essential for survival, and not only for minors. Social, cultural, and economic factors make it common for people to live with and remain economically tied to parents or other adult family members well into their thirties, including after they are married. Without a family network, and given sub-poverty-level wages, even Dreamers with a college education and marketable employment skills may find it impossible to survive. Those who lack such skills, or who speak only marginal Spanish, would face even greater difficulties.

When considering the future of DACA, we must acknowledge that deporting Dreamers to dangerous countries would, in potentially tens of thousands of cases, be like throwing innocents to the wolves.

Thomas Boerman *has worked as a consultant to governmental and non-governmental organizations involved in violence reduction efforts in Central America and Mexico; authored and contributed to numerous articles and reports; and served as an expert witness in over a thousand gang, organized crime, gender-based and sexual-orientation cases in U.S. immigration courts.*

CNS PHOTO / KYLE GRILLOT, REUTERS

Nothing Was Inevitable

The Leaders of the Second World War

John Lukacs

Hitler, Churchill, Roosevelt, Stalin—four names so familiar that it may seem there is nothing more to be said about them. Here I want to try to overcome this mental numbness, to think again about what we ought to know about these four leaders in the Second World War and rescue them from the clichés that have obscured them.

Let's start with Adolf Hitler, who was, in one sense, the greatest figure in the twentieth century. Unfortunately, the word "greatest" carries at least some suggestion of admiration. So maybe it would be better to say "most extraordinary." He ruled and directed 70 or 80 million Germans and Austrians in a world war. It took the three greatest empires of the world, six times larger than his own German empire, almost six long years to destroy him. He and his armies fought till the very end.

After the war his reputation went from seeming fearsome to seeming uniquely loathsome. The reason for this is obvious: the mass murder of those Hitler saw as actual or potential enemies—Communists, Gypsies, the disabled, homosexuals, but, above all, Jews. That record is well known, memorable, overwhelming. Hitler's responsibility for this can never be denied.

Where and when did a preoccupation with the Jews crystallize in his mind? We know that it happened not in Vienna but in Munich, not before but after World War I—in 1919, when he was thirty. Anti-Semitism was less current in Munich than in Vienna, which had a larger Jewish population. It was the rise of Jewish wealth and influence in Vienna against which some of the more influential anti-Semites were reacting. "Anti-Semitism" was a relatively recent term, replacing the older "Judeophobia," which may be a more accurate term in the case of Hitler, who after 1919 often referred to the Jews as a spiritual rather than a physical race.

There is not much reason to further research the origins of Hitler's unspoken motives with respect to the Jews; some part of them will always remain unknowable. We can only speculate. But there remain at least two matters in Hitler's life that are still worth further study. One we could call "exceptions"; the other is a history not of his motives but of his *purposes*.

Hitler had known some Jews in his early youth. Two in particular stood out. One was Eduard Bloch, a Jewish doctor whose kindness and solicitude for Hitler's mother before her death left an indelible impression on Hitler. He referred to Dr. Bloch as an *Edeljude*, a noble Jew. When Germany occupied Austria in 1938, Hitler made sure Bloch was protected. In 1940 he facilitated Dr. and Mrs. Bloch's departure from Vienna for the United States. The other Jew who had meant much to Hitler was the Austrian philosopher Otto Weininger. Hitler said that Weininger "before his suicide realized that the Jew lives by the decomposition of other nations and peoples."

There are a few other instances where Hitler's hatred for Jews was not unconditional. In 1934, the year after he became Germany's chancellor and Fuhrer he permitted his financial advisor, Schacht, to preside at a banquet honoring the Speyers, a German Jewish family of bankers, before the last of the Speyers left for England and the United States. Hitler was convinced that Germany must maintain good relations with England. He welcomed an exceptional relationship with the English press magnate Lord Rothermere. Their meetings in 1936 and 1937 were arranged by Rothermere's mistress, the princess Stephanie Hohenlohe, who was half-Jewish. Hitler treated her with exceptional courtesy. When in November 1938 Kristallnacht saw the destruction of Jewish stores and businesses and the cruel beatings of Jewish persons, Hitler told the SS to halt these atrocities. In 1944 he permitted the German purchase of the large Manfred-Weiss-Csepel steel works in Hungary in exchange for letting the Weiss-Csepel family, thirty in number, move to Portugal. Later that year he allowed the Swedish Raoul Wallenberg to enter Hungary and put a considerable number of houses under Swedish "protection," whereby thousands of Jewish men and women in the city of Pest survived the war. Such exceptions and partial exceptions may suggest how complicated Hitler was, but they do nothing to exonerate him.

John Lukacs *has written widely about the Second World War. His books include* The Last European War, The Duel *and* Five Days in London, May 1940. *His first contribution to* Commonweal *appeared in 1952.*

The victors at Yalta

As for his purposes, until late 1941 his intention was to promote the expulsion of Jews from Germany (and from much of Europe). They would have to abandon their possessions and flee to other continents. He gave no thought to what would happen to them after that. For a short time in 1940 he and his minions were considering deportation of most Jews to Madagascar. Then his invasion of Russia in June 1941 brought a change. The great majority of Eurasian Jews lived in the European portion of Russia, Poland, and the former Baltic states. What was to be done with them? In 1941 it was still possible for a few Jews to escape to America. But expulsion was no longer possible. So what about those remaining millions of Eastern European Jews? Most of them (in Poland, for example) had already been oppressed, imprisoned, tortured; many had been murdered, often by special German units. Should the surviving Jews be allowed to stay where they were? No. Hitler decided they had to be exterminated. And so they were, beginning in late 1941. Having made this momentous decision, Hitler did not wish to contemplate the Jewish problem any longer. In early 1943 a statistician of the SS, a man named Dr. Korherr, presented the Fuhrer with a paper that showed how many Jews had been disposed of. Hitler showed no interest.

A final observation. In the enormous literature about Hitler, there is not much about him as a statesman. Yet here too we may detect a change. In the beginning of his political career and for some time thereafter, Hitler said that states belonged to the past. What mattered, he said, were the people, *das Volk*. This was a theme of his *Mein Kampf*, written between 1924 and 1926. (Many years later he remarked that much of *Mein Kampf* had become outdated.) From 1936 onward, his knowledge of and insight into strategy often superseded his ideology. There are many examples of this. In the European states he conquered after 1939 he insisted on their subservience to Germany, but he did little to impose National Socialism on them, save for a few instances. (One was Quisling in Norway.) The most important of his world-political intentions was his decision to invade Russia in 1941. That intention is still wrongly interpreted by many people who regard it as but another application of his ideology, his hatred of Communism, and/or his wish to acquire more land for Germany (*Lebensraum*)—which is how he explained it to the German people. Yet his main intention had to do not with Soviet Communism or with Stalin, but with Churchill and Roosevelt. Once he knocked Russia out of the war and forced Stalin to give up, what could Churchill and Roosevelt do? Germany, ruling all of Eurasia, would be invincible; the Americans and the British could no longer set foot in Europe, and they would have to come to terms with him.

Churchill was—and remains—the hero of the Second World War. He did not win it. But he was the man who did not lose it. He was a godsend. I have written about him often, and especially in two books, *The Duel* and *Five Days in London, May 1940*. They deal with the months May to July 1940. That was the period when he and Britain did not lose the Second World War. Near the end of May 1940, Hitler's armies had conquered most of Western Europe, and France was about to fold. Almost two hundred thousand British soldiers were closed in around Dunkirk, and had to be ferried back to England. Hitler could have captured most of them. For about two days he hesitated. He thought that England might not continue the war. Churchill told his war cabinet and then the people of Britain that he and they would fight on. Hitler was convinced the he was a representative of the future—the future of Germany and of Europe, perhaps of the world. Churchill represented the past—and he prevailed.

Churchill understood Hitler better than Hitler understood

him. As early as 1930 Churchill showed an interest in Hitler. This concern with a Central European demagogue was rare for a British politician. At the end of that decade the British people came to recognize that Churchill had been right all along: Hitler was dangerous, and he had to be stopped. But was that enough? On May 10, 1940, the day Churchill became prime minister, as he was on his way to the king for the ceremonial appointment, he said to his bodyguard, "I hope it is not too late. We can only do our best." Their best would not have been enough without outside support. Hitler had to be conquered by the enormous powers of the United States and Russia. Britain, having become the weakest of these three, could only help. Churchill came to understand that all too well.

Late one Sunday evening—December 7, 1941—Churchill heard the news: the Japanese had attacked the United States at Pearl Harbor. He had been worried, reasonably enough, that Japan might invade Dutch and British possessions in the Pacific but not American ones, and that Roosevelt would find it difficult to declare war against Germany. Now everything was different. As Churchill wrote in his war memoirs, "So we have won, after all! Hitler's fate is sealed. Mussolini's fate is sealed. And the Japanese will be ground to dust." So it was to be. The war against Germany would last for another three and half years—the direst of them, 1942, marked with British defeats. But Hitler had brought America and Britain together. By 1941 the United States was waging a war against Germany in the Atlantic. Twice in that year Churchill traveled across the Atlantic to meet Roosevelt. The extent of Britain's dependence on the United States was obvious.

There were differences in strategic plans. In 1942 and 1943 Roosevelt and his military authorities were planning an American and British invasion of France. Churchill insisted that this was impossible. Instead he advocated a landing in French Northern Africa, which took place in November 1942, together with the first British military victory against German forces at El Alamein in northwestern Egypt. This was all part of Churchill's larger plan to invade Europe from the Mediterranean, which he called "the soft underbelly of Europe." Profoundly aware of the strength and resolution of the German forces, he thought this was the best way to penetrate Hitler's domain. That, however, was not how Roosevelt and the American commanders envisaged the ending of the war—and Churchill and Britain had become very dependent on the United States. The result was the invasion of Western Europe in June 1944.

Churchill had hoped for, and to some extent achieved, a good relationship with Stalin, whom he called "Uncle Joe." He knew how much depended on Russia's involvement in the war. Churchill's impressions were sometimes too romantic, but he did come to see Stalin as a statesman. In four years he flew to meet Stalin five times, traveling to Moscow twice and then to Tehran, Yalta, Potsdam. Churchill recognized that Russia's domination of Eastern Europe was inevitable. There was nothing he could do about it without support from the Americans. In 1944 he told Charles de Gaulle that Russia was now a hungry wolf in the midst of sheep: "but after the meal comes the digestion period." Russia, he predicted, would not be able to digest all of its conquests. About that, too, he turned out to be right.

In 1945 the Russians occupied Eastern and parts of Central Europe. Churchill tried to find some kind of an acceptable agreement with the Russians about the status of Poland, without success. On the afternoon of their last conference in Potsdam he flew back to London. Next morning the results of the British election came in. The Labour Party had won, and Churchill immediately resigned as prime minister. England had survived, but the British Empire would not. Hitler had been defeated, but half of Europe was now cut off behind an "Iron Curtain." Churchill titled the last volume of his monumental history of the war *Triumph and Tragedy*.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt was elected president of the United States in 1932. He helped save the United States from the Depression, and was elected president four times—without precedent in American history. When war broke out in September 1939, not many Americans thought that their country should enter it. Then, before the summer of 1940, Hitler conquered almost all of Western Europe. England stood alone.

The great German statesman Bismarck was reputed to have said that the most important fact in the world was that Americans spoke English. He had a point, but the special relationship between Britain and United States was often less sure and more complicated than it appears in retrospect. For two decades after the First World War, most Americans thought the United States must never enter into another European conflict. Franklin Roosevelt did not like Churchill. As late as December 1939 he said to Joseph Kennedy, his ambassador to Britain (and an isolationist), "I have always disliked [Churchill] since the time I went to England in 1918. He acted like a stinker at a dinner I attended, lording it all over us. I'm giving attention now because there is a strong possibility that he will become the prime minister and I want to get my hand in now." But soon after June 1940 Roosevelt, responding to Churchill, began to support Britain in hundreds of ways, shedding American neutrality piece by piece. Still, he did not declare war on Germany until after Pearl Harbor. Unlike the war against Japan, a war against Germany was still not universally popular among Americans.

