A Review of Religion, Politics & Culture

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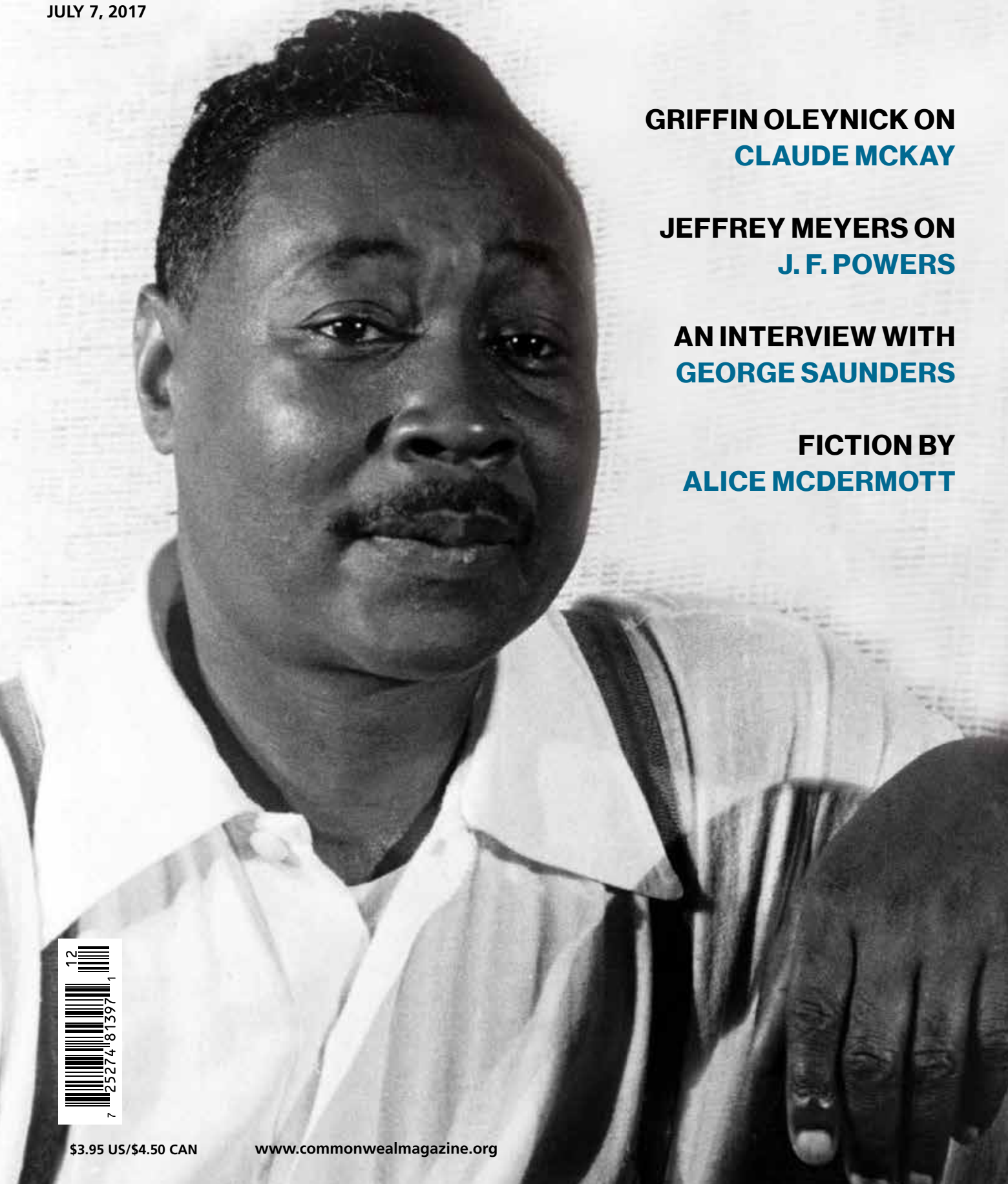

GRIFFIN OLEYNICK ON
CLAUDE MCKAY

JEFFREY MEYERS ON
J. F. POWERS

AN INTERVIEW WITH
GEORGE SAUNDERS

FICTION BY
ALICE MCDERMOTT

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LETTERS

Anonymous priests, voodoo economics, etc.

ANONYMITY APPRECIATED

In response to Robert Imbelli's remark ("Drawing Boundaries," June 2) on the anonymity of Fr. Nonomen's contributions to *Commonweal*, I have personally experienced the destruction of a path of ministry I pursued anonymously, by way of accompaniment, when my name was publicly revealed. In our times there are too many self-righteous people with too many weapons of destruction, and some of them are in high ecclesiastic office. Were his name and parish revealed, I suspect his writings would cease, and perhaps also his ministry.

That would be a significant loss. He is fair game in reader response; that is enough.

FR. KEN SMITS, OFM
Fond du Lac, Wisc.

PERPETUAL FOLLY

Charles Wilber's article "Free Market Folly" (May 19) is excellent, thorough, and, sadly, a waste of time! Others have clearly articulated the dangers and results of "voodoo economics" and supply-side, trickle-down policies which Reagan, the Bushes, and now President Trump have presented and upheld as sacred and the solution to our problems. Yes, free-market policies and Trumponomics are opposed by Catholic social teaching and individual church leaders. As sound and just as the teaching is, nothing beneficial to the poor, helpless, powerless, and other victims of blatant greed, power, and arrogant entitlement will occur until we educate and energize Catholics to understand and embrace the social-justice message of Jesus and live it, working for the common good of all. This is not the case right now. Catholics have voted for advocates of free-market policies regularly.

Sadly, many Catholics are one-issue voters or enthralled by false promises enhanced by a prolife stance. The blasphemy of this approach is its near total indifference to the needs and hardships of the less fortunate of our society.

Unless and until the bishops lead, engage, and motivate the clergy to teach, preach, and live the social-justice message, which is truly the Good News, the majority of Catholics will continue to find comfort in opposing abortions as the sum of their dedication to the sacredness of life. Going no further than the womb leaves misery, injustice, and violence for all others en route to the tomb. Amen.

MARK FRANCESCHINI, OSM
Denver, Colo.

AUXILIARY ANNOUNCEMENT

May I offer an addendum to Rita Ferrone's excellent piece on the latest cardinals ("Cardinal Virtues," June 16)? In addition to the three non-cardinalatial seeds cited—Bamaka, Stockholm, and Laos—special attention should be paid to the naming of Gregorio Rosa Chavez, auxiliary bishop of San Salvador. Seminary rector Msgr. Rosa was the very close aide to Archbishop Romero during the darkest years when, among the bishops, only Arturo Rivera Damas sided with the constantly beleaguered archbishop. Since being ordained auxiliary bishop in 1982, Rosa has been as close to an ideal "Francis bishop" as one could imagine. A skilled administrator of the Central

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American bishops' secretariat and of the Latin American Caritas organizations, he is, like Bergoglio was in Buenos Aires, *un obispo callero*, a street bishop.

A lasting image I have is seeing him at the national airport stopping to speak to every Salvadoran worker he encountered there, engaging each in lively chatter, with him knowing only that they shared a homeland together. And hearing him say, with a smile, after the divided Salvadoran episcopate voted unanimously in 1990 to send to Rome the documents for the martyred bishop's beatification: "Well, that's Romero's first miracle." Each time a Salvadoran diocese became open, friends wondered if, finally, Goya Rosa would be named, but most concluded sadly that he was destined to be an auxiliary for life. He still may not get a diocese, but I cannot imagine better news in this centenary year of Romero's birth than the placing of a red biretta on the head of Cardinal Gregorio Rosa Chavez.

TOM QUIGLEY
Annandale, Va.

TWO THOUSAND WORDS

Whether it was editorial cleverness or accidental placement, I appreciated the juxtaposition of the articles on two American princes of the church, Cardinals Cupich and Burke (June 2). What contrasting visions of the church are presented!

The ICKSP presence came to my diocese when a church was made available due to pastoral planning. Its activities reflect the ecclesial dynamic described in the Brende article and it is uninvolved in the local church.

Of the two articles, I prefer Cupich's vision and hope it is required reading at the upcoming June bishops' meeting. And, besides, I don't have a biretta.

FR. DENNIS J. LYNCH
Diocese of La Crosse, Wisc.

A GOOD CONVERSATION

Last November, our president's election made the divisions and wounds of society obvious. Our brains were wired to light up to authority, snared by fear and hoping for love, without knowing him and seeing the big picture. Now the disease has spread—do you think of everyone as "Republican" or "Democrat," instead of one complex individual? Do you ever see the two breeds talking and listening? We watch from the cheap seats in the theater and are lucky not to be congressmen. But we can get a taste of it by watching ourselves. The best way to heal society is to join a weekly discussion group. A "water cooler group"—that's what our Commonweal Local Community has become for us.

Talking with people in the same room over time, and seeing the solidness of some, the blind spots of others, is the only way to build trust. Breaking the ice, listening to others and stating one's views, seeing that the other person hears you and takes it in—these are the building blocks of civil society. A person writing emails or tweeting feels powerful, but seldom builds understanding. Those gimmicks lack the real-time, back-and-forth volley of tones, glances, facial expressions, the signaling of emotion that makes things clear. All real politics is local. (The busy senators may not do it, but the average citizen can.)

If you have a good breakroom, neighborhood porch gang, coffee shop or pub with a regular crew, then you're lucky or wise, and know what I mean. If you don't have something like that, then you may need to start the group yourself.

The group should be sloppy and inefficient, with no agenda or money at stake—so the effort to control doesn't take over. The basic goal is to have a good conversation.

What is a good conversation? It's a spontaneous, free-ranging talk, very much like play. One person tosses out the ball and others respond, till someone says "Okay if I switch topics?" Like a good country road, the course wanders from less personal topics (weather, movies, politics) to more personal ones (family, philosophy, life and death), and back again when folks need to lighten up. Of course everyone comes from a different place and won't agree, but differences are expected and vital for growth. (It's only later, driving home, I can think, "That was weird, but maybe he had something!") It's polite but not too polite, honest but not too hostile. Some humor is helpful but the serious thread remains. Brief statements, no lectures, a glance to check out how the other receives it, and asking, "What did you mean by that? Will you explain?" are all vital methods. It is fact-checking in a way that rarely happens online. Afterward, I think, "I didn't know what I thought until after I said it. It turns out that stranger is more like me than I thought. I see myself better in the mirror of the other."

BILL HOUGHTON
Milwaukee, Wisc.

THE EDITORS REPLY:

We continue to be pleased that our Commonweal Local Communities have helped foster meaningful conversations and community for our readers around the country—especially in an era in which civilized public discourse seems all but extinct. If you're interested in forming a CLC in your area, or if you'd like to check out whether there's already a group meeting, head over to www.commonwealmagazine.org/local to learn more or sign up. Email or call Ellen Koneck with any questions: ekoneck@commonwealmagazine.org or 212-662-4200 ext. 7005.

Just Build It

On an evening in early June, hundreds of New York subway commuters riding the F train found themselves trapped underground for more than forty-five minutes. The air conditioning was broken, the lights had been cut off, and there were few clear announcements about what was happening. "Claustrophobia, panic, and heat exhaustion began to set in for many folks," one passenger reported on Facebook. Some started to remove their clothes to combat the heat. Others shared water with those around them. Doors were pried open to help air circulate. Eventually, another train arrived to help and slowly pushed the stalled one to the next station.

That grim scene was only the latest and most extreme in a series of recent events exposing the decrepit state of a New York City public-transportation system that is falling apart, marked by delays, overcrowding, breakdowns, power outages, and safety concerns. But most Americans, even those unacquainted with the glories of the Metropolitan Transit Authority, wouldn't exactly be surprised: the American Society of Civil Engineers' most recent report gave the country's infrastructure an overall grade of D-plus, concluding that many of our bridges, dams, roads, airports, water systems, and more are on the verge of obsolescence or failure.

Which is why it was darkly fitting that New York's subway debacle unfolded on the very day that the Trump administration kicked off its "infrastructure week," a series of announcements and events that didn't include an actual infrastructure plan. Trump campaigned on a supposed $1 trillion infrastructure package, and after the election his chief strategist Steve Bannon crowed that it would be "the greatest opportunity to rebuild everything. Shipyards, ironworks, get them all jacked up." It would create millions of jobs and prove Trump was a different kind of Republican. Instead, Trump merely unveiled a promise to privatize the air-traffic-controllers system and a six-page "fact sheet" that vaguely sketches his infrastructure priorities.

Transportation Secretary Elaine Chao told reporters that the administration's key principles are "simple and yet quite profound," but the fact sheet actually reveals an approach that is woefully inadequate. The document calls for $200 billion in "outlays related to the infrastructure initiative," but Rep. Peter DeFazio of Oregon, the ranking Democrat on the transportation committee, pointed out that that is "a ten-year figure with zero details about how or where that money is spent." Only $5 billion of the $200 billion is earmarked for 2018, and most of the rest won't kick in until after 2020.

Even if the $200 billion is eventually accounted for, that is nowhere near $1 trillion in actual infrastructure spending. As the *New York Times* described it, the president plans to rely on "a combination of private industry, state and city tax money, and borrowed cash" to make up the difference. The costs of rebuilding American infrastructure, in other words, would be shifted to already-strapped state and local governments; the Trump administration euphemistically calls this an attempt to "encourage self-help." This approach also seems to rely on the kind of public-private partnerships that enrich corporations and hurt ordinary citizens: airports, roads, and water-treatment plants get sold off to companies that can charge tolls and fees for their use after they've been built or repaired. Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders was so alarmed by the Trump administration's reliance on what it calls "leveraging the private sector" that he released a report detailing a number of reasons to be deeply suspicious of such schemes.

It is telling that even when it comes to an issue like rebuilding U.S. infrastructure, on which more than a few Democrats would have been willing to work with him, Trump's plutocratic instincts overwhelm both political advantage and the common good. Given that the federal government can still borrow money so cheaply, the obvious solution to our infrastructure woes is to do just that: borrow $1 trillion and fix and build as much as possible. There is no need for complicated tax credits or promises of future toll revenue to get private companies to buy up what ought to be public goods. As the economist Paul Krugman once put it, "If you want to build infrastructure, build infrastructure." To which should be added: the sooner the better. ■

Jo McGowan

'Still She Is a Wonderful Girl'

HOW MY IN-LAWS LEARNED TO LIVE WITH MY CHRISTIAN FAITH

Until the day she died, my mother-in-law and I had an amazing relationship. In the thirty-eight years I have been married to her son, she and I did not have even one serious falling-out. She was ninety-nine (and seven-eighths) when she passed away, and she lived with us, more or less full-time, for the last eighteen years of her life. We stayed out of each other's way when our styles collided. (Which was often. She was meticulous, detail-oriented and time-conscious to a fault; I am relaxed, "big-picture," and habitually late.) But the bedrock of our relationship, after the love and affection, was respect.

So I was a little thrown when I overheard her talking about me some years ago to distant relatives who had come to visit. She described my family back in the states. She spoke approvingly about our three children and about my work. Then came the kicker: "*Though* she is a Christian, *still* she is a wonderful girl."

It took me a long time to move past this. "*Though* she is a Christian"? Had I been here all these years on sufferance? I came to India in 1981. Was she still waiting for me to convert? Her elder sister, who was far more conservative than she, had been skeptical about me from the start. In her opinion, the only way to make the marriage last was for me to become a Hindu. My own beliefs were completely irrelevant; women believed whatever their husbands instructed them to believe. My mother-in-law thought that was ridiculous, but there was nevertheless some distinction in her mind—an impediment that, though not my fault, I constantly had to work to disprove.

My father-in-law, for whom religion was both more important (he totally disapproved of mixed marriages), and less (he himself was secular and practiced no rituals that I was aware of), had his own views about me. In a document I saw only recently, long after his death, he described me as a sweet, well-mannered girl, albeit a "fanatic Christian." "What made him think I was a fanatic?" I asked my husband, amazed. "You went to church every Sunday," Ravi answered.

I began thinking about my own family's response to the Hindu they thought I was marrying (Ravi is actually an agnostic), and I realized that they weren't much different in their insularity and narrowness. It was a shock to me, as I had always believed them to be so liberal. My mother had the rare quality of simply being interested in what other people believed. But my father and all his side of the family were traditional to the core, the products of a small-town Catholic upbringing, and limited by a lack of exposure to anything outside their world. Some of my parents' friends even refused to attend our wedding, though, for others, the chance to see Daniel Berrigan (our officiant) trumped their scruples. They grew to love and admire Ravi, but even then they could only see him through the prism of their own beliefs. My Dad often said that Ravi was one of the best Catholics he had ever known (*though* he is a Hindu...).