Churchill's dependence on Roosevelt was of course greater than Roosevelt's dependence on Churchill. The resources of America were so much greater than those of Britain. And there remained one profound difference between them that had consequences during and after the war. It involved their views about Russia. Franklin Roosevelt nurtured certain illusions about the Soviet Union even before the war. He (and Eleanor Roosevelt too) believed that Russia represented the future—not necessarily a future applicable to America, but a

future nonetheless. All Russia's roughness notwithstanding, they believed that, in the march of progress, Joseph Stalin's Soviet Union was midway between old imperial Britain and the democratic United States. They were unwilling or unable to see the reality: that Russia was not in-between but well behind both the United States and Britain. This Rooseveltian vision—or, rather, blindness—had long-lasting consequences. On important occasions during the war Roosevelt did not side with Churchill. He also had little or no interest in the eastern half of Europe. After the war, the American president who took the true measure of Stalin was not the aristocratic FDR but the modest Missouri democrat Harry Truman.

For a serious historian to write about Stalin is difficult—not because he was enigmatic (many historical figures, and especially Russian ones, were that), but because of the scarcity of documentary materials telling us what he thought and said, and when. After 1990 some of the Soviet Union's archives were opened. (They are now closed again). These revealed some important things about the Soviet government but little about Stalin himself. But history is about more than official records, and my purpose here is to suggest some things about Stalin—especially before, during, and after the Second World War—that are not generally known.

Franklin Roosevelt nurtured certain illusions about the Soviet Union even before the war. He (and Eleanor Roosevelt too) believed that Russia represented the future—not necessarily a future applicable to America, but a future nonetheless.

Let me begin with an observation that is generally accepted: Stalin was always a Russian nationalist. The problem is that many people, including historians who know this, accept that he also was an ideologue, a committed Communist. But as head of state, Stalin, like Hitler, became less and less of an ideologue and more and more of a politician. Of course, these two designations are not always contradictory; one can be both. What matters are the proportions. We have seen that Hitler's early dismissal of the importance of states gradually changed after he discovered that his abilities could, indeed must, be applied to the powers of states. Stalin learned something like this also. His interest in the destiny of international Communism receded as his interest in the destiny of Russia grew. This was at least one reason why he forced Trotsky out of the Soviet Union. But the most stunning proof of his evolution was his pact with Hitler in 1939, before the start of the Second World War.

Stalin respected and even admired Hitler. That inclination was not separable from his respect for Germany. In 1938 and 1939 France and Britain had sought a military alliance with the Soviet Union—instead of which Stalin opted for a special relationship with Hitler's Germany in the spring of 1939. Russia and Germany entered into a treaty dividing Poland and some of Eastern Europe between themselves. The treaty was signed in August 1939, less than ten days before Hitler invaded Poland, and Britain and France went to war. On the day after the treaty was signed, Stalin made a public toast to Hitler. "I know how much the German nation loves its Fuhrer. I shall therefore drink to his health."

This was more than a well-calculated gesture. We can see this from Stalin's choice of advisers. Earlier in 1939 he replaced his foreign minister, the Jewish Maxim Litvinov, with Vyacheslav Molotov, who became Stalin's closest adviser during the Second World War. Molotov and his own close advisor Vladimir Dekanozov sought good relations with Hitler's Germany. What they said on the day Germany invaded Russia (June 22, 1941) is significant. Molotov asked the German ambassador in Moscow, "Have we deserved this?" Dekanozov, then the Russian ambassador in Berlin, asked the German official bringing him the declaration of war: "Are you sure this is not a mistake?" Stalin's reactions—indeed, his entire behavior—on that fateful day and night, and for eight days afterward, were mysterious. He knew what was coming. The amassment of a huge German army along the German-Russian border could not have been secret. Moreover, Churchill sent a message to Stalin a month before the German invasion, informing him of what the Germans were about to do. On June 22, 1941, the iron-willed Stalin collapsed. He disappeared for eight days. Even now we don't know what he thought or did during that time. Finally, a Politburo group came to see him. According to one source, Stalin thought they had come to arrest him, but they told Stalin that he was the only one who could lead the Soviet Union. Three days later he addressed the people of Russia. His speech was that of a Russian patriot, with nothing about Communism.

The afternoon before Hitler invaded Russia, Churchill talked with his secretary John Colville. "If Hitler invaded Hell, I will make at least one favorable reference to the devil in the House of Commons," he said. That night he broadcast one of his best speeches. For weeks, even months,

JANUARY

I read a poem by Amichai to you:
"I'll sing until my heart breaks."
The great love of the word
between us, poem, prayer,
a psalm.

Winter is here now, ice
and the hunger of the chickadees
pushed out by squirrels
at the feeder, how the world
is for them.

Inside our house, the hard edge
of your illness makes relentless
war on your body, how the world
is for you.

— Norita Dittberner-Jax

Norita Dittberner-Jax has published five collections of poetry—most recently Crossing the Waters*, from Nodin Press. Norita has won numerous awards and fellowships, among them several nominations for the Pushcart Prize. One of the poetry editors for Red Bird Chapbooks, Norita lives with her husband in Lilydale, Minnesota, on the banks of the Mississippi River.*

thereafter, Stalin welcomed Churchill's statements (and British supplies) but did not truly trust him. Throughout the rest of 1941 and into 1942, he presented Churchill with unreasonable demands: he told Churchill that Russia was on the edge of collapse and asked him to send entire British divisions to Russia. Churchill had to tell him that this was not only unreasonable but impossible. It was only after Churchill's difficult trip to Moscow in August 1942 that Stalin's reservations about him began to abate.

Soon the Russian armies began to win impressive victories. In March 1943 there were rumors of a possible German-Russian negotiation, but by then Stalin knew that he could get more from Churchill and Roosevelt than anything Hitler could offer. Meanwhile, throughout 1943 and 1944 and even into 1945 Stalin and Churchill argued about Poland. The Soviet Union wanted to take a big piece of eastern Poland and give Poland a large piece of eastern Germany, and it wanted Poland's government to be wholly subservient to Russia. Against both of these demands Churchill fought in vain. Roosevelt was indifferent.

This leaves one final question. What did Stalin really want? After the war he imposed Communist governments on at least eight Eastern European states and on East Germany and East Berlin. Many people see this as proof that he was a dedicated Communist after all, and not just a Russian nationalist. But was this so? A clue to his thinking is what he said to the visiting Anthony Eden in December 1941, when the German army was hardly more than twenty miles west of where they sat in Moscow. Stalin said that "Hitler's problem is that he does not know how to stop." Eden replied, "Does anyone?" To which Stalin answered, "I do." And he did. In October 1944 Churchill flew to Moscow, desperate to reach some agreement with Stalin about Eastern Europe, most of which was about to be overrun by Russian troops. Churchill immediately produced a "percentages agreement." Romania and Bulgaria would be predominantly in Russia's sphere of interest; Hungary and Yugoslavia 50-50 (two days later Molotov convinced Stalin that Hungary should be 80 percent Russian). Greece would be Britain's concern, despite a large Communist guerrilla army there. Stalin agreed to all this, and kept his word.

Why, then, did Stalin insist on foisting Communist regimes on all these Eastern European states? He did it not because of the strength of Communism there, but because he felt threatened by the West. What Churchill had hoped for was a Russian sphere of interest, but not the imposition of Communist police states in one country after another—not an "Iron Curtain." I think Stalin believed it wasn't enough to have governments generally loyal to Russia; he needed governments *controlled* by Russia. He needed puppets, not allies.

Stalin died in 1953. He was aware, through most of his life, of the weakness of international Communism—and perhaps especially in Germany. How remarkable it is that in 1952, the year before his death, he suddenly proposed ending the partition of Germany, with the reciprocal withdrawal of American troops from West Germany and of the Russian military from East Germany. The West German and American governments rejected this plan, but in 1955 both the Russian and Western powers agreed to end the zoning of Austria and to withdraw from that Central European state. A year after that, the first popular revolts against Communist governments took place in Poland and Hungary. Russian armed forces were called in to suppress them, and though they succeeded in doing so, things would never be quite the same. Twenty-five years later Soviet rule in Eastern Europe started to collapse. Thirty-five years later Russia itself was no longer a Communist state. And yet, decades later, it remains an adversary. Once again, Russian nationalism has proved stronger than Communist ideology. ■

A Burnt-out Case

Aquinas & the Way We Work Now

Jonathan Malesic

When St. Thomas Aquinas was working at his highest pitch, he produced an average of four thousand words every day—a third more than there are in this essay. He kept this up for years. Granted, he had help: a team of scribes would take dictation as Aquinas talked his way through several parallel theological arguments. In modern terms, we might say that this arrangement ensured that everyone who held a stake in Aquinas's productivity—the Dominican order, the University of Paris, and the church at large—got the most value possible out of their unique asset.

It hardly needs to be said that the work Aquinas did was exceptionally good. According to contemporary accounts, its quality even drew divine attention. Sometime in the last year of his life, after he had written about the Blessed Sacrament, Aquinas began to levitate while celebrating the Mass. Christ spoke to him from a crucifix, saying that the theologian had "written well" of him. Then he asked, "What reward would you have for this labor?" Aquinas replied, "Nothing but you, Lord."

This story is supposed to demonstrate that Aquinas's output—enough to earn him tenure at a top American university every month or so—was matched by his humility, a quality not typically required for tenure. When his assistant Reginald observed that Aquinas might be made a cardinal, Aquinas replied that his first responsibility must be to his religious order, which he could best serve as a scholar and teacher. He had no need for titles or offices.

Aquinas's ultimate act of apparent humility occurred on December 6, 1273, St. Nicholas's Day, when he was forty-eight or forty-nine years old. Aquinas was celebrating Mass in the chapel of St. Nicholas, and he again had a vision. What exactly he saw is unknown. But afterward, he did not resume his dictation as he usually would. Reginald prodded him to get back to work, but Aquinas responded, "I can do no more; such things have been revealed to me that all that I have written seems to me as so much straw." He stopped writing altogether, leaving his *Summa Theologiae*—the summary of theology, and his masterwork—incomplete.

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A few weeks later, Aquinas went to visit his sister. He was wordless and exhausted, and she complained to Reginald that Aquinas "seems stupefied and does not answer at all." Reginald pestered him again about his inability or unwillingness to keep working. But then in the new year, Aquinas fell ill on a journey to the Council of Lyons, where he was expected to deliver arguments against the "errors" of the Orthodox churches. He died at a monastery in Fossanova, Italy, on March 7, 1274, just three months after the St. Nicholas Day vision.

This brief, final period of silence has puzzled and awed scholars of Thomas's work. Their interpretations typically come back around to Aquinas humbly recognizing his lowly place in the grand order of creation or the church. Writing in the 1950s, the German philosopher Josef Pieper claimed that Aquinas's "tongue is stilled by the superabundance of life in the mystery of God. He is silent, not because he has nothing further to say; he is silent because he has been allowed a glimpse into the inexpressible depths of that mystery which is not reached by any human thought or speech."

More recently, the Yale theologian Denys Turner has presented Aquinas as a "great but quiet, friendly mass of a man, for whom the life of poverty was that of the Dominican teacher who to the end preferred to stand out of the light so that others might see." Himself a prolific scholar, Turner sounds like a latter-day Reginald as he tries "to imagine the courage it took to resist the temptation to complete" the *Summa*, which, given Aquinas's pace of writing, he could have completed "in a matter of months." Thus Turner concludes that "something theologically important to Thomas, some sense of fidelity to his vocation, held him back."

Explanations like these make an obvious, if suspiciously pious, kind of sense. Whatever caused a great thinker and saint to stop writing must relate to a calling even higher than theology. The Angelic Doctor, almost by definition, must have had a good and holy reason for giving up his work.

I do not doubt Aquinas's virtue. But I wonder if the story that gets told about his last days might be incomplete. Aquinas was not only a saint; he was also a worker. And although

he died centuries before capitalism became an economic and moral force, the ideal of sanctity that he embodied—the union of productivity and humility—aligns neatly with an image of the ideal worker in today's capitalism. That ideal comes with a cost, one that Aquinas's final silence and death testify to.

In light of the productivity and humility that employers demand—indeed, that workers demand of themselves—and the moral consequences of that demand, we might see Thomas Aquinas somewhat differently. We don't need to jettison his saintliness to recover his humanity, his acquaintance with the limits of body and spirit. He is not just a shining, inimitable exemplar, but a man whose sorrow is surprisingly familiar.

When I tell academics that I quit a tenured faculty position at age forty, they offer enthusiastic congratulations. Some say they wish they could do the same. Based on this reaction, you would think that tenure was widely seen as a misfortune, and not a universally desired goal of academic life. Their congratulations suggest both that I must have quit to pursue something even higher and that there is something wrong with the way the contemporary university works. Only one of these explanations is true.

Over my eleven years teaching theology, I strove to be a model professor, and even if I did not work at a prestigious institution, I built a respectable CV. My book and articles received a handful of citations. I taught a heavy load of required undergraduate courses reasonably well. Colleagues looked to me as someone who could get things done. I won national grants and earned tenure without a fight.

But over time, the daily stresses of all of that teaching, plus the research, plus chairing committees and directing a center for teaching excellence—all of this in a context where resources were perennially tight—added up. Every year there were more assessment reports to file. Every year the college fretted more about the size of the incoming class. Would it be big enough for its tuition payments to cover a salary increase for faculty and staff? Every year faculty had to fight harder to defend departmental budgets. Every year good work went unrecognized.

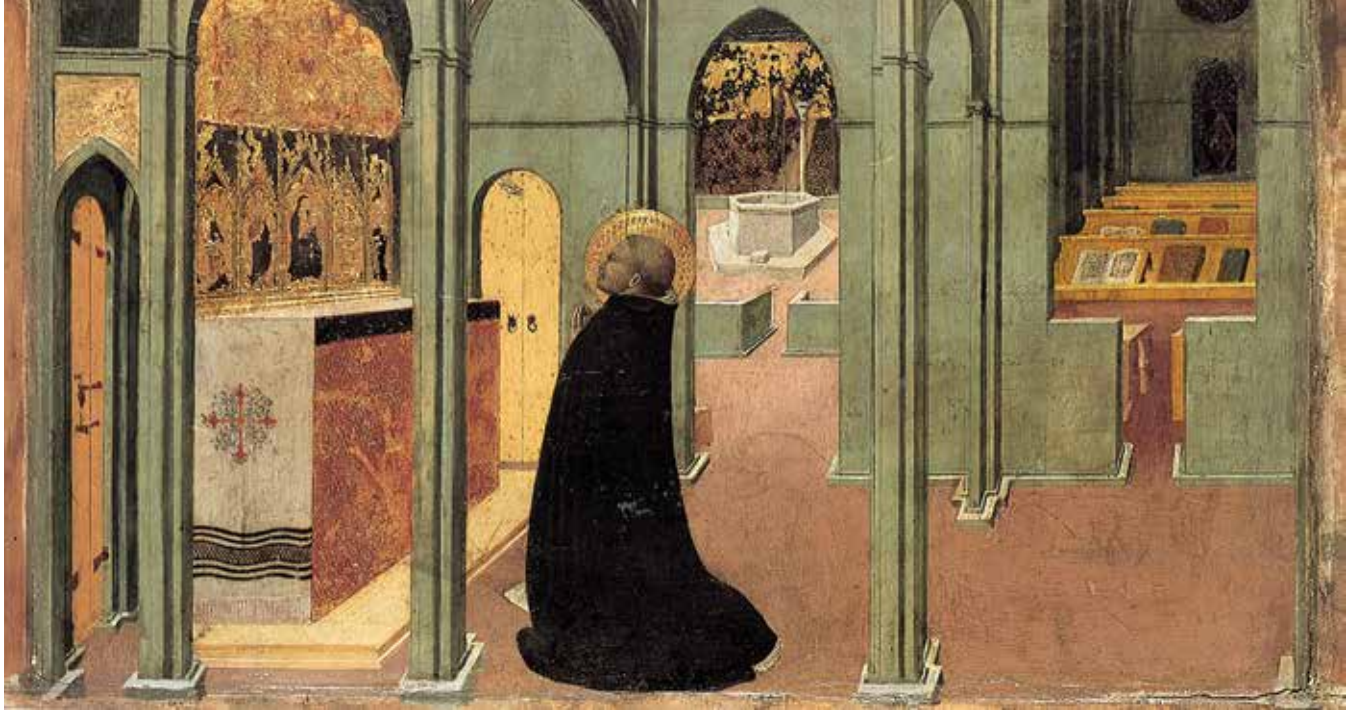
These conditions are now common in the academy outside of the wealthiest schools. Knowing that thousands of people shared my plight was no comfort, though, as I began to hate my job. Small problems became too much to bear. I began returning students' papers later and later. I even had trouble getting to class on time. It seemed like my students were learning nothing from me. Peers, including my department chair, continued to compliment my teaching. I didn't believe it; I saw my daily failure in the classroom firsthand, in every blank face of a student who wanted to be anywhere but at a desk listening to me.

On some level, I still wanted to be a professor. It had been my dream job, after all. But my body and mind had had enough. I had been living apart from my wife, also an academic, who was teaching in another state. No doubt, the distance between us contributed to my stress. We are hardly an unusual couple, though. Relationships are always implicated in people's working lives. And the "two-body problem" we faced is endemic to the academy, where like-minded people inevitably meet and marry and then seek careers in a terrible job market.

I took a semester of unpaid leave to rest—and to live under the same roof as my wife. When I came back, nothing had changed. I couldn't concentrate long enough to write a lesson plan. After years of going above and beyond, I could only do the very minimum, but even that took more out of me than I could bear. Though I had no alternative career plan, the only thing to do was quit.

Burnout is a malady typical of postindustrial capitalism, where the simultaneous imperatives of productivity and cost-cutting breed conflicting norms that workers cannot fulfill without risking damage to their inner lives.

What I experienced—and what I see, admittedly somewhat anachronistically, in the final days of Thomas Aquinas—is burnout. We toss around that term imprecisely, applying it to languorous teens, drug addicts, and Graham Greene characters. But psychologists who study the phenomenon have a definition for it. Burnout is a response to the chronic stress of work, manifested in exhaustion, cynicism, and feelings of inefficacy. Anyone who works in an institution or responds to clients' human needs is at risk. Thus burnout is a malady typical of postindustrial capitalism, where the simultaneous imperatives of productivity and cost-cutting breed conflicting norms that workers cannot fulfill without risking damage to their inner lives.



Saint Thomas Aquinas in Prayer *by Sassetta*

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The psychologists Christina Maslach and Michael Leiter have found that employers foster burnout in a range of familiar ways, such as demanding excessive workloads, limiting workers' autonomy, and offering inadequate rewards. In other words, everything that seems like it will make a company more profitable—pushing people harder, getting them to focus on their tasks and not idle chatter with coworkers, assessing everything all the time—comes at an incalculable human cost. We can think of burnout as a negative social externality: a cost of doing business that, like pollution, is borne not by companies but by workers, their families, and their communities.

Burnout in academia is on par with what we find in other industries. Universities adopted the norms of productivity, outcomes assessment, and continuous improvement from the private sector just when state legislatures began cutting appropriations and the applicant pool for private colleges in the Northeast and Midwest began to shrink. Like many small colleges, the one where I worked had gone through a painful period of budget cuts and layoffs. In any workplace, this kind of fiscal pressure raises workers' stress levels.

In medicine, a field rapidly becoming more corporate in outlook and management, burnout has become a crisis. When the Mayo Clinic and American Medical Association surveyed U.S. physicians in 2011, 45 percent of respondents showed signs of burnout; that is, their survey responses indicated that they were emotionally exhausted or cynical toward patients, or both. When the survey was repeated three years later, the rate was 54 percent, twice that found in the general workforce. In some medical subspecialties, the burnout rate raises alarms about the quality of care. In emergency medicine, it exceeds 70 percent.

Of course it does. Every day of their careers, medical professionals meet people who are in pain, confused, perhaps dying. Every worker a sick person encounters as they undergo treatment must project good cheer to soothe the patient's fears even as they implement protocols designed to maximize the hospital's profits and limit its exposure to litigation.

To do this work well, you need to exhibit supreme rationality and supreme empathy at once. You need to be something like the hagiographic image of Aquinas. It's impossible. The Mayo Clinic is now attempting to deal with burnout in its ranks by improving its doctors' autonomy, collegiality, and commitment to the ideals of medicine. It's a positive step, though one wonders how effective it can be without an actual reduction in physicians' workload. Even the best workers have limits.

Aquinas did not work in a modern institution, let alone a capitalist corporation. But the people around him wanted—as he did himself—to get the most out of his talent. Consequently, they may have ignored his limits, increasing the physical toll of such brilliant intellectual work. While the monks of Fossanova ministered to the dying theologian, they also asked him for a commentary on the "Song of Songs." Aquinas complied. Given the scope of his scholarly output, it seems that Aquinas was one of those workers who struggled to say no. Yes, he could write that handbook. Yes, he could instruct the novices. Yes, he could travel to the Council. These things needed to be done, and he could do them better than anyone else before or since. Besides, he had taken a vow of obedience. How could he refuse?

Contrary to what bosses might wish were true, it's not usually the worst employees who succumb to burnout. It's often the best. The advice, "If you want something done, ask a busy person to do it," only contributes to the overwork of the most talented and dedicated. It likely shortens that person's career—perhaps even his or her life.

Christina Maslach's 1982 book was titled, starkly, *Burnout: The Cost of Caring*. In it, she measures the toll taken by the emotional labor of constantly responding to others without a corresponding emotional reward. For that book,

she focused on "high-touch" workers like teachers, counselors, nurses, police, and correctional officers. As the service sector grew in the following decades, Maslach began to see burnout everywhere—if the industrial economy imperiled our bodies, the way we work now seems to wreck our inner lives. Today, most Americans seem to do some form of customer service, responding to people's varied needs. That means that more of our inner lives are brought under the imperative to produce more with less support, and thus we are more susceptible to burning out.

Response is at the center of Aquinas's work. The disputed question, which was his mode of classroom teaching and the format of the *Summa Theologiae*, is built on responding to others' ideas. There are thousands of "articles," or points of controversy, in the *Summa*. In each of them, Aquinas poses a question, entertains several proposed (wrong) answers, gives his (correct) answer, and then responds critically to each of the wrong answers.

It is sound pedagogy, but I cannot think of a more exhausting way to teach. There is a good reason why our image of the burned-out professor is someone lecturing from yellowed notes. That pedagogy demands the least response, the least investment of oneself in another's performance, and the greatest sense of control and efficacy: I made my points, so it must have been a good class.

Limiting your responsiveness—in Maslach's terms, cynically "depersonalizing" others—is a means to cope with the limitlessness of human need. Even if your job is not a Sisyphean battle against ignorance or illness, then you may have a manager who wants to see "continuous improvement" in performance metrics. If you internalize the norms of the productivity regime but do not have people, rules, or systems that keep your work within reasonable bounds, then in comparison with the ideal, it will always seem like straw.

The burned-out worker's sense of inefficacy bears no relation to actual incompetence. When you're burned out, there is simply no convincing you of your competence. Burnout drains your self-confidence, and not even a compliment from God himself will refill it. Even if he makes you levitate.

The most down-to-earth account of Aquinas's final winter that I have come across is by someone you might expect to play up Aquinas's sanctity: Joseph Weisheipl, a Dominican writing to commemorate the seven-hundredth anniversary of his confrere's death. But Weisheipl is interested less in hagiography than in empathy. Sensitive to the rigors of Aquinas's schedule as a professor and member of a religious order, he argues not for a theological or mystical explanation for Aquinas's silence, but a physiological one. In his view, "the physical basis for the experience of December 6 was a breakdown of his constitution after so many years of driving himself ceaselessly in the work he loved."

From this perspective, Aquinas was a casualty of his adherence to a norm that, while perhaps rare in his day, is decidedly prominent in our era's professional culture. Supposedly, those who do what they love will never "work" a day in their lives. Or they will come into money without even seeking it. This ethos is really a mythos, a noble lie. Workers do their employers a great favor when they view work as a field for exercising the virtues of love, hope, or humility. The bosses get endless productivity with little complaint, just as they would from a machine. It is no wonder that this work ethic exacts such a human cost. Fallible, whiny, self-preserving humans are not its ideal practitioners—they have to wrench themselves to fit into the new economic regime.