Children in Bangalore, India, hold Easter eggs.

CNS PHOTO / JAGADEESH NV, EPA

Now I find this both endearing and exasperating.

One of the outcomes of living in India for nearly forty years has been a transformation of my religious views. As I have learned about my own biases through the Hindu-Christian frame of reference that has dominated in my family, I've watched that same drama play out in other families and communities that are Hindu-Muslim, Jewish-Christian, Sikh-Buddhist, atheist-religious—you name it. I see how a stubborn adherence to strict dogma can destroy lives: emotionally, psychologically, even physically. Here in India, religious tensions are at fever pitch, and people are dying as a result. This is true in America too, and around the world.

For my part, I have come to see religion as more of a medium than a container. I no longer see any religion (including my own) as the sole repository of truth, wisdom, or profound insight. I now prefer to consider religion as I consider language. One language is no better or worse than another, and all languges exist to serve a common human need. Unburdened by the weight of divine appointment, language is a living thing, shaped and sharpened by use, travel, borrowing, necessity. Language is playful, supple, and responsive—constantly reworking itself in the light of events, discoveries, and changes of mood and perspective. Religion should be like that too.

Ravi's aunt thought I should adopt his faith to ensure that our marriage would last. I chose instead to learn his language. Knowing Hindi has not only enhanced our marriage; it has enriched my entire existence, making it possible for me to participate in the everyday life of my community and ensuring that I will be accepted anywhere I go in this mysterious, marvelous, and divided land. ■

Mollie Wilson O'Reilly

Solidarity or Silence?

AMERICAN MUSLIMS & RELIGIOUS LIBERTY

In response to President Donald Trump's January 27 executive order curtailing Muslim immigration, several offices of the U.S. bishops conference released a joint statement expressing concern. "We join with other faith leaders to stand in solidarity again with those affected by this order, especially our Muslim sisters and brothers," the bishops said. But hold on: *again*?

If we're talking about Catholic leaders standing in solidarity with Muslims, the past several years have struck me mainly as a series of missed opportunities. When the bishops launched their Fortnight for Freedom project in 2012, a *Commonweal* editorial noted their failure to mention "the best-documented case of growing hostility to religious presence in the United States: hostility to Islam." Not much has changed. The aim of the Fortnight has always been to put the bishops' beef with the Obama administration over mandated contraceptive coverage in a broad context—it's not just about protecting Catholic privileges, it's about defending "our first, most cherished liberty," for the good of the nation itself. Yet Barack Obama's successor as president won that office with a stream of attacks on one particular religion, and—unless your diocese departed significantly from the USCCB's prepared materials—that fact barely registered as an afterthought in the just-concluded Fortnight 2017.

It wouldn't be fair to say the bishops have done nothing to resist prejudice against Islam. The USCCB Committee on Ecumenical and Religious Affairs recently created a national Catholic-Muslim dialogue (after having sponsored regional dialogues for many years), and individual bishops including San Diego's Robert McElroy, Newark's Joseph Tobin, and Portland's Alexander Sample have spoken eloquently about the need for Catholics to stand with marginalized populations against fear and hate.

But despite making religious liberty its signature issue, the USCCB never condemned the threats and insults to American Muslims that echoed at Trump's campaign rallies and defined his crude political platform. This was a man who regaled crowds with the story of an American general who put down an insurrection by executing forty-nine Muslims using bullets dipped in pig's blood and leaving the fiftieth alive to tell the tale. To Trump, that general was a role model, and the fact that the incident never happened didn't stop him from citing it as an example of effective counterterrorism policy. "We better start getting tough," he'd warn darkly.

Trump deliberately stoked fear of an already vulnerable religious minority, and the main body of Catholic bishops seemed not to notice. He baselessly accused American Muslims of celebrating the 9/11 attacks and protecting the perpetrators of the attacks in Orlando and San Bernardino. When a supporter at a 2015 rally in New Hampshire said, "We have a problem in this country. It's called Muslims.... When can we get rid of them?" Trump replied, "We are going to be looking at a lot of different things." Solutions Trump was willing to consider included, at various points, forcing American Muslims to register in a database, conducting surveillance of American mosques, and enacting "a total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States." The USCCB issued no press releases condemning any of these suggestions.

Consistency has never been much valued by Trump, who as president is attempting to follow through on his promised Muslim ban, and who also said this: "For too long, the federal government has used the power of the state as a weapon against people of faith."

Cardinal Donald Wuerl applauds as President Donald Trump displays his executive order on Promoting Free Speech and Religious Liberty.

He said it in the Rose Garden on the National Day of Prayer, and standing at his elbow was Cardinal Donald Wuerl of Washington, D.C., there to witness Trump signing an executive order that, in the words of USCCB president Cardinal Daniel DiNardo, "begins the process of alleviating the serious burden of the HHS mandate." The GOP had won the White House, and the bishops' longstanding protest was being addressed. Perhaps they felt it would be ungrateful to register a new complaint. Yet Wuerl had prayed just moments before Trump spoke for "the courage to make our voices heard on behalf of all of those people today who suffer persecution simply because of their faith."

Thus it was more than a little dispiriting to watch Wuerl stand by in silence as Trump made himself out to be a champion of religious liberty. "We will not allow people of faith to be targeted, bullied, or silenced anymore," he said, preposterously. "And we will never, ever stand for religious discrimination." If Trump handed the bishops a win that day, they also took a loss by failing—again—to stand in solidarity with the most persecuted religious minority in America. ■

CNS PHOTO / JIM LO SCALZO, EPA

Andrew J. Bacevich

The New Normal

SOCIAL CHANGES THAT TRUMP HASN'T, WON'T, AND CAN'T AFFECT

A sampling of recent headlines: "Art in the Age of Trump;" "Truth in the Age of Trump;" "Feminism in the Age of Trump;" "Hate in the Age of Trump;" "Reading Yeats in the Age of Trump;" "Anything at All Can Happen in the Age of Trump." And that's barely scratching the surface.

Concerned about the impact of the "Age of Trump" on science? A wealth of recent literature examining that topic awaits you. Ditto for sex, gay rights, cities, philanthropy, bioethics, foreign policy, fashion, investing, anxiety, faithfulness, the Arctic, and even "vegan activism." The list goes on: in the "Age of Trump," everything is changing, and bigly.

To judge by the avalanche of commentary exploring every aspect of his eponymous "Age," our recently inaugurated president is to the United States what Caesar Augustus was to Rome or Louis XIV was to France. Just months in office, he is already putting a profound mark on virtually every aspect of human endeavor.

So at least hordes of hyperventilating journalists, scholars, activists, bloggers, and opinionated citizens purport to believe. Mark me down as skeptical. My bet is that when future historians render a verdict on Donald Trump they will see him as our least consequential president since Benjamin Harrison, whose signature diplomatic achievement was to persuade Europeans to lift a ban on pork imported from the United States, or even since William Henry Harrison, B. Harrison's grandfather, who died after a mere thirty-one days in office.

Particularly on the home front, the prospects of Trump achieving anything of lasting significance are rapidly diminishing. Barring some domestic equivalent of Pearl Harbor, Trump's own incompetence, compounded by the internal dysfunction besetting his administration, will severely limit his prospects of making much of an impact. Throw in extreme partisanship, relentless sniping from the establishment press, and the obstructions posed by courts and the permanent government, and you end up with a recipe that almost guarantees paralysis.

That Trump will retain the ability to fire up his supporters and enrage his detractors will doubtless be the case. But for the balance of his term, fending off investigations and indictments is likely to absorb the preponderance of his attention. Whatever mischief he succeeds in committing, whether by cutting social programs or conferring favors on major corporations, can be overturned or reversed once he departs the scene. So unless Trump plunges the nation into some disastrous war—a possibility, alas, not to be discounted—Americans will end up mostly remembering their forty-fifth president, fondly or not, for his tweets.

Yet to suggest that Trump will end up on the Harrison end of the presidential spectrum is not to imply that the United States as a whole will remain stuck in neutral as long as he occupies the White House. On the contrary, dramatic, fundamental, and probably irreversible changes are transforming American society day by day before our very eyes. It's just that Trump himself is irrelevant to those changes, which predate his entry into politics and continue today all but unaffected by his ascent to the presidency.

Melodramatic references to an "Age of Trump" that suddenly commenced in November 2016 obscure this reality. Simply put, our collective fixation on the person and foibles of Trump the individual causes us to overlook what is actually going on. And what is actually going on is something that Donald Trump hasn't, won't, and can't affect.

Let me illustrate the point by citing a pair of recent articles in the *New York Times*. Even as other "legacy" outlets become passé, that newspaper continues to serve as an important bellwether of change, cuing political and cultural elites to trends that merit their attention. Nominally, the *Times* provides its readers with "All the News That's Fit to Print." In practice, it prints "All the Views Deemed to Matter." Among the things that matter most at the *Times* are changes in the prevailing definition of freedom.

What we're talking about is not my grandmother's version of freedom, of course. In practice, the *Times* equates freedom with maximizing personal autonomy, a proposition especially applicable to all matters related to race, gender, sex, and sexuality. (When it comes to class, the *Times* is ambivalent, sympathizing with those in need while simultaneously celebrating extravagant consumption.) Choice signifies empowerment. That expanding individual choice ultimately advances the common good is taken as given.

So the operative principle is this: anything that enlarges choice is commendable. A recent *Times* story about the first women to complete army infantry training—"a towering milestone"—offers a vivid example. Young women "who dreamed of going into the infantry" now have those dreams come true, the *Times* reports, and with that "are no longer barred from the core combat positions that are the clearest routes to senior leadership." Whether the quality of U.S. senior military leadership leaves something to be desired (it does) and whether gender imbalance at the top contributes to those deficiencies (who knows) are questions that the *Times* does not take up. What counts, and is to be applauded, is that nothing should impede women hankering to serve in combat from making it to the pinnacle of the military hierarchy.

CIARAN FREEMAN

On the other hand, anything that inhibits choice calls for critical examination. The traditional prohibition on suicide offers an example. The front-page treatment given to a story on "medically assisted death," published in the *Times* one day after the feature on female grunts, illustrates the point.

This 7,000-plus word essay, spread across six pages and including photographs, provides a deeply sympathetic account of why and how John Shields chose to arrange for his own death. A former Catholic priest and lifelong spiritual seeker who had lived a full and consequential life, Mr. Shields was suffering from an incurable disease that condemned him to a wretchedly slow and painful demise. So he resolved to determine his own fate. In doing so, this exemplar of decency and virtue became something more: as depicted by the *Times*, in ending his life, Mr. Shields was expanding the very parameters of human freedom.

"Having control over the terms of his death," according to the *Times*, "made him feel empowered over the disease rather than crippled by it." So after bidding farewell to loving family and friends, and with the help of an obliging physician ("I'm coming here and John will be dead, so I guess technically I'm killing John. But that's not how I think of it."), he did it his way, with impressive dignity.

Add to the mix a recent *New York Times Magazine* cover story on non-exclusive coupling—"Is an Open Marriage a Happier Marriage?"—along with the attention the newspaper lavishes on all things LGBT and you get the picture. Whether for good or for ill, and whatever tomfoolery Donald Trump may or may not be plotting, American society is undergoing a profound moral and cultural revolution, of which—irony of ironies—the narcissistic Trump is himself a product.

My argument here is not that the *Times* itself is somehow responsible for this revolution. While it may encourage, approve, or certify, it does not cause. As the paper of record, the principal function of the *Times* is to bear witness. In that regard, it performs an essential service. But if the *Times* went out of business next week, the forces promoting a radically revised conception of freedom would persist, their momentum unchecked.

So to expend energy exploring the implications of the so-called "Age of Trump" is to engage in a fool's errand. Trump's antics serve to obscure the real story. Indeed, in a fundamental sense, the Trump phenomenon represents the embodiment of "fake news."

The real story is this: ours is an "Age of Autonomy," in which received norms—the basis of freedom as my grandmother understood the term—are losing their authority. This is notably the case with regard to norms that derive from religious tradition. How and whether the forces displacing those norms—science, the market, Big Data, social media—will foster a durable basis for a morally grounded community is at present impossible to foresee.

Yet this much is for sure. Long after Trump has retired to Mar-a-Lago, the revolution that predates his rise to prominence will continue, with implications far outweighing anything he—or any other president—may do. Someday even the *New York Times* may notice. ■

Andrew J. Bacevich *is writing an interpretive history of the United States since the end of the Cold War.*

William Donahue

What 'America First' Means Here

LETTER FROM GERMANY

Last week an old friend from Stuttgart wrote to reassure me: "Don't worry. We'll stick together, no matter what our politicians say and do!" That was the week that German Chancellor Angela Merkel—after a set of meetings in which Donald Trump berated Germany for its trade surplus—proclaimed that the Unites States is no longer the reliable ally it once was. For Americans, this might seem like just one more farcical moment in the Trump presidency. It is, after all, easy to become inured to his antics. For Germans, however, this was momentous. Never since 1949 has a German chancellor distanced herself and her country so decisively from the United States. If acted on, it will be the most substantive political realignment since World War II. More than unification itself, it will mark the end of the "postwar period."

We might be tempted to overlook this point. Most Americans in fact regularly do so: as we know, "foreign affairs" play an embarrassingly small role in U.S. politics—to the chagrin of many Germans, by the way, who feel cheated in a lopsided relationship where they care more about the United States than we do about them. Others will downplay Merkel's remarks as political posturing: there is an important election here in Germany this fall, and her tough stance vis-à-vis the United States may have helped a bit. (She is, however, far ahead in the polls; and the Social Democrats—her chief opponents—seem almost bent on self-destruction.)

But we cannot ignore the truth. As a new and astounding poll from the "Polit-Barometer" of the ZDF (*Zweites deutsches Fernsehen*, a branch of German Public Television) shows, Germans across the political spectrum now believe that the United States is much less likely to stand with them in a time of crisis. In similarly alarming numbers, between 60 and 70 percent of respondents find it improbable that America will work with them on key global concerns such as terrorism and climate change. This poll was in the making *before* Trump announced that the United States would withdraw from the Paris accord. The numbers can't be any better now.

I'm in Berlin this summer with more than fifty students from the University of Notre Dame studying subjects as diverse as theater, international economics, and environmental studies. And, of course, German. The fundamental premise of these programs is that Germany—both in its rich cultural traditions and as a contemporary European powerhouse—has a great deal to teach us. In the two decades I have been directing such programs, never have I felt more at odds with a U.S. administration. We take great pains to inculcate cultural humility and curiosity; Trump and his supporters are bent upon asserting a shameless American chauvinism. We should understand that the "America first" line—quoted frequently in the German press as *Amerika zuerst*—is not treated here as some forgivable rhetorical excess of the campaign, but seen rather as a policy statement meant to marginalize and devalue key relationships with Germany, Europe, and other longtime allies.

While we normally steer clear of party politics in the classroom, it has now become necessary to explain to students why Germans—conservative and liberal, across the board—are so angry and frustrated with the United States. It is not an easy task, as not a few of my students have told me that their parents are themselves Trump supporters. Suddenly learning about Germany seems very personal. Goethe's Faust, torn between deeply competing impulses, famously said: "*Zwei Seelen wohnen ach in meiner Brust*" ("Two souls, alas, indwell my breast!"). Looking at the faces of my students, I think the same must be true of them. This is not a lesson foreseen in any of the syllabi we had prepared for the summer.

AP PHOTO / EVAN VUCCI

German Chancellor Angela Merkel and President Donald Trump pose for a photo with G7 leaders in May.

None of this, of course, is to deny difficult periods in the German-American relationship since World War II. The 1968 student movement, whose fiftieth birthday we celebrate this year, brought to the surface serious ruptures. But that anger, often directed against the American prosecution of the war in Vietnam (to this day viewed as a genocide by many mainstream Germans, by the way), was in equal measure directed against the Federal Republic (FRG) itself; it was an expression of a profound crisis of faith in the then-new German democracy. Fifteen years later, Ronald Reagan's placement of Pershing missiles in West Germany led to another serious rift between the only real postwar superpower (the United States) and its "client state" (as leftist critics put it), the FRG. The hostility was real, as I personally experienced. As a student in Berlin, I rode the overnight bus to Munich to participate in the 1982 Easter march against the missiles. The displeasure was unmistakable, and one cannot deny a strain of anti-Americanism among certain demographic groups.