So our bodies and minds rebel against this work ethic. According to some third-hand report, Aquinas said in his final months, "The only thing I want now is that as God has put an end to my writing, He may quickly end my life also." To my modern and burned-out ears, this sounds like more than just saintly humility. It seems like over-identification with work, to use contemporary terms; without the ability to do the work he devoted himself to, Aquinas feels that he has nothing to live for. There's nothing impious about also understanding him as the victim of a tragic depression, created when unreasonable expectations met an unrelenting work ethic.

In the capitalist ethos today, we look at the people we exploit, and we see humility, or love, or a simple desire to have a job done. This illusion salves our conscience; their ceaseless labor is a consequence of their virtue, not our vice. It allows us to applaud the self-sacrifice of teachers and nurses but resent their union membership. It allows us to praise the work ethic of migrant laborers instead of paying them a living wage. Their burnout is a kind of martyrdom, its own reward.

Burnout has, so far, no official patron saint. Aquinas, who shared symptoms with its sufferers, seems like a good candidate. Still, I hesitate to suggest that we who have burned out ask for his intercession. Responding to the needs of the church throughout his lifetime, he worked himself to the point of collapse. Asking him now to work on our behalf would risk repeating the errors of Reginald and the monks of Fossanova.

But Aquinas can be a companion to those of us in the throes of burnout. Even if his brilliance seems to set him on a plane far above us, he was imperfect and put-upon, fragile but also irreducibly dignified, as we all are. We can feel understood by a great exemplar of Christian intellect and spirituality. We can likewise feel sorrow for him and understand the end of his life in a way his (equally fallible) contemporaries could not.

One wants to assure Aquinas that his work was much more than straw. But perhaps that desire misses the point, too. Perhaps Aquinas was not trying to say that his work was worthless. Perhaps he meant that it was tinder for the fire that had consumed him. ■

Of Course They Hated Her

The Uncomfortable Honesty of Mary McCarthy

B. D. McClay

Mary McCarthy had a famous smile, but it didn't help her much. Usually a smile is a sign of friendliness, attraction, general sociability. But not Mary's. Her smile was known to be a trap and a weapon, a "long, white upper blade of handsome, emphatic teeth," as one reporter put it in *Esquire*. "She can smoke through it, argue through it, spill the beans through it, even smile through it." You couldn't trust it. You couldn't trust *her*.

The Mary of the switchblade smile is the one we remember. Her legacy has been her scandals: the libel suit after calling Lillian Hellman a liar, her frank writing about sex, her habit of putting her friends in her novels, her leave-nothing-out memoirs. She was a "cold and beautiful novelist who devoured three husbands and a crowd of lovers in the course of a neatly managed career," according to Simone de Beauvoir, who should know, one supposes.

Mary McCarthy: The Complete Fiction
Edited by Thomas Mallon
Library of America, $90, 2,066 pp.

And yet, here we are: Mary McCarthy has elbowed her way into posterity and arrives to take her place in the Library of America. This inclusion of her novels in the series would surprise a good many of her peers. Even her friends could summon only backhanded appreciation about her work. "She is somehow rather immense without her books ever being exactly good form or good imagination," wrote Robert Lowell (who would also know). But now she settles in—a fact that no doubt pleases her, wherever it is she's keeping the score—ahead of a few notable enemies, in particular Norman Mailer, who once wrote that McCarthy was "not a good enough woman to write a major novel" and compared *The Group*, her most successful novel, to a bowel movement.

She was always too *something*—moralizing, flippant, cruel. The work was too concerned with things; she was too. At the same time, she wasn't what one might call a homemaking woman even as she wasn't quite a free spirit; she wrote freely about casual sex but in a decidedly un-casual way. She reserved the right, and the ability, to be what she peculiarly was—not what she ought to be. "I am…indefensible, at least for my friends," she wrote to Hannah Arendt. "They are fond of me but with reservations."

She did have her defenders. Among them, notably, there was Flannery O'Connor, who wrote to her frequent correspondent Betty Hester to complain about the reviews in *Commonweal*: "I have the feeling sometimes that their reviewers are trying desperately to be clever because they have no other opportunity. Who cares that that gent found Jean Stafford's character insufferable (why?) or what he thinks about Mary McCarthy. They all—all the bright boys—love to take potshots at her because she is so much smarter than they are..." (Dear Flannery, if you're reading this: Please accept this piece as a small restitution.) In any case, Mary McCarthy—who had faced down in her time sudden destitution at the age of six (she lost both of her parents to Spanish influenza), abusive aunts and uncles, several nuns, at least one Jesuit, and three ex-husbands—was not going to be undone by the likes of Norman Mailer.

So what did they miss, her skeptical contemporaries? In "The Man in the Brooks Brothers Shirt"—a funny and frank story that helped make McCarthy's reputation—Meg Sargent, the heroine of a loosely connected series of short stories that were collected by McCarthy into her first novel, falls in with and, eventually, goes to bed with a man she meets on the train that is carrying her toward her divorce. But shortly before the consummation of their fling, as she and the man discuss politics, she pauses to tell him something about herself:

> "You know what my favorite quotation is?" she asked suddenly.… "It's from Chaucer," she went on, when she saw that she had his attention. "Criseyde says it, 'I am myn owene woman, wel at ese.'"
>
> The man had some difficulty in understanding the Middle English, but when at last he had got it straight, he looked at her with bald admiration.
>
> "Golly," he said, "you are, at that!"

B. D. McClay *is senior editor of the* Hedgehog Review. *She lives in New York City.*

Mary McCarthy

Meg's story in *The Company She Keeps* is hardly one that lends itself to this image of a woman "wel at ese," following her as it does through misbegotten love affairs, dead-end jobs, and political upheaval. As she makes this boast to the man, she's neither personally nor financially comfortable—when she wakes up next to him a few paragraphs later and begins to dress in the dark, McCarthy lets slip that her underwear is held together by a safety pin. By the end of the book, married to a controlling man who forces her to undergo psychoanalysis, to be and remain her own woman in some very basic sense is all Meg can hope for. Liberated, she is not.

Yet, like the man on the train, we are inclined to say the shoe fits. We believe it because we can see the immediate ways in which it doesn't fit the bill: Meg is cool and yet not, precisely, equipped with the kind of distance that this coolness would seem to require. She's earnest, emotionally sensitive, and, by the point of her train encounter, brutally clear-sighted in a way her cool affect belies. She squirms under the examination of her own nervous consciousness. Socially, politically, she'll never be at ease. But her own woman—what would that mean?

It would be a cliché, but also not altogether an untruth, to say that the literary and political scene McCarthy entered felt betrayed by God, on the one hand, and Stalin, on the other. McCarthy, an accidental Trotskyite and a firmly lapsed Catholic, fit easily into this world. For instance: She founded an organization she called the Europe-America Groups after World War II—an anti-Stalinist organization dedicated to "the formation of a new 'left' which is independent of both the Soviet and American governments." The EAG was meant to include other prominent figures (in particular, Albert Camus), who proved not to be very involved or interested. The project eventually died.

There's another link between McCarthy and a writer like Camus however, and that was preoccupation with this question: If neither God nor political ideology could be counted on as firm guidelines for behavior, what, exactly, was one supposed to use? While others leaned on concepts like decency, McCarthy herself moved in a different direction. Whatever was painful, whatever was hard to say, whatever you didn't want to look at, whatever you were afraid to do—that was where you needed to direct your attention. Find, in yourself, in the world, the points of self-delusion, and expose them. Do this over and over. You could call this honesty, or a kind of emotional masochism, or the last remnants of a Catholic upbringing.

What it wasn't, exactly, was malicious. The switchblade, let's be clear, was there, but the cuts she made with it were clinical (though they were cuts all the same). Her writing is always taking the temperature of the room, feeling the little social shifts in attention and power, uncovering pettiness and mistaken victories. A Mary McCarthy character can move through several layers of snobbery, self-awareness, victory, loss, and delusion in just a few sentences. She notices everything and she gets in every dig, and when she despises a character, it comes out in everything from the clothes she wears to the punctuation of the sentences. Of one hapless character in *The Group*, she writes: "Girls, can you imagine it, she fainted kerplunk into Mr. LeRoy's arms!" The exclamation point stings. ("Kerplunk" doesn't help.)

People satirize their friends in their novels all the time, to varying results. It's safe to say that few people have been thrilled to find out they're in a novel. But McCarthy seemed to be delivering not her judgment, but God's. She regarded her novels as impersonal—her feelings were not involved—but that quality was also what made them unforgivable. If she rendered you with lettuce in the teeth, scuffed shoes, questionable taste; if she pinned your personal foibles down; well, it was only because that was how you were. In "The Genial Host," she quickly sketches the somewhat unreal physicality of a manipulative friend:

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How ill-suited he was, you thought, to his role of élégant! What a tireless struggle he must wage against his own physical nature! Looking at him, so black and broad and hairy, you saw that his well-kept person must appear to him like a settler's plot triumphantly defended against the invading wilderness.... Whenever you really noticed Pflaumen, you became aware of an additional person, a comfortable, cigar-smoking, sentimental family man, a kind of ancestral type on which the man-about-town had been superimposed, so that his finished personality came out as a sort of double exposure.

This kind of nervy noticing is also how her characters relate to one another. McCarthy's characters are preoccupied with ideas and with each other, not precisely as lovers (despite all their sexual encounters), but as observational subjects. Other people are objects of speculation, envy, frustration, fear, and a kind of acquisitive desire. (The one thing McCarthy never quite nails in any of her books is passionate love, though sexual frisson is there aplenty.)

McCarthy's books are often concerned with the material and with the domestic. Or rather, the material elements of domestic life—dishware, decoration, and cooking. When one single woman visits another's home in *The Groves of Academe*, she finds herself driven to despair by "the single chop in the pan on the hot-plate, the frozen peas garishly bubbling in the copper saucepan beside it, the tray set with a woven straw mat, earthenware plate, large blue-green Mexican glass already filled with milk." At the same time, such settings are often not precisely normal—three of her novels take place in dysfunctional and self-selecting intellectual communities (*The Oasis, A Charmed Life*, and *The Groves of Academe*), one ends with a hallucination of Immanuel Kant (*Birds of America*), and yet another takes place in a hostage situation carefully framed to provoke endless discussions over the worth of art (*Cannibals and Missionaries*). The remaining two—*The Group* and *The Company She Keeps*—take place in a world and a New York more familiar, but are also preoccupied with thinly personalized versions of abstract questions.

So while on the one hand McCarthy's books could almost be called domestic comedies, they're also novels of ideas, the sorts of books in which characters go off on long jags about God, morality, art, or politics. They have the restless and unembarrassed questioning of *Crime and Punishment* filtered through the sensibility of Emily Post.

It doesn't always work. I find *Birds of America*, despite McCarthy's own fairly deep affection for it, an almost unreadable novel. And while the kind of wide-ranging arguments about ideas that animate *A Charmed Life* don't drag for me, McCarthy never quite brings the various pieces of the novel together the way she needs to, and so the novel ends at an abrupt event that comes—quite literally—out of nowhere in the form of a car that appears to crash and kill the heroine in the final paragraph. ("'Killed instantly,' she said to herself, regretfully, as she lost consciousness.") But for the most part, even in the unsuccessful books, the individual parts of the story provoke and delight even if they never fit together.