But I was welcomed—as an American—to join the march. And though my comrades frequently had to catch themselves, and quickly revise some of their sweeping condemnations, they acknowledged the common good to which we all aspired. And no matter what one makes of these events, they never managed to place in doubt the fundamental alliance. The bulk of West Germans, and later the majority of citizens in united Germany, has always supported the Western alliance.

In Berlin, this was especially true, because this is where Germans most personally encountered the American men and women who risked their lives (along with the British) to mount the truly heroic Berlin Airlift, providing Berliners with all the essentials denied them by the Soviet Blockade of 1948–49. This event—commemorated here as the "Air Bridge" (*Luftbruecke*) lives deeply in the cultural memory of Berlin, and in that of Germany more generally. Will this "bridge" bear the strain of Trump's recent pronouncements? There are still many Berliners around who can personally tell this story to my students, and sometimes do. And it is because of them that I nurture the hope that my friend's words of consolation—"we'll stick together no matter what"—may in the end prove true.

But we should not underestimate the damage Trump has done—and continues to do—to the relationship with our most trustworthy ally since World War II. Merkel reported in the press that she had to repeat over and over to the president that he cannot make a separate trade "deal" with Germany. But Trump seemed to grasp the basic facts of the European Union as little as he does those of American civics.

Still, I don't want to be an alarmist. The German-American relationship is in many ways simply inevitable; fundamental economic and cultural ties will surely persist despite the policy fissures of recent weeks. But when even dyed-in-the-wool conservatives here, the equivalent, if you will, of George Bush Republicans, affirm in great numbers that the United States is no longer reliable on key matters regarding Germany's future, we do have reason for concern. Trump's disrespect of Germany, in tandem with his brash ignorance of European institutions, also sets a bad example for my students. We ask them to become respectful, open-minded cultural ambassadors. The president is telling them that none of that—indeed none of what we do here—matters much. Mr. President: The Germans are listening. And so too are young, still-impressionable people across the world. ■

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ST. JOSEPH'S CEMETERY

As the limbs bend
with the weight of the leaves
sodden with rain

I am reminded
how rooted I am
to the ground of my being—

to the saturated moss
with its little streams
seeping into the earth,

to the dirt and mud
caking the soles of my boots,
to the sound of the wind.

I am reminded
as I touch, re-touch
this lichen-covered stone

how deep down I am growing,
inch by cellular inch
into my father's bones.

—John Perrault

John Perrault is the author of The Ballad of Louis Wagner *(Peter Randall Publisher),* Here Comes the Old Man Now *(Oyster River Press), and* Jefferson's Dream *(Hobblebush Books). His poems have appeared in the* Christian Science Monitor, Blue Unicorn, Orbis, *and elsewhere. He was Portsmouth, NH, Poet Laureate 2003–2005. www.johnperrault.com*

David Pinault

Extremists, 'X-Men,' and an Ex-Governor

A CAUTIONARY TALE FROM JAKARTA

It's not every year that you encounter an election campaign featuring blasphemy charges, contorted Quran citations, and superheroes from Marvel Comics' *X-Men*. But Jakarta's stormy 2017 competition for governor has been a political season like no other.

The conflict flared last year with a comment from Jakarta's governor, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (better known by his nickname "Ahok"). He's a controversial politician. Respected for his personal integrity and determination to help the poor and combat corruption in government, Ahok is reviled by Indonesian Islamists for his religious affiliation and ethnic identity. He's a Christian, serving as leader of the capital city in a country that's over 85 percent Muslim. And he's a member of Indonesia's ethnic-Chinese minority population, a community that for generations has been the target of sporadic persecution and pogroms.

Compounding tensions is the fact that Ahok staunchly defends "Pancasila," the foundational set of principles guiding Indonesia since independence in the aftermath of World War II. Notably, Pancasila includes the concept of religious pluralism and equal legal standing for all Indonesians belonging to any of five officially recognized faiths—Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Confucianism. Pancasila offends Islamists who want the nation to become a state ruled by sharia law (in which case Islam would enjoy privileged status as Indonesia's premier religion). They've been vigilant in looking for an opening to cripple Ahok (and thereby weaken Ahok's ally, President Joko Widodo).

Their opening came in a speech Governor Ahok gave last year to Muslim voters on the island of Java. Ahok referred to a verse from the Quran (5:51) that had been frequently quoted by his political opponents. Here's what the verse commands the Muslim faithful to do: "O you who believe! Do not take the Jews and Christians as friends and allies. They are friends and allies only of each other. And any of you who becomes their friend thereupon becomes one of them."

This Quran verse dates from the later Medinan period of the Prophet Muhammad's career. It expressed his growing frustration with those Jews and Christians who resisted his Islamic message. The hermeneutical issue for exegetes today is whether the hostility in this verse should be extrapolated to apply to all Jews and all Christians for all time.

Many Indonesian Muslims clearly think it should. Throughout Jakarta's 2016–2017 electoral campaign, Islamist preachers repeatedly told their congregations that this verse forbids Muslims from voting for Christians in any leadership position that might result in non-Muslims ruling over the followers of Allah. Ahok fought back in a spirited riposte. Speaking to a group of Javanese Muslims in September, he argued that Islamic religious figures were deliberately misleading voters in using verse 5:51 as a club with which to beat him. This was all his enemies needed. They fanned a flame of anger: a Christian has the nerve to say he knows better than the Muslims what Islam's holy book really says.

Typical is the demand posted on social media by an Islamist named Habib Rizieq: "Segera tangkap Ahok karena hina al-Qur'an" ("Have Ahok arrested right away, because he has insulted the Quran!"). Rizieq is notorious as the leader of Front Pembela Islam ("the Islamic Defenders Front," commonly known by its Indonesian acronym FPI). Taking as its long-term goal the application of sharia throughout the nation, this group arose in 1998, as President Suharto's dictatorial regime disintegrated and Indonesia's emergent democracy opened up space for long-suppressed Islamist movements. The FPI's website announces its purpose: "Pelayan ummat dan pembela agama" ("service to the community of believers and defense of the faith"). The group's online mission statement proclaims, "Jihad is our path of struggle; a martyr's death is our hope."

For the Islamic Defenders Front, jihad entails a campaign to Islamicize Indonesian society. The group first gained national attention for its vigilante attacks on nightclub customers, prostitutes, and *bancis* (transgender people). It won further notoriety by protesting a concert by Lady Gaga. Indonesian fans had purchased over fifty thousand advance tickets for a performance in Jakarta scheduled in June 2012, but threats of violence by FPI leaders forced her to cancel the show. FPI members thronged the capital's streets with signs reading, "Allah, protect me from the temptation of Satan Gaga, the accursed!"

The FPI casts a wide net. Its members also engage in violence against adherents of the Ahmadiyah, a sect widely loathed in Muslim countries for its belief that prophecy did not end with the death of Muhammad. Militants belonging to the Islamic Defenders Front frequently target Christian churches (sometimes setting them afire), assault Christian worshippers, and warn of the nation's imminent "Christianization." FPI leaders I've interviewed in East Java freely acknowledge such assaults but rationalize them as "defense of the *ummah* [Islamic community]." Such defense is necessitated, they say, by the behavior of Christians and other minorities who engage in open-air prayer services and other public "provocations."

Habib Rizieq is very much the product of a hardline

Demonstration in Jakarta to demand the prosecution of Basuki Tjahaja Purnana for sacrilege

ZUMA PRESS, INC. / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

ideology imported from the Arab Middle East. He attended both King Saud University in Riyadh and the Jakarta-based Institute for the Study of Islam and Arabic. The latter organization was established by Saudi Arabia (in fact Saudi funding provides free tuition for all Indonesian students enrolled at the Institute). For the past several decades the Wahhabi kingdom has paid for the building of hundreds of mosques and *pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools) throughout Indonesia. The purpose of this largesse: to "purify" the world's most populous Muslim nation of its longstanding tradition of tolerance and syncretism, and replace this with a homogenized and standardized form of Islam that is subject to guidance by Saudi Arabia. And the Salafist thinking underlying this kind of Islam advocates enmity for Shias, Sufis, Jews, and Christians.

Wahhabi-style intolerance was on display at a mass rally organized by the FPI last December 2. "Let's defend our religion," Rizieq urged the crowd of some two hundred thousand Muslims, telling them to "stop all forms of religious blasphemy and put all violators on trial." (Indonesia's blasphemy law, which dates to 1965 and the era of President Sukarno, mandates a penalty of up to five years' imprisonment for public statements expressing disrespect or contempt for religion. Cases that come to court generally involve perceived insults against the religion of Islam.)

But FPI loyalists weren't the only Muslims to show anger at Ahok for citing the Quran. Among the more unusual protests was one initiated by an Indonesian artist named Ardian Syaf, an illustrator for Marvel Comics' *X-Men*. He had the job of drawing an April 2017 issue featuring superhero Kitty Pryde, a member of the *X-Men* team who happens to be Jewish. As he later confessed freely, Syaf couldn't resist inserting cryptic references to the Ahok case into the comic book. In one scene, Kitty faces a sullen crowd in a crowded urban setting. On the awning of a storefront is the number 212 (symbolizing December 2, the date of the mass FPI protest). Another storefront in the background advertises "Jewelry," but Kitty's hair obscures the latter part of the word so that what stands out for the reader is the word "Jew," positioned just to the left of Kitty's head. An additional cartoon panel shows a thickly muscled man swinging a baseball bat. The t-shirt he wears displays the logo QS 5:51 (QS for "Quran Surah," or scriptural chapter), which of course is the verse calling on believers to distance themselves from Jews and Christians—the verse that got Ahok into so much trouble.

This intrusion of religious intolerance into an *X-Men* comic cost Syaf his job with Marvel. But the illustrator was unrepentant. On his Facebook page he wrote concerning his "QS 5:51" reference: "It is [the] number of justice. It is [the] number of love. My love [for] Holy Qur'an, my love [for] the last Prophet, the Messenger, my love [for] Allah."

As for Ahok: amidst the mounting public outcry that built over a period of months, he was put on trial, convicted of blasphemy against Islam, and sentenced to two years' imprisonment. Unsurprisingly, he also lost his election bid for governor. The winner was a Muslim candidate who had openly courted the support of the Islamic Defenders Front.

So: a big win for the FPI, and for Saudi-financed forms of Islamist intolerance. The losers: not only former Governor Ahok, but also all who honor Pancasila, pluralism, and religious coexistence. ■

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‘A Kindly Presence of Mind’

An Interview with George Saunders

Anthony Domestico

When I first e-mailed George Saunders in September to see if he’d be willing to chat about his first novel, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, his response was surprisingly prompt (within a day) and incredibly generous (yes, he’d be happy to). The promptness was surprising for one of the most successful—and most celebrated—writers of American fiction. His four collections of formally adventurous serio-comic short stories, including 2013’s *Tenth of December*, have won Saunders a passionate following (no literary writer attracts a more devoted, fanboyish following than Saunders), a MacArthur, and a Guggenheim. He’s almost certainly the only short-story writer to be named by *Time* as one of the 100 Most Influential People in the World. If the promptness of Saunders’s response was unexpected, his generosity was not. Over the years he has developed a reputation for warmth to his fellow writers, dedication to his students (he teaches creative writing at Syracuse University), and humanity, even love, towards his screwed-up, deeply pained characters.

We didn’t actually get to talk in earnest until December. A lot happened in the interim. On the existentially terrifying end of the scale, Donald Trump was elected president. On the existentially reassuring end of the scale, *Lincoln in the Bardo* was published. (And Saunders’s brilliant, complicated essay on the Trump phenomenon, “Who Are All These Trump Supporters?”, was nominated for a National Magazine Award.) *Lincoln in the Bardo* takes as its premise a situation that Saunders readers will find reassuring in its weirdness. It’s 1862. Willie Lincoln, the president’s young son, has just died, and his ghost currently lingers in a Washington graveyard, along with a host of other spectral figures (a gay man who committed suicide, a former reverend, and many, many others). The novel is set in the bardo—the Buddhist in-between state where souls wait before their next incarnation. (Saunders, a former Catholic and now a practicing Buddhist, has admitted that he plays fast and loose with Buddhist theology here.) The novel is devastating, especially on the several occasions when the president comes to visit and hold his son’s body, and it’s also exuberantly comic. Saunders may be trying a different genre, but this formal shift has only reconfigured and amplified the tonal and thematic elements that make Saunders so great.

Anthony Domestico *is an assistant professor of literature at Purchase College, SUNY, and a regular contributor to* Commonweal.

ANTHONY DOMESTICO: In July 2016, you wrote a piece for the *New Yorker* in which you tried to understand the Trump phenomenon in all its complexity: the candidate’s fear-mongering and nastiness, his supporters’ constant anger and occasional civility. You ended with this thought: “I thank [Trump] for this: I’ve never before imagined America as fragile, as an experiment that could, within my very lifetime, fail. But I imagine it that way now.” What’s your sense of the strength or fragility of the American experiment at this moment, five months and a startling election later?

GEORGE SAUNDERS: Well, I think we’re at a critical turning point. In the best case, we’ll have to endure four years of a very strange right-leaning and billionaire-infested administration that will be working from what I think is a discredited conservative view of the world: rigid, ungenerous, incurious, harsh, Other-averse. In the worst case… well, I don’t want to think about that. What concerns me most is the horrible degradation our notions of truth, civility, and decency have undergone. Also the way that language has been malformed—we have been overcome with banality and the cynical misuse of language. When a candidate runs a campaign on a series of dog whistles to bigots, then turns around and talks about “healing the wounds of division,” that is right out of Orwell. On the other hand (he says, trying to brighten things up a bit), this might be the beginning of a new movement in American politics that turns away from the familiar and reductive right vs. left discourse in which we’ve been trained by the corporate media, and back to questions that are now more than ever wide open: What does it mean to be an American? In what do we truly believe? Is there a way to re-establish a common national premise? Is America “about” something (love, inclusion, growth) other than material gain?

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AD: All the way back in *The Braindead Megaphone* (2007), you described "our national discourse" as "degraded" and "dumbed-down." How to combat this, you asked? By "small drops of specificity and aplomb and correct logic, delivered titrationally, by many of us all at once." Do you still think this is right? Another way of putting it: does this moment call for a more direct political engagement by our writers? Or is the writing of good, truthful prose and poetry itself enough of a political act?

GS: Yes to all of that, only louder now, with more confidence and swagger. Writing and reading and speaking with specificity and skill has never seemed more important to me than it does at this moment. It's what's between us and chaos.

When I first shared that piece with David Foster Wallace, he liked it but said he thought the ending was a bit anticlimactic—too small a solution for too big a problem. And I agreed with him then and agree with him now. I don't think that solution sufficient, but I do think it necessary—a requisite first step in all that we do. We have to move toward specificity, intelligence, facts, proof, and mutual affection. What I think people have to do now is be very, very assertive about the utter essentiality of intellectual undertakings. This—where we are now—is where a culture gets to, when it has chosen, for many years, banality over intelligence, the literal over the immaterial or complex, materialism over spirituality. This is the result of many years of disrespecting the intellectual project—of a collective acceptance of the idea that thinking and reasoning and reading deeply in difficult text and being respectful of history are somehow "wimpy" or secondary. I think it is time for a new pride in the intellectual life, and a new impatience with people who take pride in ignorance, or somehow use "elite" to mean "person who has taken the time to know" and then are eager to dismiss, say, striving, or the notion that improving one's self out of difficult conditions is a noble thing.

AD: Let's switch gears from politics to fiction. Your new novel, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, employs a kind of collage aesthetic: different voices speak with and at one another (and with and at themselves). There's a choral effect achieved: the voices of the dead form one chorus, the historical record another, and the two together a third. Indeed, the novel seems as much an act of orchestration as it does an act of creation. What were the different challenges faced—and the different gifts offered—by working in the more expansive form of the novel, especially with regards to voice and structure?

GS: I think I arrived at that form from the demands of the material, mostly. It was a relief to not end up writing a "normal" novel, which I really had no desire to do anyway. It was basically a case of being fascinated by the idea and

then having to find a means to open out that idea that wasn't lame. So—if you start with the idea that you are going to be writing about a night in a graveyard, and that there are only a few living people in that frame, all sorts of interesting and difficult technical problems arise. And then form—new form, or experimental form—might be understood as just trying to tell that story most movingly and efficiently.

AD: Many of your short stories think through how we remember the past (and how we monetize such acts of memory), from the amusement park of "CivilWarLand in Bad Decline" to the cave people reenactors of "Pastoralia." In *Lincoln in the Bardo*, you're again interested in how we represent the past—both the national past and our own pasts. Do you see the novel as participating in this career-long exploration of historical representation? What new territory were you hoping to explore in this work?

GS: I think you're right in this observation but to be honest I find I don't have much to say in response. So much of what I am doing in my fiction is just trying to get into interesting places in terms of language or form, places that don't bore me. And this happens via hundreds of quick micro-decisions that are done "to taste," so to speak. So the experience is one of groping toward that interesting place—trying to leap away from anything that seems boring, or about which I don't have strong opinions. Essentially trying to avoid that moment where, devoid of any strong feeling, I start conceptualizing. That, I've found, produces dull and over-controlled text. So, a reasonable answer to a question about why a writer gravitated toward certain material or a certain approach is actually, you know, "I just liked it." I love that Flannery O'Connor quote: "A writer can choose what he writes but he can't choose what he makes live."

AD: Can you talk about some of the research and reading that went into *Lincoln in the Bardo*? Were you interested in writing a story about Willie Lincoln and so then started combing through the Lincoln shelves of the library? Or was the trajectory the opposite: you read about Abe and Willie and Mary Todd and that got you interested in the story? Were there other historical novels that you looked to as models for what you were trying to do?

GS: Yes—the way it happened was that years ago (in the 1990s) I heard this story about Lincoln—that after his son died, he went into the crypt "on several occasions" to hold the body. And that just stuck with me, for many years—the image of Lincoln with the body across his lap. At the time I didn't think I was ready to write a story like that—felt I lacked sufficient chops—and I was right. I tried writing a play about it and, during that time, read a little about the circumstances of Willie's death. And a narrative started to form itself in my head, about the death and its effects on the family. And when I started, finally, trying to make a novel of it (around 2012), I found that 1) a book of all ghosts needed a spine of factuality and 2) the most efficient way to provide this was to simply excerpt the actual texts I'd read (as opposed to having some character talk about the history, etc.). I remember rather frustratedly asking myself, "Well, how do YOU know all of this history?" and then the answer just sort of hung there and produced that aspect of the form—those direct references from history books. So once that became a thing, I found myself focusing my reading—I'd realize I "needed" a certain historical section. I wanted, for example, to know everything I could about a certain party the Lincolns threw just before Willie's death, so any book on Lincoln I found, I'd go to the index to see if that party was mentioned. And sometimes it worked the other way around. I found this great book called *The Physical Lincoln* that listed pages and pages of quotes and observations about the different parts of his body, and it made me think that might make a good historical section: a choral listing of his physical features. It was really a great adventure in terms of the story dictating form, and then the form sometimes dictating the necessary research.

What I loved about writing this book was just that my aesthetic interests and my spiritual interests became a unity, so to speak. As one gets older, this question of, uh, death, becomes more vexing and urgent, of course. So it was good to spend these years trying to look directly at the thing, through art.

AD: There's a beautiful moment in the novel when the voices of the dead describe what they most miss: human touch, the physical signs of affection that tell us "we [are] perhaps not so unlovable as we had come to believe." I'm wondering what role physical embodiment more generally has in your sense of spirituality. How do you think about the relationship between religious mystery and our experience of the carnal and material? You were raised Catholic and are now a practicing Buddhist, and I'm curious as to how those two traditions have informed your thinking on this question.

GS: Well, thanks. What I loved about writing this book was just that my aesthetic interests and my spiritual interests became a unity, so to speak. As one gets older, this question of, uh, death, becomes more vexing and urgent, of course. So it was good to spend these years trying to look directly at the thing, through art. My view is that our minds are incredibly powerful animals that are, during life, kept somewhat in check by the load of our bodies. Once that load is gone (or so some ancient texts teach us) the mind is like a horse off the tether. So the habits we get into here might have something to do with what happens to us afterwards. An exciting but harrowing idea, given the everyday state of my mind. But also hopeful, since that's something a person can work with. The bardo-being or ghosts in this book find themselves trapped by those habits (by longing, regret, greed, hunger, etc.)—but just as we are, right now. So pretty quickly the book moved from being "about" the dead to being about all of us, just as we are.

AD: Another highly regarded short story writer, David Means, recently tried his hand at a novel. Like you, he succeeded wildly. I'm sure that you don't begrudge writers working in whatever form they find most fruitful, but are there other short-story writers you'd like to see stretch their legs within the novel form?

GS: No, really not. I feel pretty strongly we should just let people do what they like and want to do. I try to keep my artistic opinions not so much "to myself" but "on myself." And the story form is so wonderful—I can't wait to get back to working on some stories. Also, my experience with this book made me feel the two forms aren't as different as I'd believed. They both work along the same lines… an expectation is created, somewhat satisfied, a new expectation is created, etc. So the frame is bigger but the method for covering it is basically the same, maybe...

AD: Your friend and colleague, Mary Karr, published a poem in this magazine called "The Voice of God." Here it is:

> Ninety percent of what's wrong with you
> could be cured with a hot bath,
> says God from the bowels of the subway.
> but we want magic, to win
> the lottery we never bought a ticket for.
> (Tenderly, the monks chant, embrace
> the suffering.) The voice of God does not pander,
> offers no five-year plan, no long-term
> solution, nary an edict. It is small & fond & local.
> Don't look for your initials in the geese
> honking overhead or to see thru the glass even
> darkly. It says the most obvious crap—
> put down that gun, you need a sandwich.

I'm wondering if you could walk us through your response to it—what you find interesting, what you find moving, what kind of thoughts and desires and fears it activates within you after reading it.

GS: I love Mary's poems. And she herself is such a powerful and positive force. Reading this today, a few weeks after the election, it makes me think that our first responsibility in all things is to preserve our goodness of heart—then, and only then, act. What evil does first in the world, maybe, is distract us from our pursuit of goodness. So I've been having this idea of drawing a tight circle around myself that includes all of the things I can actually somewhat exert control over (chief among them, my mind). This involves being suspicious of projections and agitation-from-afar. The best thing we can bring to any fight is a calm and compassionate mind. And it is going to be a fight here, for the next four years, and the negative forces are very real and energetic. So I say yes to the hot bath and the sandwich—to getting ourselves into the best possible mental shape to identify and then fight the necessary fights from the best possible mind-state: calm, loving, affectionate, precise. Not pushovers, but also not zealots. With the idea in mind that "our enemies" are not our enemies; they might seem like that in their present form but that form can morph. We really are large, and really do contain multitudes. But I think it all has to start with a kindly presence of mind, and the aspiration to affection for others. ■

SUMMER ADDRESSES

They keep arriving, defying
the summer heat, the crowding
of ancient thoughts in the mind's

sceptical corners, defying
the mood to celebrate
the presence of old

relationships now, at this
moment's looking back
at all those things I lost

in my journey toward
myself, in a mood's revival
through a slight, healing touch.

The addresses keep rushing in,
and I wonder if they are necessary
in this body's mistaken adventures.

—Bibhu Padhi

His Bleak Materials

J. F. Powers at One Hundred

Jeffrey Meyers

In May 1981 I was invited to lecture at St. John's University and monastery in Collegeville, seventy-five miles northwest of Minneapolis. J. F. Powers, who'd been teaching creative writing at St. John's for many years, came to my talk that evening and asked me back to his house. We hit it off immediately, drank and talked till midnight, and eventually became good friends. Tall, thin, and severe-looking, he was a handsome man with thick wavy hair combed straight back. He smoked a pipe and wore a sweater over his shirt and tie. He had a sharp Irish nose, thin upper lip, and features of clerical cut. Though often mistaken for a priest because of his manner and books, he was married and had five children. Pondering the contrast between Jim's conviviality and the chilly isolation of rural Minnesota, I went to sleep, for the first time in my life, in a monastic cell.

I was rather shocked when I returned the next day to look more closely and see the primitive conditions of his hair-shirt house, a drab grey stucco dwelling that had originally been built for the workmen who served the monastery. The bookshelves were rickety, the furniture shabby, the floors were bare and there were no modern appliances. He disliked household chores but, with monk-like penitence, did his laundry, in a rusty bathtub, on his knees. In the fierce winters, with only a strand of barbed wire between him and the North Pole, the uninsulated roof and thin walls made it impossible to raise the inside temperature above sixty-two degrees, even with the furnace and fire going full blast.

Jim was old enough to be my father and our filial bond was strong. We both loved literary gossip, valued wit, and took a satiric view of human folly. Early on he defined our friendship by creating wildly exaggerated, semi-comic characters for both of us: believer, atheist; corny Midwesterner, savvy easterner; ignorant autodidact, learned professor; cautious introvert, reckless wild man; blocked writer, prodigious ink-spiller; hoary hermit, social butterfly; resolute recluse, manic traveler. Commenting on my ambition, he paid me a backhanded compliment by remarking that I'd make a good monsignor but would never become a bishop. When I offered to take him to lunch in nearby St. Cloud, Jim looked puzzled and mordantly asked, "What did I ever do to *you*?"

His amusing inscriptions in my copies of *Morte D'Urban* illuminated his characters and themes as well as our friendship: "Let Fr. Urban be a lesson to you when *you* hit the big time," and "To Jeffrey Meyers, Honorary Oblate in the Order of St. Clement—Jim Powers (Founder)." After we'd been discussing the Sermon on the Mount, he inscribed one of his books: "To Jeffrey Meyers, who has given literary workaholism a good name, from one who toiled not and neither did he spin if he could help it."

Despite his acute intelligence, Jim was still unworldly and a bit naïve, and this simplicity made him teasable. I discovered just before my second lecture that the sole of my shoe had become detached and was flapping about. Since Collegeville had no shops, Jim eagerly fetched his own supply of glue, hammer, and nails, pounded in a small mountain of metal and proudly said, "That ought to do it." After a time, I glanced down at the shoe and casually remarked, "I'm afraid the sole has come loose again." Jumping from his chair, he knelt down, examined my footgear—and realized he'd been fooled!

J. F. Powers, a master of witty and sophisticated fiction, was born one hundred years ago this month. In the 1940s, when he began to publish, Catholic literature flourished in America. Thomas Merton's mystical *The Seven Storey Mountain* was a bestseller; Jacques Maritain and Etienne Gilson brought out works on Thomist Scholasticism; the poets Allen Tate and Robert Lowell, who expressed his Baroque intensity in *Lord Weary's Castle*, were prominent converts; Flannery O'Connor produced Gothic tales of sin and redemption. Bishop Fulton J. Sheen, a popular promoter of the faith, lectured the nation on television. Powers was not mystical, scholarly, poetical, redemptive, or popular. He lived in Minnesota and Ireland, far from the centers of cultural power, remained aloof from literary politics, and refused to promote himself through readings and interviews. Often forgotten in his lifetime—he died in 1999—he produced isolated masterpieces separated from

Jeffrey Meyers *has recently published* Remembering Iris Murdoch *(2013),* Thomas Mann's Artist-Heroes *(2014),* Robert Lowell in Love *and* The Mystery of the Real: Correspondence with Alex Colville *(2016).*

each other by prolonged silence, and every decade his reputation had to be revived. He wrote timely stories about racial conflict and some short pieces about his own family life, but early on he discovered his true subject: the lives of Catholic priests in the Upper Midwest.

Deliberately regional and focused on a celibate minority within a Catholic minority, his elegant and subtle fiction is universal and enduring, his characters both commonplace and exotic. One priest, paternal as well as fatherly, puts on a comic apron, turned outside in, to make breakfast for the old monk who's celebrating the early Mass; another idly uses his Roman collar to practice putting on his bedroom floor; a third vests himself in a "white fiddleback chasuble" regrettably spotted with ink when the pastor had shaken his fountain pen. Priests form a secretive fraternity closed to outsiders, yet are exposed to the prying eyes of their housekeepers and parishioners. At the bottom of the hierarchy of power that stretches all the way to Rome, curates in isolated parishes yearn for promotion; priests, struggling against loneliness, boredom, and sloth, try to reconcile the spiritual and material worlds. Commenting on his choice of subject, Powers said: "I write about priests for reasons of irony, comedy, and philosophy. They are officially committed to both worlds in a way that most people officially are not."

J. F. Powers in 1948

Powers's themes are very different from François Mauriac's Jansenist preoccupation with universal evil and Georges Bernanos's portraits of anguished village priests, as well as from the fiction of the English converts, Graham Greene and Evelyn Waugh. He has no whisky priests or saintly sinners, no tormented adulterers or miraculous interventions; no aristocrats with incense and idols in their private chapels, no priests like Waugh's wise and worldly Fr. Mowbray, who tries to instruct the impatient and obtuse business mogul Rex Mottram in *Brideshead Revisited*.

Waugh taught Powers close observation, subtle wit, savage unmasking of falsity. Like Waugh, Powers is deeply amused by his characters' faults, but also conveys the urgent need—with salvation at stake—to rise above them. Like Joyce and Waugh, he assumes that the author shares the defects and aspirations of his creations. In his essay "The American Epoch in the Catholic Church," Waugh, emphasizing Powers's themes of disillusionment and spiritual waste, wrote that his presbyteries "are not mere literary inventions."

Reading those admirable stories one can understand why there is often a distinct whiff of anticlericalism where Irish priests are in power. They are faithful and chaste and, in youth at any rate, industrious, but many live out their lives in a painful state of transition; they have lost their ancestral simplicity without yet acquiring a modest carriage of their superior learning or, more important, delicacy in their human relations, or imagination, or agility of mind.

Powers's incisive stories are told from the priests' point of view. Essentially ordinary men, with human needs and failings, they negotiate their way in the church and the world as if it were possible to reconcile the two. His characters reveal the limitations and consolations of belief, and his work affirms his faith even as it challenges it. There are in Powers's hard-nosed tales no joyous rites, like baptisms and weddings, or even funerals, where priests are *needed*; no charming and lovable Hollywood pastors like Bing Crosby and Barry Fitzgerald. His limited men often lack knowledge and insight, and fail to follow a spiritual path and provide spiritual guidance.

Subject to the conservative hierarchy and bound by a vow of obedience, Powers's priests have little room to maneuver. The rectory or the cloister is home, where men of different characters, ideas, tastes, abilities, and generations are forced to get along together. His priests, to use Greene's phrase, look for ways of escape. In petty disputes they cannot win, they exact compensatory revenge. They escape loneliness by devoting themselves to golf and beer, by taking boys out for hamburgers and sweating with teenagers on the basketball court (they cannot be seen alone with young women). Bored with hearing confessions and visiting the sick, they curry favor with wealthy men, devote themselves to fundraising and real estate. But they are committed to their vocation and have to endure.

The narrowness of this world supplies Powers with all the room his art requires, and out of this bleak material he wrote some of the most amusing stories in American literature. Though his humor is absolutely American, he cultivated a chaste satiric style derived from "the scrupulous meanness" of Joyce and Waugh. His observation of detail is acute, and

he creates his Midwestern interiors and landscapes with economy and grace. He uses supple Joycean techniques, inhabiting his characters' consciousness, sliding in and out of their minds, tracing the flow of their needs and anxieties. Yet we detect in all the stories the presence of Powers: his omniscient sigh of resignation, his penetrating wit, his laughter that fends off loneliness and despair.

Prince of Darkness (1947) contains his greatest story. The allusive and poignant "Lions, Harts, Leaping Does" is a winter's tale about intellectual pride and spiritual snobbery, laced with mordant wit. Written in Powers's late twenties, in Joycean language and rhythms, it reveals the mind of Didymus, an old frail priest, Franciscan monk, and rationalistic teacher of geometry. Didymus's older brother Seraphin, a priest returned from Rome and clearly dying, has recently asked him to come to St. Louis for a final visit. Didymus hasn't seen him for twenty-five years, but refuses to go. During torments of conscience about his own imperfections, he suffers a crippling stroke that forces him to question his own faith and humility, and to reflect on sainthood, mortality, and salvation.

In a brilliant lyrical passage at the end of the story, which recalls a Joycean "epiphany" as well as the lacelike snow in Joyce's "The Dead" and in Fitzgerald's "Babylon Revisited," a storm obliterates the ground and levels everything under its uniform whiteness: "The snowflakes whirled at the window, for a moment for all their bright blue beauty as though struck still by lightning, and Didymus closed his eyes, only to find them there also, but darkly falling." Powers uses Didymus's scruple—about whether or not to visit his dying brother—to reveal the priest's intellectual vanity and to question the meaning of his existence in the faith. The old priest slips out of life in an agony of regret as the blinding snow suggests the impossibility of spiritual certainty.