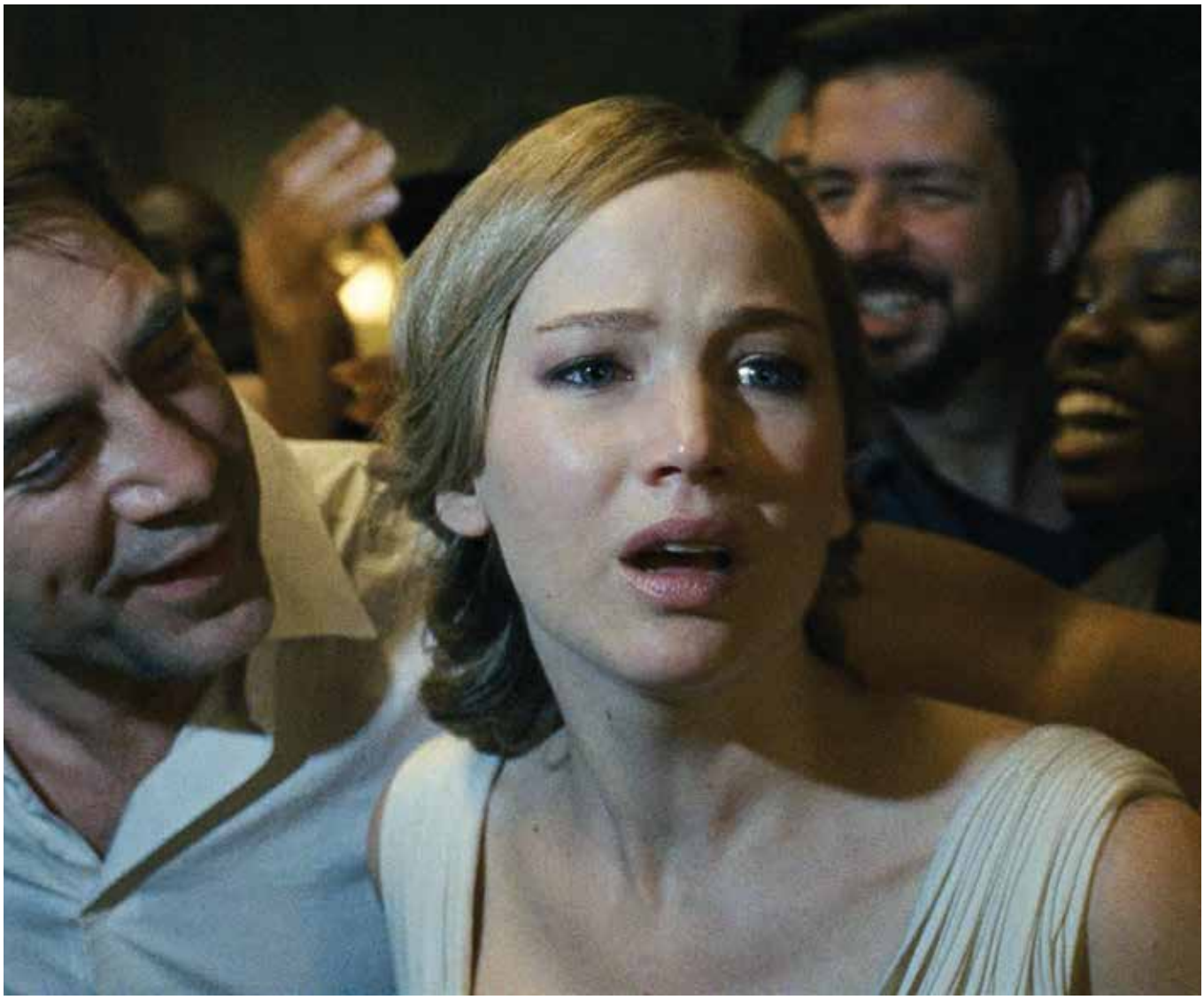
And when it works—really works—as it does in *The Company She Keeps*, it's something truly special: a work uncompromised, uncompromising, that is precisely what it sets out to be, that marries feminine preoccupations with soaring moral questions in a way that somehow ennobles both and yet renders them a little ridiculous.

Another way of saying all this is that the McCarthy skeptics didn't miss anything, not really. McCarthy's project was offensive to them and they responded accordingly. Plenty of sharp women have successfully married an eye for the quotidian to a big question, and plenty of such women were flourishing at McCarthy's own time. But though McCarthy was no feminist, and certainly seems to have felt little solidarity with other women, her sensibility was aggressively feminine with no pretense otherwise. And yet her work fails to be captured by such safe, non-threatening stock phrases as "seeing beauty in the everyday" or "seeing meaning in the ordinary." Her people and her situations were not ordinary. Her intellectual ambition and her material preoccupations were both huge.

And earnest—almost awkwardly so. Though McCarthy dissects her characters' self-deceptions expertly, there's nothing ironic about the way she has them talk about ideas. Ideas are their great romance, certainly more so than any of their relations with each other. She was somehow able to take the size of human vanity without entirely disowning it.

To return to Meg Sargent and her proclamation on the train: To be your own woman, well at ease, meant for both Meg and McCarthy cultivating an ability to be uncomfortable. McCarthy could be what she was, could do what she did and write what she wrote, because she was accountable not to the social pressures she felt so acutely, but to the truth that pushed her—to her conscience, to use a somewhat loaded word. She said what needed to be said, she did what needed to be done. She wrote precisely what she wanted to write. Of course they hated her. Whatever it was that she was doing, it wasn't about them or even for them. She shouldn't have been able to get away with it. And yet she did, somehow—she brought it all with her: the high morals and the petty snobbery, the erotic ideas and the clinical sex, God and the dishware. To her fiction, she above all brought her honesty.

"We all live our lives more or less in vain," said McCarthy toward the end of her life. It was another honest statement from a perversely honest woman. But she was also, at the moment, wrong—both about other people and about herself. Her fiction, full of hopeless Utopians, knew better. Yes, Utopia never arrives. And yes, we're all, no matter how intellectual, largely foolish people, sensitive and self-deluding. But no one believed like McCarthy the degree to which every texture of life isn't there in vain. Unsentimentally, the world matters—not because it's good, but because it's there. ■



Javier Bardem as *Him* and Jennifer Lawrence as *Mother* in mother!

PARAMOUNT PICTURES

Travis LaCouter

A Biblical Bloodbath

DARREN ARONOFSKY'S 'MOTHER!'

If there's anything readily obvious about Darren Aronofsky's latest film, *mother!*, it's the movie's ability to divide opinion. When the credits first rolled after its premier at the Venice Film Festival, half the audience booed while half gave it a standing ovation. And yet for all the strong emotion it has engendered, the film remains deeply misunderstood by critics and viewers.

It is not, for instance, a "vehemently exaggerated satire on the burdens of fame," as the *New Yorker*'s Richard Brody would have it. It is not a home-invasion psycho-thriller à la *Rosemary's Baby*, as many of the pre-release promotional materials were leading us to believe. And it is certainly not "torture porn," as *National Review*'s Kyle Smith deemed it in a particularly histrionic review. What it is, however, is an impressionistic, biblically inspired allegory for the drama of creation. And this is not just my own reading; the movie honestly invites us to consider it theologically. Aronofsky said as much in a Reddit forum with fans, admitting that once he "decided to turn to the stories of the Bible," he had a great "breakthrough" in writing the script. Moreover, Aronofsky isn't simply hijacking the characters of Genesis (the creator God, the created Earth, Man, and Woman) or its plot points (an idyllic beginning shattered by fratricide giving way to an apocalyptic reckoning) for the sake of telling some

other story. Rather, he's unironically taking up those characters and that plot and playing with them from the inside. This is the source both of the movie's power, and of the prevalent misunderstandings inflicted upon it.

The film is divided rather neatly into two parts, the first of which focuses on the small, domestic drama between Him (Javier Bardem) and Mother (Jennifer Lawrence). The couple live in beautiful, secluded house. Him, a poet, seeks vainly for inspiration; Mother, a literal homemaker, lovingly restores the grand Victorian mansion, describing it as a "paradise" for the lonely couple. (Indeed, the home's Edenic qualities are hard to miss.) Yet if we're following the source material, the beginning of the film takes place before the sixth day. God is alone with his creation; man has not yet intruded upon the scene. Mother, for her part, cherishes this isolation; the poet, we sense, is agitated by it.

Before long, Man (Ed Harris) arrives at their door seeking hospitality, which the poet is eager to give, claiming Man's presence is good for his creativity. Mother, however, is skeptical: she's not so keen on opening her home to this mysterious stranger. Indeed, Man seems off somehow—awkward, unsure of himself. Nevertheless, the poet extends Man every courtesy, drinking with him and even offering to let him stay the night. As it turns out, Man is kept awake with a fit of asthma (and an open wound near his rib…). Then his wife, Woman (played by Michele Pfeiffer with characteristic panache), shows up too.

Here is Aronofsky's first brilliant subversion of the biblical source myth. If she could, might the spirit of the Earth, God's first creation, object to the entry of mankind into existence, which must have seemed a rude intrusion upon a heretofore peaceful reality? If we indulge a healthy bit of anthropomorphizing (which is, after all, the point of allegory), mightn't we easily imagine Mother (i.e., Mother Earth) to be jealous—even suspicious—of the attention God showers upon His new creatures? The juxtaposition of Lawrence's Mother and Pfeiffer's Woman is particularly sharp: Where Mother is reserved, chaste, and demure, Woman is forward, crass, and bristling with unencumbered sexual energy. She guzzles vodka, comments on her hostess's unsexy lingerie, and paces the house like it's her own. In a cruel reversal, we learn that Mother isn't (yet) a mother, though she very much wants to be, while Woman casually complains about how her several children have been a drag on her social life. Two tropes of femininity emerge here and motherhood is made to seem arbitrary, an unearned advantage of the acquisitive "bad woman" who flaunts her fecundity in front of the accommodating but barren "good woman."

As if to drive home this point, two of Woman's children soon show up (played by real-life brothers Domhnall and Brian Gleeson), fighting bitterly over an inheritance. Anger quickly turns to wrath and the younger brother is killed by his sibling, with blood spilling on Mother's painstakingly refinished floorboards (where it will stay the rest of the film, crying out for vengeance). From here things spiral further out of control. Countless additional guests stream into the house for the younger son's impromptu wake. They drink, they sneak off into Mother's bedroom, they break things. Mother's fears prove well founded as each new guest seems ruder, crueler, even more violent than the last. This sequence comes to a screeching halt when a sink is dislodged from the wall, causing the pipes to burst and prompting Mother to cast out all the "guests" in a fit of rage. A great flood, then, wipes the slate clean—finally Mother and the poet are left alone again.

This whole sequence captures rather nicely the sweep of antediluvian salvation history. But it does so from the point of view of nonhuman creation. This change of perspective is as subtle as it is subversive, since we find ourselves sympathizing with Lawrence's put-upon hostess. "Throw the bums out!" we want to scream, without realizing that we are those bums—boorish, brutal, and brash.

The film's second half jumps ahead several months (eons?). Mother is very

pregnant, the poet has written his masterpiece, and the house has been put back in order. It doesn't take long, however, for the poet's fans—inspired by his latest work—to show up on his doorstep. They want to see him, to hear him, to touch him. Mother is again distressed, and He again insists on her patience, her understanding. Somewhere around this point Aronofsky flips a switch and allows the immensity of the metaphor to run wild: in an extended climax the film gets louder, bloodier, and more thunderous than anything contained in its first half. The fans form a cult (led by Kristen Wiig as a cold-blooded publicist) devoted to the poet's image; it takes over the house, clashing violently with police and locking other houseguests in makeshift jails. Here the movie becomes a sensory assault—delirium mixes with brutality in a way that makes it difficult to watch. Mother takes refuge in the poet's study—the place of creation—and gives birth to a son. Again she begs the poet to send the guests away, but he won't. Instead he presents them with their infant son, whom they lift up and exalt before snapping his neck and feasting on his body. The poet is distraught but again pleads with Mother—*we must find a way to forgive them*. But by this point Mother's heart has been hardened, literally turned to stone, and she will have none of it. She goes on a rampage, killing as many guests as she can before exploding the whole house, and herself, in a cathartic inferno.

It's the second half of the movie that's caused outrage among viewers. People report walking out at this point, disgusted by the increasingly ludicrous images of violence and destruction. As Lawrence herself said to the *New York Times*, "The images [at that point] are burning so bright, and you're left with that feeling, that visceral feeling" after leaving the theater. But how different are these images, really, from those we see each day on the news? Dead refugee children lie face-down in the dirt, religious extremists throw gay men from rooftops, madmen and tyrants threaten nuclear ruin—are these not the same proofs of man's native violence that so scandalize Mother? Isn't she justified in wanting these self-destructive clod-hoppers out of her house? And isn't the unfathomable patience of the poet a source of scandal when looked at from the third-person perspective?