Powers's masterpiece *Morte D'Urban* (1962), whose title suggests the Arthurian themes in the work of Sir Thomas Malory, won the National Book Award in 1963. In the novel, at once comic and profoundly serious, Fr. Urban struggles to fulfill his vocation and to get things done. A real operator, attractive and athletic, a dynamic preacher and fundraiser with a gift for handling people both high and low, Urban is the right man in the wrong Order: the willfully mediocre Clementines. Based in a leased building in Chicago, members of the order conduct missions and retreats and serve as visiting priests. The novel's locales are confined to Chicago, Minneapolis, and small Minnesota towns connected by train to the ramshackle retreat house, St. Clement's Hill, at the end of a dirt road, and to the fishing lakes in the north.

Throughout the novel Urban is beset by worldly temptations—ambition, fame and power, gifts, money, and sex—but he's so skilled at milking his connections and grasping opportunities that he doesn't see the dangers ahead. There is no literal Morte d'Urban as there is a Morte d'Arthur, but he recovers his vocation and is reborn, a sadder and wiser priest. In the ceremony which elects him as provincial, he repeats the principles of the twelfth-century Cistercian monk St. Bernard of Clairvaux, affirming the primary importance of the altar and the sacraments in a true priest's life. Despite the blows to his pride and the failure of his ambition, Urban keeps trying and endures. Powers, always artful and amusing, creates a comic masterpiece about a flawed man's inner life.

Powers worked on his last novel, *Wheat That Springeth Green*, for twenty-five years and published it in 1988. The action of the novel begins in the 1930s, but mainly takes place in 1968 when his hero, Fr. Joe Hackett, is forty-four. This long gestation had some negative consequences: the material seems less fresh and original; the comic tone less sure and consistent; the conclusion more contrived. Yet Fr. Joe's spiritual biography is as compelling as Fr. Urban's, and even more profound in its religious, moral, and social implications. *Morte D'Urban* is about power and ambition, *Wheat* about money and principles. The Democratic Convention in Chicago in 1968 is a crucial offstage event, and behind the comic plot lies the slow agony of the Vietnam War. *Wheat* is a heavy-hearted comedy.

At the end of the novel the various stories are neatly tied up at a party where many of the characters take a curtain call. An unexpected legacy to resolve the plot is a timeworn but fitting device. Joe remains uncorrupted by money, and the gift releases him from the burden of tedious solicitations and a fund-raising thermometer on the front lawn. As a boy Joe thought there were two problems in being a priest: having to "live in a run-down neighborhood" and "always having to try to be like Our Lord." At the end, he has to do both. He'd started at Holy Faith and now leaves, without an assistant, for the slum parish of Holy Cross.

Powers's fictional priests exemplify the human condition and reveal the cost of the clerical life. His parish priests are the workhorses of the hierarchy, often isolated, lonely, far from family and friends. Always available to help others, they have no one to confide in. Most make compromises and succumb to lesser sins: drink, gambling, television, and cars. Urban and his other priests dedicate their lives to an ideal they find hard to achieve. They don't expect people outside the church to value the ideal, but feel betrayed when episcopal leaders go out of their way to diminish it. Candidates for the priesthood are scarce these days, and many have left the priesthood. Celibacy is like reality: few can take it. Some of his priests are nasty; none of them are saints, or even especially good men. His subtle humor is his way of facing the essential weakness of humanity.

Living next to a monastery, Powers met many priests who came there to recover from alcoholism, sexual problems, and mental breakdowns. He went to Mass every day, but sat alone in the balcony. I once remarked that I envied his faith. He replied that he might be as skeptical as I was, but had made the same wager as Pascal. He wanted to believe and hoped faith would carry him through doubt. ■

Prophet of Harlem

The Conversion of Claude McKay

Griffin Oleynick

Early on in J. F. Powers's 1947 short story "The Trouble," a distressed African-American intellectual recites a few lines of poetry in response to a horrific act of violence he has just witnessed: "'If we must die,' said the man with the glasses on, 'let it not be like hogs hunted and penned in an inglorious spot.... We must meet the common foe; though far outnumbered, let us still be brave, and for their thousand blows deal one deathblow! What, though before us lies the open grave? Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack, pressed to the wall, dying—but fighting back!'"

The lines, as the precocious narrator—a small African-American boy whose mother has just been injured in a race riot—soon learns, belong not to the bespectacled speaker, but instead to a famous black "poetryman," Claude McKay. Deeply moved by the defiant verses, the inquisitive child resolves to discover all he can about their author: "I decided I would go to the public library when the riot was over, and it was the first time in my life I ever thought of the public library the way I did then."

The presence of Claude McKay, a leading African-American intellectual and poet most associated with the Harlem Renaissance, in a short story by J. F. Powers, a prominent twentieth-century Catholic author whose fiction typically depicts the workaday lives of white parish priests in rural Minnesota, might strike us as surprising. What, after all, does the Harlem Renaissance, with its investigations into modern black experience and its forceful calls for racial justice and social equality, have to do with the efforts of white Catholic writers to articulate the hidden presence of God in the turbulent world of postwar America?

Besides McKay's status as one of the canonical poets of the Harlem Renaissance, there is another side of the writer that rarely comes into public view. In Spring 2017, the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University hosted "Gather Out of Star-Dust," a major exhibition on the Harlem Renaissance that featured a wide range of primary materials from black writers, artists, entertainers, and intellectuals associated with the movement, including Zora Neale Hurston, Aaron Douglas, Josephine Baker, Langston Hughes, James Weldon Johnson, and, of course, Claude McKay. The exhibition, which included first editions of McKay's groundbreaking works as well as his correspondence with other well-known poets, presented him as a protégé of James Weldon Johnson (who called McKay "a true poet") and a mentor to Langston Hughes (who called McKay's novel *Home to Harlem* "the most exciting thing in years" and "the finest thing 'we've' done yet"). He and his work figure in the exhibition as a typical expression of the Harlem Renaissance. Yet beyond the display cases, stored off-site in the archival boxes of the Beinecke's Claude McKay Papers, lie several other objects that tell a more complicated story. In Box 18 we find a black-and-white photograph of McKay

Claude McKay, circa 1925

SCIENCE HISTORY IMAGES / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

Griffin Oleynick *recently completed a year of postdoctoral study as scholar-in-residence at Saint Thomas More, the Catholic Chapel and Center at Yale University, and was a visiting fellow at Yale Divinity School. He has also taught in the Department of Catholic Studies at Sacred Heart University.*

posing with Ammon Hennacy, the famous Catholic Worker pacifist; in Box 14 we find a small collection of religious books, including McKay's personal copy of *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas à Kempis, an illustrated edition of *My Sunday Missal* in Latin, and a well-underlined, dog-eared Bible in English, replete with handwritten annotations. McKay's appearance in the Powers story, and his links to the world of Catholic fiction, now become more clear.

In 1944, three years before the publication of Powers's story and four years prior to his death, in a move that stunned both his friends and literary associates, McKay was baptized and received into the Catholic Church. His conversion has never received much critical attention. Indeed, when critics do acknowledge McKay's Catholicism, they tend to dismiss it as an opportunistic attempt to secure a patron at a time of material destitution and declining health, as a rebellion against his stern Protestant father, or, at best, as a sincere if misguided attempt to align himself with a strong political ally in the fight against Communism (an ideology to which, like his longtime correspondent Dorothy Day, McKay had once fervently subscribed).

McKay himself was well aware of the potential strangeness of his choice, and offered a moving if somewhat meandering response to his critics in a still-unpublished essay titled "Right Turn to Catholicism," also held at the Beinecke. Tracing his affinities for Catholicism by referencing his time in Catholic Spain, and insisting on the inadequacy of so many other "isms"—imperialism, fascism, communism, nationalism, socialism, etc.—to resolve the perennial problem of racial division, McKay declares that only the Catholic Church possesses the "secret" of the "positive way of life preached by Jesus Christ." This way of life transcends all divisions of "race and nation" and enables McKay to withstand even the most blistering criticisms. "Some modernists may say that joining the Catholic Church is a backward step. But to me it is the progressive step, which should have been taken long ago…. I contemplate the Catholic Church as a vast world organization of human brotherhood, preaching the Word of the Lord Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, and endeavoring to keep mankind in the middle of the road." McKay's sense of the Catholic Church as an inclusive institution, uniquely capable of guiding humanity along the road of life, speaks both to his intellectual wariness of extremes—fatal "ditches" lying along either side of the road—and, more poignantly, to the suffering and dissatisfaction he experienced throughout his career as an embattled activist and polemical writer.

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In February of this year, nearly seven decades after his death, Claude McKay returned to prominence on the heels of a "monumental literary event"—the discovery and ensuing publication of a previously unknown McKay novel, *Amiable with Big Teeth: A Novel of the Love Affair between the Communists and the Poor Black Sheep of Harlem*. This is, to be sure, a rare object in the contemporary literary world: a complete, corrected, unpublished novel by a canonical author. Released in a carefully edited edition by Penguin Classics, the book features highly informative notes and a critical introduction by Jean-Christophe Cloutier and Brent Hayes Edwards, who together discovered the novel in the archives of the Columbia University Library back in 2009. *Amiable with Big Teeth* has been hailed by scholars such as Henry Louis Gates Jr. as a "major discovery" and an important document of the Harlem Renaissance.

Written in a secluded Maine cabin in early 1941, the novel paints a vibrant picture of Depression-era Harlem, with all its glorious variety and searing contradictions. As the plot unfolds, McKay takes readers on a virtual tour of Harlem in the mid-1930s. We see open-air parades and mass political demonstrations on Seventh Avenue and 125th Street. We hear quiet conversations in the basements and drawing rooms of the stately brownstones on Striver's Row. We step inside famous Harlem nightclubs such as The Merry-Go-Round, which McKay playfully terms the "largest and bawdiest bar in Lenox Avenue."

Reviews of the novel have been universally positive, but none has made even a passing reference to McKay's Catholicism. Still, the timing of the novel's composition suggests the relevance of his conversion. McKay wrote *Amiable with Big Teeth* in 1941, the year just before a sudden, life-threatening health crisis and his recovery at Friendship House, the interracial Catholic charity center in Harlem founded by Catherine Doherty in 1938 and famously described in *The Seven Storey Mountain* by Thomas Merton, who had volunteered there in the fall of 1941, just months prior to McKay's arrival. *Amiable with Big Teeth* was the last major work written by McKay before he became Catholic.

This critical oversight, hardly intentional, is partly due to the book's presentation. The editors' focus on *Amiable with Big Teeth* as a record of the complex political fervor of Harlem's so-called "Abyssinian Crisis"—the sudden outpouring of African-American support for Emperor Haile Selassie's Ethiopia in response to the 1935 invasion by Mussolini's Fascist Italy—has led most commentators to concentrate almost exclusively on McKay's politics, reading the novel in light of his growing dissatisfaction with Communism and his search for another means of African-American political empowerment. This focus is understandable, but it misses much of what makes *Amiable with Big Teeth* such a compelling literary artifact. For the novel not only documents McKay's political crisis, but also provides a window into his equally urgent spiritual crisis, which ultimately led to his conversion to Catholicism. Like Dante's *Inferno* or Dostoevsky's *Demons, Amiable with Big Teeth* penetrates beneath the shifting spectacles of politics in order to address the evil of political division at its root. McKay lays bare the hell of a diabolical political landscape in which all the interpersonal conflict, backroom scheming, and street-corner sloganeering drown out the voice of the Spirit and leave no room for God.

While the novel does not contain any explicit references to Catholicism, religion—and, in particular, Christianity—is one of its central concerns. Historical religious figures from Harlem, such as the Muslim convert and activist preacher Sufi Abdul Hamid, whom McKay had profiled in his nonfiction work *Harlem: Negro Metropolis*, make cameo appearances. More importantly, the Bible itself forms a kind of backdrop to the novel. McKay quotes from it repeatedly—for instance, in the title of the very first chapter: "Ethiopia Shall Soon Stretch Out Her Hands to God." This verse, taken from Psalm 68, is later used to explain the religious longings of Harlem's African-American community. As the schoolteacher-turned-activist Newton Castle, a convert to Communism, exclaims near the middle of the novel, "There is a Zionist streak in the hearts of the colored people…a spiritual hankering after a Land of Beulah. And that explains the amazing interest of the masses in Ethiopia. It's the ancient Ethiopia-shall-stretch-forth-her-hand-to-God of the Bible that is stirring them up."

The Bible also helps us understand the novel's unusual title. *Amiable with Big Teeth* is in fact a creative reworking of a passage from Matthew 7, where Jesus warns his disciples to be wary of false prophets—those who appear "in sheep's clothing" (amiable) but underneath their disguises are really "ravenous wolves" (with big teeth). The subtitle, *A Novel of the Love Affair between the Communists and the Poor Black Sheep of Harlem*, translates Christ's metaphor into an explicit simile: the white Communists (and their black allies) are false prophets who prey like wolves on the economically destitute, politically leaderless, and morally vulnerable sheep of Harlem.

Part of what makes the novel so compelling is that McKay does not separate his characters into two rigid ideological camps. Rather, against a backdrop of changing allegiances, he explores the moral dilemmas faced by conflicted figures who stand at various points on the political spectrum. One of the most complex and richly described characters, Pablo Peixota, is a Harlem community organizer and landlord. Tainted by his past involvement in the "numbers game," Peixota has nonetheless achieved legitimacy in Harlem and longs to help advance the political and economic fortunes of its residents. His story suggests that, despite our strong human urge for pure positions and clear agendas, politics is never a simple binary; there are always nuances, ironies, and variations. McKay's poetic descriptions of each character's unique skin tone remind us that the black-and-white dichotomies of race, as well as those of politics, do not adequately capture our experience. The color line, which McKay, following the ideas of W. E. B. DuBois, deemed the central problem of the twentieth century, thus becomes a mirror of our political divisions. Whiteness, associated with the Communist arch-meddler and villain Maxim Tasan, is not universally negative, just as blackness, epitomized by the eccentric, bombastic, self-taught "historian" Professor Koazhy, is not entirely or unambiguously good.

But the quandary that *Amiable with Big Teeth* returns to repeatedly is the plight of "God's Black Sheep." That phrase was the novel's working title, and it recurs throughout the book—especially in Chapter 10, whose title also refers to Scripture (this time Isaiah): "All We Like Sheep Have Gone Astray." This crucial formulation points toward McKay's conviction that the effective organization of African-Americans, not just in Harlem but indeed throughout the world, requires a religious solution. McKay's personal copy of the Bible, the one held by the Beinecke Library, provides material evidence of the importance of Isaiah's prophetic vision for McKay's thinking about the race problem in connection to the novel. Not only does the Book of Isaiah itself receive the most attention from McKay's red-pencil markings, but the author copies by hand Isaiah 53:6—the verse used as the title for Chapter 10—in the endpaper of the back cover. Scribbled just below it, we again find the phrase "God's Black Sheep." These notes not only indicate that the Bible was one of the most important sources of inspiration for McKay's novel; they also invite us to read Chapter 10 as the key to the whole story.

There we find the lengthy sermon of the Reverend Zebulon Trawl, who, in response to the Communist protests on the steps outside his church, prays "like a wailing saxophone." The verbose preacher, a comic mask for McKay himself, bemoans his own inability to protect "God's black sheep" from the "false prophets," "the white ones who have swarmed up here like hornets and peckawoods," fooling their victims "with the magic of their white fleece." The scene ends farcically, as the Communist agitator Newton Castle is stripped to his underwear and tossed out on the street, leading Trawl to proclaim that God has heard his prayers.

The farce of this scene and others, all the way up to the novel's wryly comic conclusion, reflects McKay's profound doubt about the ability of Harlem's many home-grown religious movements to address the problems of black life effectively. A dark, sad mood permeates the novel's second half. McKay's merciless lampooning of the Communists expresses his own unsatisfied longing for salvation.

By his own account an "outcast child," a black sheep without a true home, McKay looked to his Catholic faith as a means of transcending the shame of failure and the pain of rejection by the various literary and political communities to which he had belonged. His longing for home is a central theme in his last poems, which appeared in publications such as the *Catholic Worker*. Here McKay returns to the same formal strategies he had employed in his 1922 *Harlem Shadows*, the collection that includes the poem quoted in J. F. Powers's short story.

Where *Amiable with Big Teeth* had expressed McKay's anxiety and loneliness, his discomfort with religious and political sectarianism, his post-conversion poems, like "For Peace," communicate a deep and abiding sense of calm. At home in himself and at peace with others, McKay now wrote poetry that engaged with some of the best-known voices of the Catholic tradition. "For Peace" builds on Gerard Manley Hopkins's "God's Grandeur," a sonnet that describes the post-Edenic world as "seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil." "For Peace" adds the scars of ideology to those of industrialization: "the precious earth is scorched and dreary, / The people stumble in the darkness, blind, / and theory-ridden men are weary, weary, / And in the night no ray of hope can find." "For Peace" also revisits *Amiable with Big Teeth*, now positing the Catholic Church as the solution that he had been unable to identify in the novel: "Thy Church, Thine instrument, shall lead the way, / And bring Thy lost ones in like scattered sheep, / and fold them at the passing of the day, / And give them warmth and love and soothing sleep!" The church, understood not as just another cause or "ism" but as a concrete network of loving relationships, offers refuge and heals old divisions.

These moving lines invite us to reconsider a black Catholic writer who confronted in himself some of the same tensions and divisions that face us today: how, in a world still wounded by political polarization and racism, can we realize that peace and unity to which God is always calling us? McKay's work, read in its entirety—what was written before his conversion together with what was written after it—offers no easy answers, but instead invites us to take up the challenge ourselves. It encourages us to find God even in our own contentious, fractured moment, even *in extremis*, when we feel "pressed to the wall, dying." That, after all, is where McKay found him. ■

Two Poems by Michael Cadnum

MOSQUITO

The garden at night coy shadow,
fishpond thick with softly
gleaming algae.
The human whispers, our murmured
secret thrives in such balmy
chiaroscuro and we have so
much to share—but we
are not alone. The insistent,
stubborn needles, *yes*,
no, approach and flee, their
whine more distracting than any song.
The wounds they leave are nagging
constellations across the map
we wear within our clothes,

as the hunters easily know here we have
hidden in the windless angle of the dark.
The hand slaps, misses, kills, what does
it matter? They are legion,
and what they steal is hungrily
pilfered survival.
We slap again,

shake our heads, wave our hands, too much,
soon we will escape.
But stay, almost forgiving—we have
so much to learn about
each other and these hungry

wings pause only to persist,
missing, stealing with a
blue-note mine-mine all the while
nothing is theirs.

THE GIRAFFE

Let the trees
root and grow.
Let the feeding birds choose this
shade or that branch.
When the learned accept
that the lessons are worn out,
only the wide horizon is left,
and a life shaped by such

magnitude is changed,
elevated in a way
that can only be awkward.
To be handsome, he realizes,
accepting this
clumsy grandeur, to be a
creature of proportion,
is hopeless. And so he feeds
from the crests of the woodland,
follows a shadow ungainly but fluid,

over the watering hole,
through the increasingly scattered salt lick,
over the tracks of lesser, quicker beings,
their dimunutive elegance exhausted
by escape from the predators
that only the extraordinary can see,
and only the silent ungainly,
resigned to his stature, free of hope,
can drive from the helpless.

Michael Cadnum's thirty-sixth book is The Early Dark: Micro-poetry and Ultra-flash fiction *(Horse Eagle Press).*

Illuminations

Alice McDermott

On her first afternoon at the sanatorium upstate, Sister Illuminata left the porch where the patients were lined up like bolts of linen and wandered through the wings of the cottage. She wanted only solitude. She had already endured the crowded crossing in steerage, the filth and the sickness. She had endured the constant entreaties from every poor Catholic on board, and had brushed from her veil and from the hem of her skirt the traces of spit that had been directed at her from those who were not. She stood in the knocking crowds on Ellis Island, elbow to elbow. And although her habit earned her only a cursory stethoscope to her lungs—through her bib, no less—from a harried and blushing doctor, she'd had barely a night alone in her convent room when Dr. Hannigan, less afraid and more thorough than the government doctor had been, sent her to the sanatorium.

When a nurse there—a Sister of Mercy herself—tried to stop her from going off alone, Sister Illuminata said, lying, that it was a stipulation of her own order that she say her afternoon Office on her feet. She wouldn't be long.

So it was that she found herself drawn by the luxury of silence to a section of the cottage that was not currently in use—the back of the house, where a winter sunroom she had seen from the drive had now, in midsummer, been given over to storage. Her beads in her hand, she turned from the darkened hallway into the bright space. The air here was hazy, full of dust motes and vague sunbeams, stiflingly hot. There were bed frames and wicker chaises piled haphazardly. A green-and-white linoleum floor that was glazed with sunlight. The dull silence was exactly what she had sought. But then a human sound disturbed it: a long sigh that rippled across the stifling air like breath on water.

In an instant, her eyes found them: a man and a woman, half kneeling, half crouching. They were pressed together in a corner of the hot room, pressed

Alice McDermott *won the National Book Award for her novel* Charming Billy. *This story is excerpted from her new novel,* The Ninth Hour, *which will be published by Farrar, Straus & Giroux in September.*

up against each other, behind an iron bedstead that seemed to enclose them. Both had slipped their white robes from their shoulders. Both moved with the same slow, stuttering rhythm. Sister could see the woman's bare throat, corded and straining, the white flesh of her breasts and the brown of her nipples. She could see the man's shoulder blades, the short bones of his spine as they pressed themselves against the paper-thin skin. He rose up over her, she arched herself toward him. He was an old man, white hair on the back of his head, across his shoulders, and all along his skeletal arms.

Briefly, Sister thought there was something angelic about their pale struggle, the winged shoulder blades, the tangled bodies, the soft folds of their white robes, and the dusty, streaming sunlight. But then she saw how their mouths were wide-open, black and straining. Opened helplessly as if in sudden reflex—as if to expel the short, ragged breaths they were taking. Precious breaths in this place.

Sister Illuminata saw them for only a moment before she turned away. There is a hunger, she thought.

The woman was a young mother from a wealthy family—Sister Illuminata's own age. She died within the month. The old man was a doctor from Syracuse, New York, who went home with his family the same week Sister Illuminata returned to the convent—both of them, he said, with lungs forever scarred by their ordeal.

There is a hunger. It was a lesson she had learned and then forgotten across the years she had labored in the convent laundry. But she remembered it again when Sally returned from Chicago and Sister Lucy explained to a small coterie of the nuns: Illuminata and Jeanne, Sister Eugenia and old Sister Miriam, what the girl had discovered.

They were in what the Sisters humbly called the refectory; it was, in fact, the rich man's former drawing room. It was elegant still, high-ceilinged, paneled, with the same thick silk draperies he had paid for. It was where the Sisters took their simple meals, but it was also the site for card parties and ladies' teas, Christmas gatherings for the neighborhood poor, visits from the bishop. A room the nuns used to impress both the indigent and the hoi polloi.

The small bulbs in the chandelier above the polished table where the nuns now sat reflected prettily in the dark wood, like starlight on a pond. As Sister Lucy spoke about the arrangements she had made to remove Sally from the scene of her mother's "indiscretion," Sister Illuminata recalled that she had seen such a pond, such dancing starlight, at the sanatorium upstate. She recalled the pond, the bracing cold night, the tall black pines in the distant darkness, and the flavor of pine on the air. She became aware once more of the ache in her scarred lungs. She recalled the old doctor.

She remembered the lesson she had learned on her first afternoon at the sanatorium, had learned but forgotten: There is a hunger. ■

Rand Richards Cooper

The Fundamentals

'OBIT' & 'JEREMIAH TOWER'

These two documentaries are a bit off the beaten path, including the path to the movie theater, so you'll have to stream them or get the DVD. But they present a pair of topics dear to your reviewer: writing, and restaurants.

I've long viewed obituary writing as the most novelistic side of daily journalism. It takes in the whole scope of a life: the character of the protagonist and the zeitgeist he moved in; themes, settings, and plots; even delicately judged notes of commentary. There is no real reason, indeed no good reason, for obituaries to be solemn or boring. Life itself isn't, after all—and, as one practitioner in Vanessa Gould's film *Obit* asserts, "Obituaries have next to nothing to do with death, and everything with life."

Obit penetrates the well-guarded citadel of the *New York Times* to follow a team of obituary writers through their daily routine. I enjoyed their distinct personalities: Bruce Weber, with his confident all-purpose intelligence; the slightly spectrumy, endearing hesitancy of Douglas Martin and Paul Vitello; Margalit Fox with her freakish articulateness; and best of all, the madcap wackiness of Jeff Roth, who presides over the "morgue," where the newspaper keeps a century or more of clippings on thousands of people, squirreled away higgledy-piggledy in endless rows of file cabinets.

Unsurprisingly, a certain baseline grimness informs the job: "I show up in the morning and say, Who's dead?" comments Weber. But in the end it is a job, and plenty of what we see is humdrum, with writers phoning survivors and scribbling interview notes ("Now was that 1950 or 1951 that he left the military?"). Perhaps above all, we are reminded of the relentless pressures of daily journalism, which loom larger when the task is to research, sum up, and deftly communicate someone's entire life—today, by 6 p.m. That responsibility involves a burden of anxiety. "Seven hours to have complete command over the life and work of someone I never heard of," muses Fox. "Each new assignment is equal parts exhilaration and terror."

Obit left me with a few questions. First, how does the *Times* judge how much space to give a particular life, or whether to cover it at all? "A virtuous life doesn't mean it's newsworthy," comments one staffer; and while we understand that, the film doesn't do much to clarify. What are the criteria, beyond a gut instinct? Trying to balance, say, cultural versus political significance, while factoring in reader interest, leads to absurd questions of judgment. Who is more important, Leonid Brezhnev, or the guy who invented the Slinky? Second, what does being an obit writer mean to these individuals in terms of their aspirations as *Times* journalists? Take, for instance, William Grimes. In his nearly thirty years at the paper, he has been magazine writer, culture reporter, theater columnist, book reviewer, and food writer—including a stint as the paper's chief restaurant critic. How does he see his emergence as obituary writer? Demotion? Evolution? Part of the natural life cycle? And why are he and his colleagues, with one exception, all white males?

Gould uses archival footage to provide glimpses of subjects during their lives, as the writers read their obituaries. Some are famous—Michael Jackson, Philip Seymour Hoffman—but more often we get the lives of the interesting un-famous: like Manson Whitlock, the last great typewriter repair maven; or Irving Cohen, maître d' at the Concord Hotel summer resort, who earned the pleasing sobriquet, "King Cupid of the Catskills." Emblematic figures, whose passing marks the passing of their era.

Inevitably, *Obit* serves up some mordant humor. ("What is a fortunate death?" one writer muses. "One you hear about at 9 a.m.") But we sense fundamental respect for the lives whose stories are being told, and an implicit awe at the prospect of those stories being captured at the very moment of moving from lived life into history. A commitment to telling vivid life stories justifies and frees these writers to offer finely tuned, decorous exercises of wit. "He crossed the Atlantic because it was there, and the Pacific because it was also there," writes Margalit Fox, in the highly novelistic opening of her obituary of British adventurer John Fairfax. "He made both crossings in a rowboat because it, too, was there." Such stylish tributes, done on deadline, constitute journalism's last rites, and reflect their writers' admirable grace under pressure.

In the ranks of fundamental human activities, along with dying (or, rather, prior to it) comes eating, which is the subject of *Jeremiah Tower: The Last Magnificent.* Tower was one of the founding figures of the legendary Chez Panisse restaurant in Berkeley, where he played Hamilton to Alice Waters's Jefferson, helping forge the restaurant's reputation for extraordinary freshness and verve. After a falling-out with Waters, he spent a decade running his own San Francisco restaurant, Stars, then dropped out of sight—leaving the restaurant world altogether and beating a retreat to Mexico, only to surface twenty years later, unexpectedly, in 2014, for a brief stint as chef at the retooled Tavern on the Green in Manhattan's Central Park.

Director Lydia Tenaglia's study of this bon vivant and kitchen genius has its cloying moments. Voice-overs offer solemn musings by Tower ("What are my great expectations, and what have I done?") as we watch him ramble about Cozumel—"a kind of deity-in-exile," wrote one critic witheringly, "wandering amid ruins with the grave visage of Max von Sydow digging up demonic

amulets in *The Exorcist*." Reenactments of scenes from Tower's early life as a neglected child of privilege show Little Lord Fauntleroy feasting alone in hotel dining rooms or on cruise ships ("cold pheasant," Tower recalls, "galantines of rabbit, and almost anything in aspic.") The film's commentary pounds a drumbeat of melodrama, as when we learn that "all innovators are lonely. All creators are lonely. All artists are lonely." Please. Just fry the onions and serve the dinner.

Half-hidden by these excesses is a captivating and informative story, sketched via interviews with Mario Batali, Anthony Bourdain, and other chefs and food writers discussing Tower. A self-taught cook, he is portrayed as a culinary savant, with a photographic memory for menus and a passion for culinary history. (At Chez Panisse he once decided to do a full week of menus developed entirely from August Escoffier, the French chef and exemplar of modern haute cuisine; by the end of the week, his chef de cuisine recalls, "I was completely wiped out.")

Jeremiah Tower

Central is Tower's role in fomenting the American food-and-dining revolution of the past three decades. A landmark moment was his 1976 California Regional Dinner, a meal composed of local ingredients from farms named on the menu, which overnight transformed Chez Panisse's quaint imitation of a Provencal bistro and provided what *Wine Spectator* called "the match that lighted the fire of the New American Cuisine." Today, a chef who spends his mornings dealing with two dozen local farms is commonplace—but that fact, and our cult of fresh-and-local, traces in part to Tower.

And then there's the cult of the chef. In the age of Food Network and the chef as global brand, we take for granted that famed chefs are, well, famous. But it wasn't always that way. "In the old days, nobody knew who the chef was," Anthony Bourdain points out. "He was the servant." When Tower opened Stars, he was determined to cater to celebrities and to become one himself—a glamorous and ubiquitous presence in the front of the house, and eventually the subject of a magazine Dewar's Profile (remember those?). "He was one of the first celebrity chefs," Martha Stewart comments. "Like a conductor coming out before the audience."

The film will encourage those who believe, as an old Harvard friend of Tower's asserts, that "you can change a culture through food." Politically Chez Panisse was a paradox—a fine-dining place nursed in the cradle of New Left protest, many of whose adherents viewed eating mass-produced, industrial food as an act of solidarity with working-class America. Waters demurred, and those who revere her brand of hippiecureanism view the fresh-food movement, as David Kamp writes in *The United States of Arugula*, as "the counterculture's greatest and most lasting triumph."

Tower himself could hardly be more apolitical, and his dedicated culinary hedonism provides a quirky aesthetic counterpoint to the fraught politics of the 1960s, when he came of age. At Harvard, we learn, he had already garnered—as an undergraduate!—a reputation as a cook. There, he perfected a marijuana consommé, and his idea of making a political statement was to throw a dinner party for the visiting ballerina Margot Fonteyn, with a menu consisting of ingredients and fine wines his roommates had pilfered from shops in Cambridge.

Vive la révolution—and pass the Chateau Latour! ■

Celia Wren

Women's Work

'THE HANDMAID'S TALE'

The brutality unfolds with a precision so choreographed it's worthy of Busby Berkeley. In the Republic of Gilead, a totalitarian theocracy that has supplanted the United States, women are arriving for a "particicution"—an execution by mob. The execution relies on the subset of Gilead women who have been compelled to bear children for elite households. In compliance with the society's rigid sumptuary laws, these "handmaids" wear red cloaks and white, face-concealing bonnets. In the lead-up to the execution, the camera gives the viewer a bird's-eye-view of the women as they glide, in demure red-and-white lines, past black-clad men toting submachine guns. In an open-air death chamber, the handmaids kneel—a corps de ballet ready for a delirium of killing.

This sequence, in episode 1 of the Hulu drama *The Handmaid's Tale*, epitomizes the harrowing power of this small-screen series, adapted from Margaret Atwood's 1985 dystopian novel about a patriarchal theocracy. The show features a sterling cast, headed by the extraordinarily expressive Elisabeth Moss (*Mad Men*) as Offred, an intelligent, brooding handmaid. Launched in April, the series has struck a chord with Americans chafing at the policies and personality of President Trump, whom many consider an exemplar of misogynistic male privilege. Real-life protestors have recently donned red-and-white handmaid-style garb to demonstrate against what they see as infringements on women's rights around the country. Meanwhile, Hulu has renewed its hit for a second season.

To judge by the first seven episodes, the show faithfully reflects Atwood's novel, while amping up the political-thriller elements and allowing Offred more small consolations, such as moments of solidarity with other handmaids. Avoiding the monotonous tone of—*The Man in the High Castle*—Amazon's recent dystopian series—*The Handmaid's Tale* prudently employs shifting moods, often flashing back to pre-Gilead days, when Offred was a happily married editor and mother. That life was not to last: in the wake of a devastating plunge in fertility rates, apparently caused by environmental degradation, a coup toppled the U.S. government and imposed a regime in which women are forbidden to read or (mostly) work outside the home. Gays and lesbians (condemned as "gender traitors") and religious dissenters (including Catholics) are persecuted or killed.