Even a passing familiarity with the biblical source material reveals the resonance of Aronofsky's nightmare vision here. The story of salvation is a crescendo: man's abuse of freedom is again and again met by God with clemency, with renewed offers of covenant, until that definitive act of sacrifice in which the sinless Son becomes a victim. Hans Urs von Balthasar described this drama as an "ever-intensifying rhythm" that reveals "both God's infinite power and his powerlessness; he cannot be God in any other way but in this kenosis" that gives to the point of death. Sacrifice here is not what God does, but what God is. There is something of this God in Bardem's poet, who won't turn away the houseguests but instead repeatedly tries to appeal to their love of him. And there is something of this same self-gift in Mother's devotion to Him, which winds up killing her: the film ends with Mother literally giving up her heart to the poet, which he will keep on his shelf as inspiration after she's gone. In the end, the radical suggestion of *mother!* is that the "ever-intensifying rhythm" of sin and forgiveness upon which our faith is built looks less like a cycle of love and forgiveness than it does some absurd sadomasochistic farce. In Aronofsky's deft hands, our whole biblical narrative is turned on its head: God's generosity becomes God's callous self-obsession, the forbearance of the "good woman" becomes the source of her self-harm, and the son's sacrifice leads not to redemption but to ruin.

Now, Aronofsky isn't doing theology, of course. There are good and rather straightforward reasons why his metaphor doesn't ultimately hold. For one, God's love is no zero-sum commodity. The superabundant economy of gift in which God is always moving would never force God into the position of Hamlet-like indecision in which the poet finds himself in the final half-hour. Further, the distance between Creation and creatures is perhaps too wide here; the antagonism between Mother and the houseguests is possible only if they really are strangers to one another, rather than being specifically intended for loving communion. Then again, there are less elegant metaphors for sin than this: behaving as an unruly visitor to a house in which you're a guest.

But actually to carry on with these sorts of counter-arguments would be churlish: Aronofsky's standard is not Christian orthodoxy. The salient point, rather, is that this movie cannot be made sense of without reference to its particular theodramatic imaginary, which is self-evidently biblical. Sure, *mother!* may subvert that imaginary in a perfectly postmodern way, bending and breaking the categories of the original text, but to do so only underlines the prevailing power of the source material. Christian viewers of this film may find it repulsive, but, if they do, it should not be for its vivid depictions of violence. Rather, the film seems a haunting (because plausible) reminder of how easily the Christian narrative can be redeployed to new and destabilizing uses. And quite apart from its slippery rhetorical maneuvers, the film dares to depict what our sinful nature looks like—to dramatize the violence we do to creation itself in the course of our absurd history of sin.

Aronofsky produced the script in what he called a five-day "fever dream," inspired by a particularly potent devil's brew of anxiety, guilt, and anger: "All those ideas, the intensity of all those ideas, just sort of flooded out of me," he told *Vulture* recently. It's noteworthy, I think, that when Aronofsky drew upon his significant creative reserves to give voice to these feelings, he went back to a very old story. It's perhaps even more noteworthy, though less encouraging, that so many who view this movie will fail to recognize his source material. ■

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Andrew J. Bacevich

Madness to Their Method

The Doomsday Machine
Confessions of a Nuclear War Planner
Daniel Ellsberg
Bloomsbury, $30, 432 pp.

Before he became famous (or infamous) for leaking the Pentagon Papers in 1971, Daniel Ellsberg spent more than a decade working in relative anonymity as a national-security analyst in the employ of the RAND Corporation. Here he provides an account of what he was doing before photocopying a horde of classified documents related to the Vietnam War for further distribution to the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*.

Created by the Air Force shortly after World War II, RAND existed to devise and refine what came to be called nuclear strategy. To work at RAND in its heyday was to be in the know—or more prosaically to hold security clearances above TOP SECRET—and to hobnob with the likes of nuclear-war strategists Herman Kahn and Albert Wohlstetter. This was back when others in the know, especially senior members of the national-security apparatus, looked upon Kahn and Wohlstetter as thinkers in the same league as Kant and Wittgenstein.

To work at RAND, according to Ellsberg, was to join a "religious order," which he likens to the Jesuits. In fact, however, the nuclear strategists of the 1950s and 1960s rank among the greatest intellectual scam artists of all time. Armageddon was their obsession and also their meal ticket. If the threat of World War III went away, so too would their cushy jobs. Yet as long as Washington relied on RAND for thinking about the unthinkable, government contracts flowed without interruption to its Santa Monica campus.

Expedience therefore required members of this "secular priesthood" to por-

The mushroom cloud from the first hydrogen bomb ever tested, Enewetak Atoll, November 1952

tray themselves as knowing "more about the dangers ahead" than anyone, more than "the generals in the Pentagon or [Strategic Air Command] or Congress or the public, or even the president." RAND's self-advertised and self-justifying purpose was nothing short of messianic. "We were rescuing the world," Ellsberg recalls, not only from the Soviets, but even more so from the "lethargy and bureaucratic inertia" of officialdom.

In *The Doomsday Machine*, Ellsberg offers a peek inside this secret world. The result is a book that is part memoir and part jeremiad. His memoir recounts the education he acquired while serving as a cog within that machine. His jeremiad denounces the "dizzying irrationality, madness, [and] insanity" that he encountered there. Taken as a whole, the result constitutes something akin to a conversion narrative, describing the transformation of gung-ho cold warrior into an impassioned dissident, albeit one retaining a touch of the old RAND messianism.

I have only once had an extended conversation with Ellsberg. He struck me on that occasion as entertaining a somewhat exalted opinion of his own importance. That tendency is on ample display here. The reader might come away from this account persuaded that during the administrations of Dwight D. Eisenhower and John F. Kennedy, Ellsberg was a key player. In fact, however, he never exercised any real authority and did not "make" policy, even if on occasion advising those who did.

Still, given his involvement with nuclear strategy during the early stages of the Cold War, Ellsberg unquestionably qualifies as a credible witness. Whether observations drawn from that era retain validity today is less certain.

The core of his critique, offered with specificity and in convincing detail, reduces to the following:

First, the strategy of deterrence—assertions that the massive U.S. nuclear arsenal exists solely to prevent an attack on the United States—"is a deliberate deception." From the earliest days of the Cold War, the United States has actually positioned its nuclear forces to strike first. "Though officially denied," preemptive attack, prompted by indications that an adversary might be preparing its own first strike, "has always been at the heart of our strategic alert."

Second, given that the primary aim is to ensure "that not a single nuclear warhead would land on U.S. territory after such an American first strike," allowing any enemy retaliatory capability to survive constitutes strategic failure. U.S. targeting, therefore, emphasizes redundancy and overkill, with little concern for collateral effects and long-term consequences. This is a view to which senior Air Force officers are particularly prone, according to Ellsberg, who describes in detail the behind-the-scenes civil-military tussling over who actually "owns" the plan for World War III.

Third, the imperative of landing the first blow creates incentives to disperse authority for ordering a strike. "The hand authorized to pull the trigger on U.S. nuclear forces," Ellsberg writes, "has never been exclusively that of the president." The widely held belief that the commander-in-chief has sole authority to order a nuclear attack is "essentially a hoax." As early as the 1950s, depending on circumstance, field commanders at different echelons have been empowered—or believed themselves empowered—to act autonomously.

Fourth, despite concerted PR efforts to depict the entire U.S. nuclear apparatus as efficient, effective, and safe, the system "is more prone to false alarms, accidents, and unauthorized launches than the public (and even most high officials) has ever been aware." His own rendering of the Cuban Missile Crisis sustains that view. In short, the scenario depicted in the film *Dr. Strangelove*, he suggests, is by no means implausible. In sum, Ellsberg believes that even today all-out nuclear war is "*a catastrophe waiting to happen*" (his italics).

In part 2 of *The Doomsday Machine*, Ellsberg shifts from his own personal experience to mount a blistering critique of the policies that as a RAND analyst he once helped to design and justify. The Original Sin, in his interpretation, occurred when the United States abandoned Franklin Roosevelt's conviction, expressed at the outset of World War II, that "in no event, and under no circumstances" should belligerents engage in "the bombardment from the air of civilian populations or of unfortified cities." FDR condemned the bombing of cities as "human barbarism." Within a few years doing so became a mainstay of the U.S. war effort, eventually culminating in Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Ellsberg argues, correctly in my view, that Americans have studiously avoided any serious reckoning with this aspect of their World War II experience. The failure is above all a moral one. Yet the policy implications that flow from that failure have proven to be enduring. They are today best captured in the ritual insistence of high U.S. officials that "all options are on the table" whenever they consider how to address some particular crisis. Indeed, an expressed willingness to exercise "all options"—tantamount to terrorism on an apocalyptic scale, in Ellsberg's view—figures as a virtual prerequisite for entry into the upper ranks of American politics. Try winning the Iowa caucuses or the New Hampshire primary after foreswearing any use of nukes.

Yet as Richard Nixon might have put it, when the United States does it, it's not terrorism. So we tell ourselves, even while wondering how it is that Donald Trump can, at a whim, unleash "fire and fury like the world has never seen," with the Pentagon intent on expanding the options available to Trump and his successors by spending a trillion dollars to modernize the U.S. nuclear arsenal. Try opposing that program and then running for Congress.

"We are in the grip of institutionalized madness," Ellsberg concludes. He just might be right. ■

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Matt Mazewski

A Problem Only Politics Can Solve

After Piketty

The Agenda for Economics and Inequality

Edited by Heather Boushey, J. Bradford DeLong, and Marshall Steinbaum

Harvard University Press, $35, 688 pp.

In a 2008 interview with Jim Lehrer shortly after becoming a Nobel laureate, economist Paul Krugman sheepishly revealed that he first became interested in economics because of his childhood love of science fiction. And no, it was not, as some might say, because economics *is* science fiction, but rather because studying it seemed to the young Krugman to be the closest he could come to practicing psychohistory—an imaginary social science developed by the mathematician Hari Seldon in Isaac Asimov's science-fiction series *Foundation*.

Psychohistory in Foundation is essentially an advanced form of what today goes by the name of "big-data analytics." Armed with ultra-sophisticated mathematical models, Seldon is able to predict the exact timing of a societal collapse and develop a plan to limit the fallout. The prediction must remain secret, however; otherwise it will trigger a chain of events that will make the calamity even worse.

The soothsaying abilities of present-day economists remain far more limited than those of the godlike Seldon (see Recession, The Great), but self-fulfilling and self-defeating prophecies involving the economy are quite real. If forecasts of looming inflation convince the Federal Reserve to preemptively raise interest rates, they may in fact ensure that inflation never materializes. The act of making a prediction about the trajectory of the economy can itself shape the future.

Heather Boushey of the Washington Center for Economic Growth, J. Bradford DeLong of the University of California, Berkeley, and Marshall Steinbaum of the Roosevelt Institute contemplate this very paradox in their introduction to *After Piketty: The Agenda for Economics and Inequality*, an edited volume containing twenty-one "arguments, critiques, extensions, and explorations" written in response to French economist Thomas Piketty's 2013 work on the history and future of inequality in the West, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*. To understand what they find puzzling, it helps to first understand what it is that Piketty sets out to show.

Krugman explains in "Why We're in a New Gilded Age" (Chapter 3) that Piketty's thesis is "all about r versus g—the rate of return on capital versus the rate of economic growth," where "capital" refers not only to financial capital but to productive assets of any kind, such as industrial plants or equipment. *Capital* argues that for most of history the rate of return on capital (r) has been greater than the rate of growth (g), and that this pattern is so consistent that it is virtually a fundamental law of capitalism. In addition, whenever the difference between r and g becomes greater the result is that a larger share of the national income accrues to the owners of capital. Piketty maintains that g is currently declining because of reduced population growth and slowing technological progress, but that r is declining more slowly and that the gap between the two rates is therefore growing. This portends a future of worsening inequality, in which inheritance rather than work becomes the main path to amassing wealth.

Thomas Piketty

Piketty claims that the major exceptions to the historical norm of $r > g$ were the result of cataclysmic events like the Second World War, when wartime taxation and widespread destruction of factories and machines reduced capital's income share across the industrialized world. The editors write that Piketty's *Capital* "portrays the forces favoring the formation of a dominant plutocracy as being so strong that they can be countered only by world wars and global revolutions—and even then, the correction is only temporary."