Elisabeth Moss in The Handmaid's Tale

The Gilead elite deploy biblical verses to maintain control. For example, the story of Jacob, Rachel, and the slave-girl Bilhah (Genesis 30:1–8) is read aloud during the handmaid sex ritual. But it is obvious that the regime is cherry-picking its scripture. In an interrogation/torture scene, when an official (Ann Dowd) cites the Beatitude "Blessed are the meek," Moss's Offred feistily answers with another Beatitude—"Blessed are those who suffer for the cause of righteousness"—only to be beaten and shocked with a cattle prod.

When she is not escaping into memories of her husband Luke (O. T. Fagbenle) and friend Moira (Samira Wiley), Offred endures life in the home of the unpredictable Commander (Joseph Fiennes), who is married to the fretful Serena Joy (Yvonne Strahovski) and waited on by the mysterious chauffeur Nick (Max Minghella) and other servants. In a departure from the book, the Hulu series briefly shows us Gilead, and life before Gilead, through the eyes of Serena Joy, a writer who initially believed wholeheartedly in the regime. The incorporation of different perspectives—another episode adopts Luke's viewpoint—both complicates and expands Atwood's nightmare vision.

Imagery associated with vision has talismanic power in Gilead, where the secret police are called the Eyes and "Under His Eye" is a standard greeting. Atwood's novel has already been translated into film, opera, and ballet, but it seems particularly fitting that it should find a niche in television, a format that both controls the viewer's gaze and divides a story into episodes—not unlike the bonnets that allow the handmaids to see just a bit of the world at a time. ■

Jack Miles

Shop Talk

The Face of Water

A Translator on Beauty and Meaning in the Bible

Sarah Ruden

Pantheon, $26.95, 232 pp.

Somewhere in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, Gertrude Stein has Alice opine that no one can appreciate a sculpture who has not dusted it for a year. Translating any passage in the Bible imparts to the translator an appreciation that is similarly intimate and humble, yet at the same time dynamic and intrusive, for the translator must begin with what the Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek permits, allows, or requires, and then must proceed with inescapable rudeness to a "version" of it, using only what her native language permits, allows, or requires. A translator knows the target text "in the biblical sense." She has the kind of access to it that your proctologist has to your body.

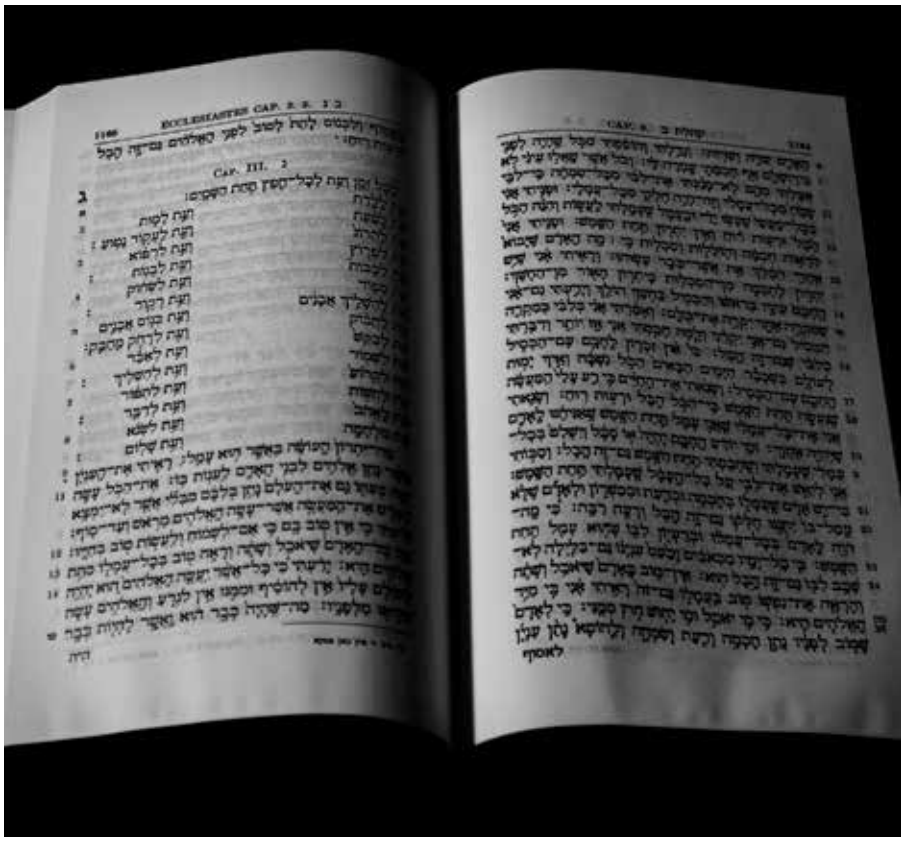
Such is the intimate, humble, dynamic, intrusive, and inescapably rude appreciation of seven Old Testament and seven related New Testament passages that Sarah Ruden aims to convey in *The Face of Water*. Ruden links each of these pairs to a different aspect of the Bible translator's challenge: grammar, vocabulary, style, prosody, voice, meaning, and comedy or wit. The seven pairs recur in the three parts of the book: "Impossibilities Illustrated: The Character of the Languages and Tests"; "Possibilities Put Forward: Mainly, the Passages Retranslated"; and "An Account of the Fuller Facts," which exhibits some of the tools or resources that translators employ.

The epigraph to Ruden's book, a poem of her own composition, includes the following quatrain:

> I passed exams, unpacked and packed,
> Ordered and cancelled. Time went by
> Like a foreign-language broadcast. Then
> I saw a river in the sky.

Ruden—with a Harvard doctorate in classical philology but without a conventional academic appointment—seems in the late 1990s to have embraced translation as her calling in life, the river in her sky, and this with most impressive results. At the rate of one major classic every three or four years, all published to favorable reviews, she has translated the *Satyricon* (2000), the *Lysistrata* (2003), *Homeric Hymns* (2005), the *Aeneid* (2008), *The Golden Ass* (2012), and the *Oresteia* (2015). Her translation of Augustine's *Confessions* was published in June, and she is under contract for a translation of the gospels.

Ruden is also an energetically, even combatively engaged Quaker Christian. *Paul Among the People* (2010) combined professional and personal commitments in a tart and somewhat contrarian appropriation. Her forthcoming gospels and *Confessions* suggest a further turn from the pagan to the Christian cassics as does the fact—much in evidence in *The Face of Water*—that Ruden has immersed herself in the study of Hebrew. A priori, then, there is good reason for a Bible reader who does not know Hebrew or Greek to expect here both a deeply informed and an essentially sympathetic introduction to *how*, linguistically, the biblical texts actually work.



JAROSLAV A. POLÁK

Ecclesiastes 3 in the original Hebrew

But there is a problem with this book, which I will illustrate with a brief digression on bicycling as distinct from walking. In walking, the weight is born on the feet, and locomotion is achieved as the walker pushes downward on the toe of one foot, while lifting its heel, and, leaning forward slightly, simultaneously raises the other foot from the ground and moves it forward, shifting the weight to that foot as it meets the ground again. In this way, by successively falling forward, the walker harnesses the force of gravity and achieves forward locomotion accompanied by an ongoing left-right rhythm.

Bicycling is different. In bicycling, the weight is born on the buttocks, and locomotion is achieved as one foot pushes down on a pedal, and this force is transferred by a chain to one of two linked wheels, propelling the pair and the seat between them forward, while the same rotation brings the second foot into pressure position on a second pedal placed on a common sprocket at a 180-degree angle from the first. The alternating, left-right, lateral equilibrium of walking is thus replaced in bicycling by a uniform lateral equilibrium achieved principally by forward momentum. In walking, moreover, pedal motion mediates directional control; in bicycling, manual motion does the same through a handlebar governing a movable front wheel.

Why this digression? Because my experience—reading Sarah Ruden's linguistic analyses of passages that I have long since read in the original Hebrew and Greek and, in one or two cases, also translated—is peculiar in the way that, I trust, my walking/bicycling comparison just now must have struck you as peculiar. I see what she is trying to do. I easily appreciate how the Hebrew and Greek do indeed produce the effects that she describes them producing. I get it, I do. Easily. But would I get it if I did not already know the languages? If you had never either walked or bicycled, would you get my paragraphs above?

In her discussion of 2 Samuel 11–12:7, Ruden focuses on a recurrent Hebrew clause that in the King James Version is commonly translated "And it came to pass":

> Technically, [this] Hebrew clause (more like a mini-clause) is a "vav consecutive" or "vav conversive" constructed out of the verb for "to be" or "to become" or "to happen" and the one-letter word for "and," vav (which happens to be, on its own, visually, a straight vertical line). In a vav consecutive, vav is glommed right onto the front of a certain form of a verb (well, visually, onto the back, as we're reading right to left) and changes that verb's quasi tense or aspect (or something). Don't close this book and turn on a PBS documentary about ferrets: what I'm about to tell you is way more interesting.

With all the good will in the world for what Ruden is attempting here, I fear that for most readers the ferret documentary is likely to win.

At a later point in her book, Ruden says that she herself would never read a book like the very book she has written on any text as inescapable as the Bible: "the only writing about writing that doesn't send me climbing up the walls is about works I have no intention of ever sampling." But she then goes on:

> On the other hand, since as a translator I *am* on the toiling end of the literary enterprise most of the time—mopping that floor, stocking that salad bar—there are worse-informed people you could consult if you want to know what goes on in the kitchen.

There certainly are many worse informed people than Ruden, but most people just don't care what goes on in the kitchen: they are diners, not cooks. Actually, Ruden is at her most accessible and enjoyable when she comes out of the kitchen and chats with the diners about what the texts mean. Then, she can both delight and instruct with her combination of deep erudition, a beautiful linguistic sensibility, and a cheerful, folksy style (she likes to pop in the occasional "for cryin' out loud" or the like).

Translation, however, is finally the criterion by which this book must rise or fall. And as for her actual translations, well, to put it as colloquially as she might, they range from the pretty wonderful to the pretty stinky. On the wonderful side, here are the last two verses of her translation of Revelations 7:9-17:

> They will never go hungry anymore; they will never be parched anymore;
> The sun's heat will not assault them, no burning heat will strike them.
> Because the tiny lamb there in the middle of the throne will be their shepherd;
> And he will lead them on the paths to springs flowing with water that gives them life,
> And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.

On the stinky side, here are the opening lines of her translation of Matthew 6:9–13:

> …Father, our father in the heavens above,
> Spoken in holiness must be your name.
> Into the world must come your kingdom,
> And into being whatever you have willed,
> In heaven the same way as here on earth.

All I could think of, reading those lines, was Wolcott Gibbs's famous parody of Henry Luce's "Timestyle": "Backward ran the sentences until reeled the mind…Where it all will end, knows God."

It's true (and now please step into my kitchen for a moment) that the standard sentence order in either Aramaic or Hebrew is verb + subject + object + modifiers. It's entirely plausible as well that an Aramaic *Vorlage* lies beneath Matthew's Greek, but does one replicate the effect of standard order in the source language by using the different order that is standard in the target language? Or does one retain the native syntactic order of the source language even to extraordinary and dislocating effect in the target language? Here, Ruden does; Miles wouldn't.

Such are the questions that translators rightly worry about, but I'm afraid it does take one to know one. For the lay reader, the non-translator, much of *The Face of the Water* will be a tough read, and that's for darn sure. ■

Jack Miles, *professor emeritus at the University of California, Irvine, is the author of* God: A Biography *and* Christ: A Crisis in the Life of God.

Cassandra Nelson

Losing His Way

The Schooldays of Jesus

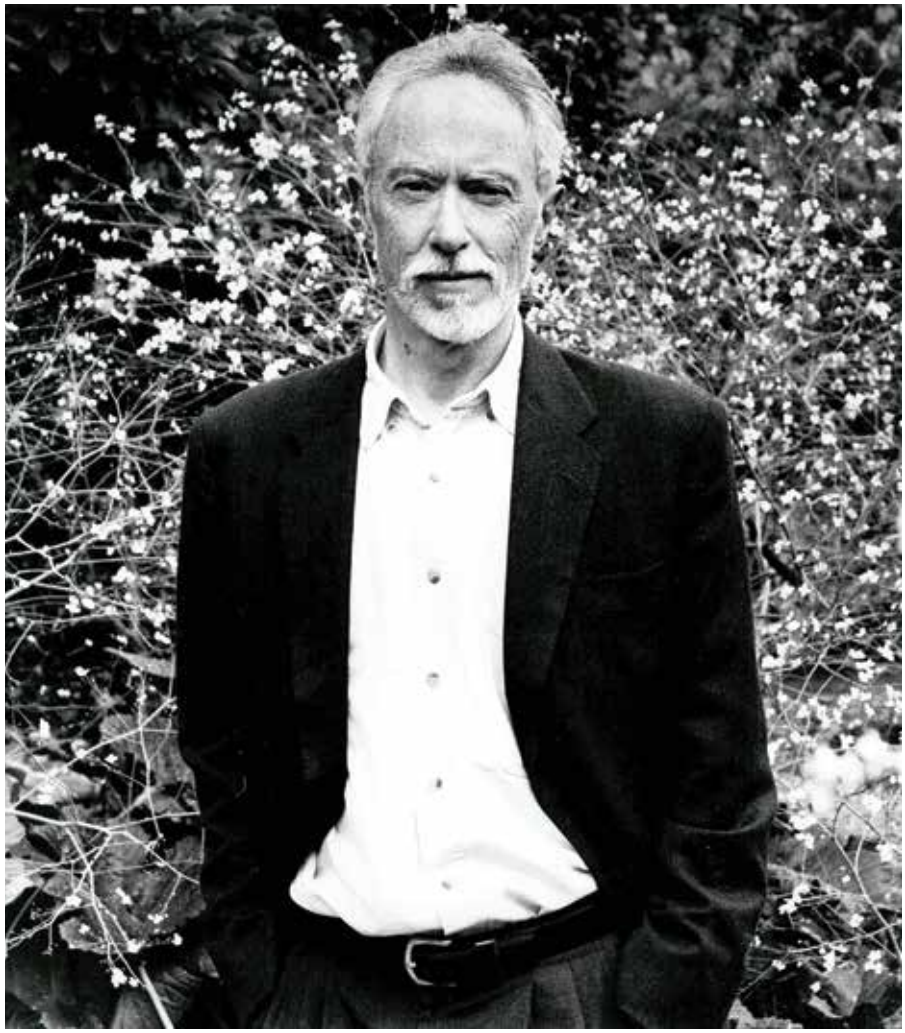
J. M. Coetzee
Viking, $27, 260 pp.

In his essay "The Storyteller" (1936), philosopher Walter Benjamin asserts that "every real story" must contain "openly or covertly something useful," and that any teller of tales worth his salt should have "counsel for his readers"—that is, some advice and encouragement about how to make one's way safely through the world. "Counsel woven into the fabric of real life," Benjamin writes, "is wisdom."

Regrettably, J. M. Coetzee's *The Schooldays of Jesus* offers readers nothing but folly. A sequel to *The Childhood of Jesus* (2013), Coetzee's most recent novel picks up where the last one left off—in a baffling, unnamed country where refugees arrive by boat, and are given new names, randomly assigned to residences (some humble and some extravagant), and gruffly encouraged to start a new life. Also, for reasons that are never really explained but may have something to do with *Don Quixote*, new arrivals are forced to communicate in beginner's Spanish. All memories of their old lives—and apparently their old languages—have somehow been stripped away in the journey. Two books into what I fear may be a trilogy, I have no idea whether this country is a metaphor for life, the afterlife, or something else entirely.

On the bright side, the capital city of Novilla—where the boats come in—turns out to be a kind of colorless socialist utopia, and the protagonist, Simón, quickly finds work at the docks. The food in Novilla may be bland, but the job provides him with opportunities for manly camaraderie and endless philosophical speculation with his fellow stevedores. It also allows him to support the ragtag family that he assembles almost accidentally upon arrival. This family consists of Davíd, an ostensibly extraordinary but in practice extremely tiresome little boy who became separated from his mother on the boat and whom Simón has vowed to protect, and Inés, a haughty woman whom Simón conscripts to be Davíd's mother. When the first book ends, Davíd has run afoul of the educational authorities and the three must flee in a cramped car to start a new new life in the distant town of Estrella.