In an essay titled "The Piketty Phenomenon" (Chapter 1), *Capital*'s English-language translator, Arthur Goldhammer, ponders how "a work by an academic economist comprising nearly 700 pages dense with statistical tables and graphs" could become the fastest-selling book in the history of Harvard University Press, and its author "the 'rock star' of a profession more commonly regarded as a 'dismal science.'" He attributes the book's stunning success and the "readiness of so many to wade into the unfamiliar waters of economic history" at least in part to widespread public anger at the injustices of the post-recession recovery, when "the portfolios of the wealthy recovered quickly, whereas people who lost their homes lost them for good."

It is here that the editors spot a "contradiction" in the book's "dual nature as work of scholarship and global intellectual phenomenon." On the one hand, *Capital* contends that increasing inequality is the result of fundamental laws of capitalism. But in speaking

before standing-room-only crowds at universities and high-level forums like the UN and IMF about possible policy remedies, "Piketty himself as a celebrity public intellectual is not behaving like a passive chronicler of unavoidable destiny. He is acting as if he believes that the forces he describes in his book can be resisted—that we collectively make our own destiny."

The essays in *After Piketty* are impressively diverse, not only in their subject matter but also in the way they relate to Piketty's original text. Several launch straightforward critiques of his work—both of what he has done and what he has failed to do—while others present complementary ideas that aim to enrich his arguments. Daina Ramey Berry (Chapter 6, "The Ubiquitous Nature of Slave Capital") laments that Piketty did not say more about the institution of slavery, a form of "literal human capital," and its role in wealth accumulation up through the nineteenth century. Laura Tyson and Michael Spence (Chapter 8, "Exploring the Effects of Technology and Wealth Inequality") show how technological change has also been an important driver of income inequality, and how advances in automation could weaken the link between income and work to such an extent that policies like a universal basic income become necessary.

The contributors also span a wide spectrum of ideological orientations. Some, such as Eric Nielsen, operate from squarely within the mainstream neoclassical tradition in economics. In "Human Capital and Wealth before and after *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*" (Chapter 7), Nielsen criticizes Piketty's neglect of "human capital" (of the non-literal kind) and somewhat unconvincingly suggests that education, rather than Piketty's own "contentious and divisive policy program" of global wealth taxation, is the surest path to reducing inequality. Piketty's proposed wealth tax is not without its problems, including the inherent difficulty in coordinating international agreements and monitoring tax havens, but education alone will not reverse our slide toward oligarchy.

Others offer more heterodox perspectives that draw on feminist theory or Marxist analysis. Heather Boushey's "Feminist Interpretation of Patrimonial Capitalism" (Chapter 15) comments on the virtual absence of gender from Piketty's narrative and considers how social norms surrounding marriage, childrearing, and inheritance can affect the intergenerational propagation of inequality. She highlights evidence that women, while "just as likely as men to inherit wealth from their parents," are less likely to inherit a family business, and that parents are twice as likely to ask Google, "Is my son gifted?" as they are to ask, "Is my daughter gifted?"

Suresh Naidu (Chapter 5, "A Political Economy Take on W/Y") posits a tension in *Capital* between a "Domesticated Piketty" who works with standard economic models that are "institution-and-politics free" and a "Wild Piketty" who sees capital as "the alchemy of today's income transmuted into secure claims on future income." Wealth, in this latter view, is not simply money saved from past income but a collection of rights to future income that are shaped by politics and power. If, for instance, intellectual-property protections are strengthened, the holders of patents or copyrights will find that what they own—namely, the right to a stream of revenue—has been rendered more valuable.

The sheer variety of approaches in this volume would pose a challenge for any attempt at editorial curation. Boushey, DeLong, and Steinbaum have chosen to arrange the chapters in four sections, with a fifth and final section devoted to a response from Piketty himself. The first section ("Reception") contains the essay by Goldhammer and previously published reviews of *Capital* by Robert Solow and Krugman. All of these are supremely useful as introductions to the book and its academic and cultural significance. The ordering of the chapters in the subsequent triptych ("Conceptions of Capital," "Dimensions of Inequality," and "The Political Economy of Capital and Capitalism") seems fairly random.

An alternative would have been to group chapters according to their level of technical detail. Most of *After Piketty* is accessible to the general reader, but anyone who has done more practical things than take graduate-level courses in economic theory will almost certainly find parts of the book to be a slog. For example, "Macro Models of Wealth Inequality" (Chapter 14), with its discussions of "logarithmic preferences" and "nonhomothetic bequest motives," will be of interest only to specialists.

The math-phobic may be more interested in the chapters that offer broader philosophical or epistemological perspectives on Piketty's project. David Singh Grewal, in the "The Legal Constitution of Capitalism" (Chapter 19), critiques the way in which Piketty treats $r > g$ as a law of nature akin to gravity. Instead, he tries to "historicize the laws of capitalism understood as laws" by tracing the development of modern theories of property and contract and showing how these often "work to entrench the privileged place of capital."

Although the competition is fierce, the most fascinating chapter is the final one, Elisabeth Jacobs' "Everywhere and Nowhere: Politics in *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*" (Chapter 21). Jacobs circles back to the paradox highlighted at the outset by asking, "How can we have both fundamental laws of economics and historically contingent, institutionally bound processes that shape the relationship between the distribution of economic gains and the pace of economic growth?" She finds fault with Piketty's discussions of proposals like international wealth taxation for their depiction of policy intervention as something that comes from outside the economic system rather than from actors and institutions that live within it. *Capital*, she says, fails to attend to the "mechanisms through which inequality might erode the promise of democratic governance." The diminution of the voice of working people as wealthy donors and high-paid corporate lobbyists come to drive the agenda and write the legislation is but

one example of "feedback loops" between economic and political inequality. Jacobs maintains that "promising economic policy ideas such as Piketty's utopian vision of a global wealth tax are likely to remain a fantasy" unless coupled with a sustained effort to "build countervailing political power."

Paul Krugman realized early on that he could never be Hari Seldon, but it sometimes seems as if he and many other economists have not entirely given up on the dream. The premise of psychohistory lives on in the technocratic conceit that economic policy can be formulated and implemented by an elite group of experts with minimal input from the masses. In Chapter 3, Krugman writes that it's "easy to be cynical" about the prospect of meaningful action against the problem of inequality. "But surely Piketty's masterly diagnosis of where we are and where we're heading makes such a thing considerably more likely," he continues, for Piketty "has transformed our economic discourse; we'll never talk about wealth and inequality the same way we used to."

Yet transforming the "economic discourse" will not by itself transform the world. It is not enough to have white papers or bullet points on a campaign website if you cannot amass the political power needed to implement your agenda and defend it once implemented. To do that, you have to organize people around a concrete vision of how your policies will improve their lives. Inequality will persist as long as we assume that the technocrats will eventually fix it for us. "We collectively make our own destiny," say the editors of *After Piketty*, "even if the circumstances under which we make it are not those of our choosing." A more egalitarian future is possible, but only if we build it for ourselves. ■

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Mike St. Thomas

Borne Back into the Past

Paradise Lost
A Life of F. Scott Fitzgerald
David S. Brown
Belknap, $29.95, 424 pp.

History remembers F. Scott Fitzgerald as the author of *The Great Gatsby*, but that reputation arrived posthumously. While he was alive, his 1920 debut novel *This Side of Paradise* was his calling card. Its descriptions of the loosened morals of his generation established the twenty-three-year-old writer as the voice of the Jazz Age, and its publication convinced Zelda Sayre to offer him her hand in marriage.

Fitzgerald took the book's title from "Tiare Tahiti," a poem by the late-Victorian writer Rupert Brooke, in which the poet rejects heavenly "paradise" as the folly of the wise, and turns instead to the fleshy pleasures of the Tahitian isle. Likewise, the novel's Amory Blaine, Fitzgerald's most transparently autobiographical protagonist, pursues fulfillment in liquor, women, and high society, paradise be damned.

Paradise, though, still has a hold on Amory. Haunted by Catholicism, "the only ghost of a code he had," he remains torn between the worlds of flesh and spirit. Fitzgerald was really writing about himself. Long after he claimed to have left the church, he described himself as a "spoiled priest," a divided soul unable to pursue mammon with a clear conscience. Arthur Mizener used the phrase as a motif in *The Far Side of Paradise*, the first biography of the author, which helped resuscitate Fitzgerald's reputation and to this day remains the standard for insight into his psyche.

F. Scott Fitzgerald

David S. Brown, in naming his new biography *Paradise Lost: A Life of F. Scott Fitzgerald*, places himself squarely in Mizener's wake. In the crowded field of Fitzgerald scholarship, the scope of Brown's book deserves this ambitious title. A historian by trade, Brown argues for Fitzgerald's status as a cultural critic who charted the decline of America from the high ideals of the nineteenth century to the "soulless materialism" of the twentieth. This angle provides a fresh look at Fitzgerald's role in shaping our understanding of the modern age, but Brown's errors and unsteady grasp of Fitzgerald's work ensure that the author himself remains hidden.

Brown places the writer in conversation with similar-minded intellectuals of his era, such as the economist Thorstein Veblen and Frederick Jackson Turner, who argued that the closing of the American frontier subsequently shuttered our cultural imagination. This context helps tie Fitzgerald's tragic vision more closely to the material circumstances of his time, and specifically, to the rise of industrial capitalism and subsequent decay of civic virtue. Brown is right to draw our attention to the author's unflinching focus on the American dream. Fitzgerald's father, an ineffectual man born into a fallen Southern lineage, imparted to his son his nostalgia for antebellum aristocratic ideals, but "twentieth-century America's rising republic of consumers" guaranteed that this bygone era remained a "paradise lost." Brown argues that Fitzgerald, like Gatsby, was "borne back ceaselessly into the past" in a futile attempt to recover it.

Brown's chapters constitute a lumpy mix of historical commentaries, analyses of Fitzgerald's fiction, and reflections on the novelist's private life. One of the biography's strongest chapters, the beautifully written "Penance," reveals Fitzgerald's ugly need to control Zelda's own literary ambitions. Another high point occurs in Brown's convincing claim that Henry Adams's epochal view of history helped Fitzgerald see "the source of society's disenchantment" in Jazz-age New York. Yet Brown's forays into the ideas of Adams and other intellectuals, which last for a few pages each at most, are neither systematic nor thorough enough for his purposes. Also problematic is that Fitzgerald hardly ever knew the work of the thinkers Brown mentions. As family friend and biographer Andrew Turnbull notes, "general ideas [were] for him little more than a backdrop to his fiction." Not surprisingly, Brown rarely draws from Fitzgerald's large body of letters and notes in presenting his case.

That is not to say that historical and sociological context cannot help us understand Fitzgerald or his work. Brown fails, however, in distinguishing the role of a fiction writer from that of a cultural critic or an academic. He claims that, as with a good historian, Fitzgerald's "archives were any number of bars, newspapers, beaches, and cities," and that, like a good economist, he questioned society's "underlying cultural apparatus...money." But as William Faulkner insisted, the only thing worth writing about is "the human heart in conflict with itself," and for those fiction writers whose work endures, the "underlying cultural apparatus" is not money but the soul.

Paradise Lost does not venture far into the territory of the spirit, and its author misses the importance of Catholicism in shaping Fitzgerald's identity, content simply to lump it with his Irish heritage as something that gave him outsider status in elite circles. In reality, Fitzgerald, who claimed to have left the church in 1917, never escaped its influence. He went out of his way to ensure that the major events of his adult life were recognized by church rituals, including his request for a Catholic burial, which, thanks to his daughter's persistence, finally occurred thirty-five years after his death. Some of Fitzgerald's fiction deals specifically with Catholic practices, such as "Absolution," one of his finest short stories. More importantly, the moral urgency found in his writing bears witness to the faith from which he could never quite escape.

Of Brown's missteps perhaps none is more significant than misquoting Rupert Brooke's "Tiare Tahiti," the source of the title and epigram of Fitzgerald's first novel. In the poem's concluding lines Brooke writes of the pleasures that lie "Well this side of paradise... / There's little comfort in the wise." Brown, however, omits Brooke's ellipsis and turns an adverb into an interjection: "Well, This side of paradise / There's little comfort in the wise." In Brown's reworking, the lines become a wry lament; Brooke, however, intended them as an assertion of the desires of the flesh. In the novel, Amory Blaine reads and references Brooke frequently, and pursues those desires down "a long chute of indulgence," which leads him, like Dante, to encounter the devil and an "artificial lake of death."

Both in his title and in his focus on Fitzgerald's desire to recover the virtues of his father's generation, Brown invokes John Milton's paradise, which remains forever sealed in the past as a result of sin. This paradigm can help us understand Fitzgerald's role as an American cultural critic, but to understand Fitzgerald the man, we need to think of Dante's paradise, which constantly beckons the searcher toward spiritual fulfillment, though, like the author and his characters, that searcher may never escape the dark wood. Nick Carraway says that Gatsby was "worth the whole damn bunch put together" not because he tried to recover the past but because among all the wealth-chasers, he alone was moved by love, not greed. Brown astutely recognizes this, noting that Fitzgerald "measured the value of [his heroes'] character by the quality of their quests."

Unfortunately, this aspect of Fitzgerald's character and work is never developed. Brown's book has value in placing the author in a unique context, but those looking for a true understanding of his life will be disappointed. The "spoiled priest" deserves better. ■

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Steven Knepper

Liturgies of Loss

The Tragic Imagination

Rowan Williams
Oxford University Press, $24.95, 160 pp.

Rowan Williams argues that the "tragic imagination" is a moral imagination. Tragic drama teaches us that calamity can be narrated, that it can be drawn, at least to some degree, back into shared experience. There is a spare hope in this. It shows that "we have not been silenced forever by loss." Furthermore, tragedy requires us to attend to the sufferings of others on stage. It presents us with "different kinds of witnessing to pain" and teaches us that "suffering calls out [for] recognition." This is not a matter of straightforward empathy, which risks deluding us about our ability to identify with sufferers. Tragedy teaches us instead that "the suffering of others is not to be absorbed into our own feelings. But we also find that the suffering of others is already shared in human communication, recognized and named as loss or catastrophe." Tragedy helps us recognize the limits of our own self-knowledge and the fragility of our condition.

Still, tragedy does not just dramatize individual fragility. Its representations of strife and cyclical violence, as in the paradigmatic *Oresteia*, dramatize the fragility of the political community as well. Indeed, in his opening chapter Williams, the former archbishop of Canterbury, claims that Athenian tragedy was a liturgical event. The tragic was "originally a function of how a verbal and visual representation works in the mind of a community gathered to celebrate or affirm its resilience and legitimacy in full awareness of the fragility that always pervades life." Williams suggests a liturgical dimension remains in modern tragedies despite all their differences from those of ancient Greece.

After outlining these aspects of the "tragic imagination" early in the study, Williams responds at length to George Steiner's influential work, including his 1961 study *The Death of Tragedy* and his subsequent essays on tragic drama. Williams readily acknowledges Steiner's erudition and his insight into key changes in the history of drama, but he rejects Steiner's ideal of the "absolute tragedy" that affords no hope. In the end, Williams argues that this ideal is unattainable. Again, Williams points to the minimal hope to be found in the act of narration itself. "A strictly Steinerian tragedy," Williams claims, "…is compromised as soon as it opens its mouth, because it is committed to representation, and so to an undetermined future exchange of words."

Williams also challenges Steiner's argument that Christianity is fundamentally "anti-tragic" because of the promise of the Resurrection. Steiner has distinguished company in this regard, from some of the Romantics through twentieth-century predecessors such as I. A. Richards and Karl Jaspers. In a nuanced argument, Williams claims that although Christianity does indeed reject a notion of "absolute tragedy," this allows it to more directly affirm "the possibility of mourning—the articulation of loss." He argues that Christianity itself represents "the most serious possible disruption of what is meant to be ethical and political community—the killing of the human form of God by the process of human law—[which] is a paradigm of tragic performance." He agrees with theologians like John Milbank and David Bentley Hart that there is danger in a Christianity that overemphasizes tragedy. It risks displacing charity and grace, or at least minimizing them. Williams, however, makes a good case that a theology of tragedy, if not a resolutely tragic theology, is important

Lear in the Storm *by George Romney*

for Christianity.

In addition to the arguments sketched above, Williams offers extended readings of several dramas, including Sophocles' *Antigone*, Euripides' *Medea*, Shakespeare's *King Lear*, Milton's *Samson Agonistes*, Racine's *Phèdre*, and, as a more recent case study, Sarah Kane's controversial 1995 play *Blasted*. He also discusses the Book of Job and John's Gospel in light of the tragic imagination. Williams touches on topics as varied as Antonin Artaud's theater of cruelty, the similarities and differences between Greek tragedy and Japanese Noh theater, tragedy in postcolonial literature, and the relationship between comedy and tragedy. *The Tragic Imagination* is thus a brief but wide-ranging study.

Williams builds on the work of a number of scholars, such as Martha Nussbaum, Stanley Cavell, Terry Eagleton, Donald MacKinnon, Hans Urs von Balthasar, and Gillian Rose. There are also significant debts to Hegel, especially the Hegel that emerges in Rose's work. Williams largely eschews the clash and synthesis of ethical claims that are often associated with Hegel. But like Hegel, he is interested in how tragedy can call into question one's self-conceptions, how it can also call for recognition and expose misrecognition of others. Indeed, when Williams speaks of recognition in this study, what he has in mind is usually closer to the sort of recognition that is central to Hegel's thought, the recognition that is given and sought after in community, than to the *anagnorisis* of Aristotle's *Poetics*. And, like Hegel, Williams is more interested in the knowledge tragedy can yield than in the feelings it can provoke.

A brief study, even one as concise and tightly argued as *The Tragic Imagination*, is bound to leave some issues unresolved. For instance, Williams acknowledges that tragic art is risky. He claims that "it is possible to pile up the detail of atrocities or vivid representations, visual or verbal, of atrocities with no clear ritual structure to hold the present moment of paradoxical 'safety' (thus Bret Easton Ellis's brutal satire, *American Psycho*, is not tragic in any interesting sense) and so to lose the point of the dramatic representation itself—which is to allow the audience to appropriate their own danger, with intense feeling but without panic, in a shared linguistic event." The tragic audience can give way to voyeurs ogling at a sadistic spectacle. As noted above, Williams acknowledges the concern of theologians like Milbank and Hart who have argued that tragedy revels in—indeed ontologizes—violence. Williams holds that this is not what tragedy necessarily offers, but the genre can devolve in this way. Still, he does not explain how this devolution happens. For instance, do those genre conventions that seem to make tragedy more explicitly liturgical—the chorus, the use of verse rather than prose, the retelling of familiar myth and history—help to keep tragedy from becoming merely "brutal"? Williams suggests that they are more than incidentals, but he does not say much about their gradual abandonment.

Williams's emphasis on tragic knowledge raises a deeper question. Yeats once wrote "that in the supreme moment of tragic art there comes upon one that strange sensation as though the hair of one's head stood up." To attend a tragedy is to undergo a volatile and visceral experience. Williams acknowledges that tragedy "involves both a bodily engagement and unavoidable dispossession," but he has much more to say about what tragedy allows us to know than what it makes us feel. He is wary of theorists who emphasize the sublime or catharsis. In the end, he (like Hegel) may make the experience of tragedy too determinate and intellectual. There are insights and humane wisdom to be found on every page of Williams's study, but at times his steadiness belies the profound volatility of tragic art.

Tragedy does give words to calamity, and there is hope in this, but tragedy also stages howls and silences. The philosopher William Desmond claims that a howl like Lear's can never be adequately translated into words. Its significance and implications can never be fully pinned down. In this way tragedy chastens criticism and philosophy. Likewise, tragedy's affirmation of being's fragile worth is often experienced rather than rationally deduced, and this experience can be elusive. It calls for something like a phenomenology, one attentive to how a human stripped down to a "bare, forked animal" can still appear haloed in dignity.

But there is no guarantee that this is what tragedy will reveal to us. Tragedy can indeed slide into a sadistic counterfeit that aestheticizes violence. And while the Furies might be turned from a destructive to a sustaining force, they might also poison our sense of life's worth. Steiner is himself too conclusive in saying that tragedy must be hopeless, but he is surely correct that it can shock us into despair. As Williams's incisive readings suggest, great tragedies can yield crucial moral knowledge. Preparing oneself to receive this knowledge, though, likely requires an imagination formed by other liturgies. Even then, perhaps, to watch a tragedy is to undertake a risk that promises no certain insight. ■

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Holy Tenderness

Greer Hannan

As you reach the buffet, someone asks whether you want sauce on your roast, whether you want salad, then a third volunteer puts silverware and a napkin into your hand. You take your plate and find an open dining-room chair, except that the dining room is old St. Paul's Catholic Church, where the altar has been replaced with tables, and the meal is a eucharist of a different kind.

Shelter residents come from the former parochial school next door; families come from the Section 8 apartments across the street; the agency's staff trickle in from offices around the campus of Louisville's Society of St. Vincent de Paul. Everyone finds respite from the heat, the noise, the hustle. The room's vaulted ceilings are illumined with bright, gem-toned light streaming through the stained-glass windows. Each is illustrated with a Gospel scene, Jesus moving through this world, getting his hands and feet dirty in the business of those who are poor, or sinners, or disconsolate. One especially striking window depicts Mary Magdalene on her knees, her cascades of blond hair sweeping the floor. She is washing Jesus' feet with her tears.

For its first millennium, the Western church held the pious belief that Mary Magdalene was not only the person who first saw the risen Lord (initially mistaking him for the gardener); she was also the sister of Martha and Lazarus of Bethany and the penitent sinner who washed Jesus' feet in Luke's gospel. But modern scholarship rejects that conflation, instead recognizing that Mary Magdalene, Mary of Bethany, and the unnamed repentant sinner are three distinct individuals. It also repudiates the charge that Magdalene led a licentious life before her conversion, dismissing the rumors of her promiscuity as patristic embellishments.

Yet in setting the record straight, we perhaps lose the depth and tenderness of the encounters between Magdalene and Jesus. Those who hold the church's ancient, pious belief witness a profound friendship unfold between them. Magdalene keenly feels that her sin has wounded Jesus—her remorse pours forth in tears—and in his great compassion, he allows her the exquisitely intimate gesture of washing his feet with her tears, drying them with her hair, and kissing and anointing them. She sits at those same feet and listens as he teaches in her house in Bethany, while her sister Martha fusses to provide hospitality; their friendship even grows strong enough that she can challenge him in grief and anger over the death of her brother Lazarus. She reaches out to draw the resurrected Christ close when she encounters him outside his tomb and realizes that he is truly risen.

And one more scene comes to mind: at the Last Supper, at that first Eucharist, Jesus kneels to wash the feet of his disciples, echoing the washing that Magdalene first undertook for him. Then he tells us to do likewise.

Christ in the House of Simon *by Dieric Bouts*

One of the privileges of working with people who are homeless is that it has given me a chance to follow Jesus' injunction literally. I remember in particular a man who had arrived at the overnight shelter with painful wounds on his feet. He had cut them the previous night, and after a day of walking the streets, they were swollen and infected. So I washed them, and anointed them, with a tube of antibiotic ointment rather than an alabaster jar of pure nard.

These people, this place, and that stained-glass image of Mary Magdalene have taught me that a holy life is a life of tenderness. It may not be a life of moral perfection, or right belief, or spiritual epiphanies, though these are genuine goods. Magdalene—as the ancient church perceived her—sincerely repents of her sins and resolves to do better; she listens to and contemplates Jesus' teaching; she has seven devils cast out of her. But she also struggled with demons and passed through dark nights, teaching us that doubt and struggle persist even for those who have seen resurrection. Moral, intellectual, or emotional certainties are always elusive, and, anyway, they aren't why Magdalene was canonized. The sanctity of her life is fundamentally embodied in her attentiveness to Jesus and the tenderness of her actions.

I spend most of my days in an office, balancing budgets, reviewing regulations, and writing reports, not washing feet. When the peace of our meal in old St. Paul's is inevitably shattered, I remember that poverty has a way of bringing out the worst in people. In those moments it is hard to feel patient or cool-headed or hospitable. But her image in the window reminds me to move with humility and grace. It reminds me that in every moment and in every act, in the midst of turmoil, confusion, and grief, it is always possible to wash and kiss his feet. ■

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