The Schooldays of Jesus opens with them stepping out of the car. In terms of plausibility and interest, the plot does not improve on the first novel. Stubborn, willful Davíd is soon enrolled in the nearby Academy of Dance, his tuition conveniently underwritten by three aged spinster sisters who recognize his gifts. There, the husband-and-wife team who run the school take him under their wing, and manage to tame, occasionally, an otherwise spoiled, headstrong, and rude little boy. After Juan Sebastián and Ana Magdalena Arroyo impart to him their occult views about "the noble numbers" and the "ant numbers," the reader is subjected to two of what are surely not the most boring or misjudged school concerts in the history of the world, but are still very bad. Mostly, they are bad because Coetzee appears to want us to take the "noble numbers" business seriously. In one scene, Simón sits mesmerized as Davíd "dances" the number Seven:



J. M. Coetzee

> As if the earth has lost its downward power, the boy seems to shed all bodily weight, to become pure light.... The numbers are integral and sexless, said Ana Magdalena; their ways of loving and conjugating are beyond our comprehension. Because of that, they can be called down only by sexless beings. Well, the being who dances before them is neither child nor man, boy nor girl; he would even say neither body nor spirit. Eyes shut, mouth open, rapt, Davíd floats through the steps with such fluid grace that time stands still. Too caught up even to breathe, he, Simón, whispers to himself: *Remember this! If ever in the future you are tempted to doubt, remember this!*
>
> The dance of Seven ends as abruptly as it began. The flute falls silent. With chest heaving slightly, the boy faces Arroyo. "Do you want me to dance Eleven?"

Thankfully, Señor Arroyo declines.

To generate something like forward momentum, Coetzee includes a hefty subplot involving Ana Magdalena's love affair with a museum guard who works nearby and eventually strangles her. Their union is bizarre, even by the novel's standards. Ana Magdalena is supposedly beautiful in a lunar way—although I struggled to understand how her albino coloring, lack of eyebrows, and high forehead leading up to "fair, sparse hair" could achieve the effect it did on men—while Dmitri, the guard, is described as "oily" and "smelly," with unwashed clothes and a scraggly beard. Never mind that Ana Magdalena's husband is handsome, attentive, and possessed of genius, for the course of true love never did run smooth.

Personally I regretted the murder less for the loss it entailed than for the opportunity it gave Dmitri to offer endless and increasingly incoherent self-justifications. Pleading for Davíd's continued affection, he asks,

> Who ever stopped loving a person because he was bad? I did my worst to Ana Magdalena, yet she never stopped loving me. She hated me, maybe, but that doesn't mean she didn't love me. Love and hate: you can't have the one without the other. Like salt and pepper. Like black and white. That's what people forget. She loved me and she hated me, like any normal person. Like Simón here. Do you think Simón loves you all the time? Of course he doesn't. He loves you and he hates you, it's all mixed up inside him, only he won't tell you. No, he keeps it secret, pretends it's all nice and placid inside him, no waves, no ripples. Like the way he talks, our famous man of reason. But believe me, old Simón here is as much of a mess inside as you or I. In fact, more of a mess. Because at least I don't pretend to be what I am not. *This is how I am, I say, and this is how I talk, all mixed up.* Are you listening, my boy? Catch my words while you can, because Simón here wants to drive me away, out of your life. Listen hard. When you listen to me, you listen to the truth, and what do we want, finally, but the truth?

On and on in this manner Dmitri is permitted to ramble, in venues both public (a trial scene; a hijacked evening lecture) and private (he repeatedly sneaks into Simón's house, or jumps out of the darkness to accost him and the boy on the street). He is not, as you can see from the passage above, much to write home about, as far as fictional criminal masterminds go. (If you want to get inside the mind of a murderer, try Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment* or Meursault in *The Stranger* instead.) Dmitri's repeated threats to run away to the salt mines, where he might pay his penance in toil, prove disappointingly hollow.

Indeed, the only real interest the book generates comes from watching Coetzee grow more and more entrapped in a pointless web of his own making. Much of what passes for philosophical musing in the novel is as contradictory, nonsensical, and repetitive as Dmitri's soliloquy above. I sensed a writer stalling, endlessly, because he did not know the way forward; and spinning, helplessly, because he had lost all sense of cardinal direction. Perhaps this is what allegory looks like in a pluralistic age: all sound and fury, signifying nothing. Red herrings abound in the book; loose ends are left untied, although it hardly matters as stakes are lowered by the characters' relentless mix of selfishness and two-dimensionality; and guns laid on the table in the first act either don't go off or fire blanks in the second. Why, I wondered, didn't Coetzee cut his losses after the first book, which conjures an atmosphere of genuinely compelling gloom? Why didn't a friend or editor intervene?

Religious references in the novel are particularly garbled: the faux Holy Family follows a star (Estrella) to safety, and they arrive while a census is in progress, but Davíd's mean-spirited challenges to his parents' authority bear no resemblance to Jesus' Finding in the Temple. Scattered references to "killing the fatted calf" and the washing of feet lead nowhere. Davíd's wisdom, interestingly, is something that Coetzee can only ever tell the reader about, but never show. For instance, at one point Davíd whispers words of alleged brilliance into the ear of one of his patronesses. Coetzee then lets himself off the hook by having the patroness decide to fiercely guard whatever has been revealed to her. I would wager that Coetzee doesn't actually know, and therefore can't explain, why Davíd is so special. He has no wisdom to convey.

Amusingly, Coetzee's plight seemed to become Simón's plight as the book unfolded, and ultimately my plight. There we all were, chafing at the ridiculousness of the Arroyos' numerology: "No, I don't call it philosophy. Privately, I call it claptrap. Privately, I call it a load of rubbish." Or there we all were, stuck in the narrative doldrums: "*I must find something to do!* he tells himself"—Simón is unemployed for much of the book—"*One cannot live like this, killing time!*" Or there just the two of them were, Coetzee and Simón, unable to distinguish between reality and falsity, when, in order to quell his restlessness, Simón signs up for an introductory composition class. Eagerly awaiting feedback from his instructor, he realizes that "he wants her to listen to him and tell him whether his speech—the speech he is trying his best to write down on the page—rings true or whether on the contrary it is one long lie from beginning to end." The latter, I'd say. Unwilling to pass on this plight to another reader, I recommend that anyone intrigued by Coetzee's misleading title look instead at the Infancy Gospel of Thomas. ■

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Dominic Preziosi

Lie, Memory

Ill Will
By Dan Chaon
Ballantine Books, $28, 458 pp.

Would a bookish 1970s adolescence have been complete without taking on Thomas Tryon's *The Other*? Aside from Judy Blume's lurid chronicles of puberty and John Jakes's racy historical sagas, nothing was as eagerly passed among the newly voracious readers of Ms. Katz's sixth-grade classroom as this classic novel of horror, which trafficked in some of the occultish frights (malevolent children, ceremonial killings) to become associated with the era. A solitary thirteen-year-old in an isolated Nebraska village was equally absorbed: Dan Chaon, future novelist and National Book Award finalist, who would also grow up to write the afterword to the *The Other*'s 2012 New York Review Books reissue. No mere artifact of mass-market schlock, Chaon writes, *The Other* is a serious meditation on childhood, death, and especially how we human beings recollect: "[O]ur well-remembered pasts...are each a little Atlantis, sinking into the sea; a memory, that, on second thought, was never accurate anyway."

The multifariousness of memory—its mutability and insistent unbiddenness, its maddening elusiveness and acknowledged unreliability—is a thematic staple of Chaon's fiction. What he's interested in is not how we draw on the past to make sense of the present, but whether we should even buy into the notion that we can. If memory is a set of subjectively authored stories, the tales endlessly reshaped by private retelling, how can it be a guide to the objective reality of now? Why should we believe that what we have in our heads is true? Chaon has mined this premise across a distinctly unsettling body of work, to which his novel *Ill Will* is a thrilling addition.

Among the virtues on display are some that seem to get short shrift in contemporary literary fiction, such as breakneck plotting built around characters truly *in extremis*. Add to this that Chaon doesn't shy away from reliably disconcerting tropes of genre horror: twins, amputees, corpses, and serial killers, to name a few. There is nothing supernatural, though there is the periodic truly terrifying image. But lest readers think Chaon is just Stephen King with some Raymond Carver in his back pocket, *Ill Will* also examines modern, troublingly common horrors like intergenerational poverty, sexual abuse, and opioid addiction. It would be too much to call it a social novel, but as Atticus Lish did with *Preparation*

Dan Chaon

for the Next Life (2014), Chaon compels readers to consider the forces that helped bring about the circumstances in which his characters find themselves. "Disproportionate numbers of bad things happen to people who are economically disadvantaged," observes one as she enumerates the tragedies that have befallen the protagonist's family.

Ill Will begins with a grim discovery, a scene Chaon handles with his typical dispatch and tactile immediacy. "Sometime in the first days of November the body of the young man who had disappeared sank to the bottom of the river," reads the first sentence, leading quickly to a pair of college biology students at paragraph's end peering at the corpse, "both feeling scientific rather than superstitious, and one of the girls reached down and touched the face's cheek with the tip of her pencil." It's soon clear that this mystery will serve mainly as the backdrop—though an increasingly pressing one—to the main story, built around protagonist Dustin Tillman, a forty-something psychologist living in Cleveland Heights, Ohio. He gets word that his adopted brother, Rusty, is being released on exonerating DNA evidence after serving thirty years of a life sentence for the 1980s murder of Dustin's parents, aunt, and uncle. This is not good news, as Dustin and his cousin were the main witnesses against the older boy, their exaggerated tales of Satanic rituals the basis of the prosecution's case.

Chaon moves back and forth among narrators and across time and place as the book unfolds: between the weekend of the murders and the aftermath; between the adoption of the troubled adolescent Rusty by Dustin's well-meaning father and Dustin's own muddled, undirected middle-age; from the dying Nebraska town of Dustin's childhood to the blighted fringes of Cleveland today. At the time of Rusty's release, Dustin is already dealing with the death of his wife from quickly moving cancer, along with a pair of now-motherless sons drifting away from him. Apathetic about his practice and sinking into self-doubt, he also grows increasingly susceptible to the conspiratorial theorizing of one of his patients, an ex-cop convinced there is a serial killer preying on Midwest college boys.

The book's narrative tension, of course, lies in the will-he-or-won't-he question of Rusty's settling of scores with Dustin. By what we learn of their childhood, Dustin has legitimate reason to fear his adopted brother even without the fact of his testimony against him. Rusty as a boy was cruel, casually violent, and on at least one occasion sexually abusive; Chaon deftly keeps certain details of these events murky, the better to represent the blurriness of memory. Yet in other fleeting but heartbreaking scenes of Rusty's own pre-adoption childhood, we learn what might have contributed to his behavior. Here Chaon demonstrates how sexual abuse need not be graphically depicted or even explicitly sexual to result in psychic and emotional damage.

But *Ill Will*'s real subject is whether Dustin can continue to believe what he thinks he knows about his life. Does he actually remember the murders? Does he know the details of the relationship between his parents and aunt and uncle (a pair of brothers married to a pair of sisters)? Has he placed too much faith in the memories of one cousin over the other (twins themselves)? "There is that feeling when your own story is out of your hands," Dustin observes at one point, dwelling on the crumbling of his memory—another little Atlantis, sinking into the sea—even as his present disintegrates beneath him.

The question of narrative reliability lurks throughout *Ill Will*, but Chaon's use of multiple points of view mitigates the practical concerns without undermining his thematic aims: collectively the characters corroborate enough of the main facts to root us in what is unquestionably reality, even if their individual recollections don't precisely line up. Yet in anxiously holding to their versions of the truth, they cleave themselves from one another. Internal monologues and conversations break off in mid-sentence or are disrupted by extra spaces between words, a splintering of consciousness and speech that's indicative of the splintering of everything else. "I don't believe in ghosts," Dustin's younger, heroin-addicted son declares late in the book, though it's hardly an expression of courage. "I believe in...what? Malevolence?" *Ill Will* is literary horror for these times. ■

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Phil Christman

A Defiant Imperfection

The Idiot

Elif Batuman
Penguin, $27, 432 pp.

It's probably possible to read Elif Batuman's first novel—the story, by a Harvard-educated, language-obsessed, Turkish-American writer, of a language-obsessed, Turkish-American writer's first year at Harvard—without pondering its resemblance to her life. It may even be possible to read *The Idiot* without cross-referencing it against Batuman's considerable body of literary criticism. But what fun would that be? Such self-imposed contextual poverty would resemble the "limited historical consciousness" that Batuman has often lamented in contemporary American fiction, perhaps most notoriously in her 2010 attack on MFA programs, "Get a Real Degree," "I should state upfront," she wrote in that piece, "that I am not a fan of program fiction," a species of writing she accuses of narrowing its own intellectual horizons and frame of reference. This narrowing, in turn, she traces to bourgeois guilt over the nature of literature: "Because writing is suspected to be narcissistic and wasteful, it must be 'disciplined' by the program." The result is fiction that reads as if it came from "a developing nation with no literary tradition."

I was not a fan of this line of argument when Batuman initially made it. I read her avidly, but she was one of those writers I would lose an afternoon mentally arguing with. Her generalizations were too sweeping, her arguments sometimes half-baked. What is her beloved nineteenth-century Russian literature but the product of a "developing nation" with a fairly new literary tradition? But my ambivalence was self-interested, too. I finished an MFA in fiction just as Batuman came to literary prominence, and I resented that so many better-established writers, herself included, seemed to be trying to lower the perceived value of my and my friends' degrees, both by writing polemics against MFA programs (as Batuman and seemingly everybody else was doing) and, as in the case of David Shields and his followers, by attacking the very idea of novels. In some ways, Batuman seemed allied with this latter group of writers as well. Though she praised novelists old and new—Chekhov; Balzac; even Franzen, that *bête blanc* of recent literary history—she described, far better than did the negligible Shields, that weariness with the kayfabe of plot and character that afflicted so many of us in those years. "The juxtaposition of personal narrative with the facts of the world and the facts of literature—the real work of the novel—is taking place today largely in memoirs and essays," she wrote in "Get a Real Degree," and in an interview around the same time, she elaborated on this point in oddly specific detail: "[A] lot of the writers that I know are incredibly good email writers and a lot of the time I find their emails more compelling than the things they are writing at the time.... The email is kind of the unknown life, and the published writings are the known life." I, too, felt like I needed fiction to bridge these two lives, or somehow turn them into one.

In the past decade, some writers have solved this problem by turning to autofiction. If realism's devices for measuring the divergence between life and art, or between the known and unknown lives, had gotten old hat, writers like Sheila Heti, Ben Lerner, and Karl Ove Knausgaard foregrounded the unknown life, using tactics already developed and forgotten in the twentieth century by writers as diverse as Linda Rosenkrantz, William Demby, John Edgar Wideman, Renata Adler, Chris Kraus, and Marguerite Duras, many of whom experienced a revival during this period. If the essay seemed to be stealing the novel's territory, these writers stole back, writing things that read like essays but called themselves novels, and in some cases (Knausgaard, Lerner) they foregrounded the shame of writing as well. These books were joined by works like Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts* and Terry Castle's *The Professor*, which, like Batuman's hilarious 2010 memoir *The Possessed*, blended narrative, theory, and criticism into something compulsively readable.

Elif Batuman

On its surface, *The Idiot* looks more "traditional" than these books. Batuman goes to the trouble of creating a novelistic alter ego. Selin Karada, like Batuman, matriculates at Harvard in 1995, just in time to be part of the first email generation:

> Always there, unchanged, in a configuration nobody else could see, was a glowing list of messages from all the people you knew, and from people you didn't know, all in the same letters, like the universal handwriting of thought or of the world.

Email is described here so as to resemble a language: "the universal handwriting of thought." And it is via email that Selin falls in love for the first time, with a Hungarian senior named Ivan. The medium itself seems to call forth this emotion from her; through it she and Ivan speak to each other more freely, more strangely, than in their actual meetings, which are a painful comedy of misunderstandings. Email not only communicates but almost creates Selin's "unknown" life.

The Idiot, like life, turns out to

abound in such structures. Ivan is a math major, and early in their flirtation, Selin comes across Nabokov's description of math as an "artificial system," a convenience that turns out to encode the structures of the world: "nobody seems to have been surprised at the queer fact of the outer network becoming an inner skeleton." For her part, Selin obsesses over the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis—that language is both the vehicle of thought and the driver. Even Selin's bizarre Russian textbook, which consists of a love story made surreal by limitations of vocabulary and grammar (one new verb tense per chapter!), prophesies the arc of her love for Ivan. This emplotted feeling does not make her experience safe or predictable. She ends up following Ivan to his home country, a trip she likens to reading *War and Peace*: "new characters came up every five minutes, with their unusual names and distinctive locutions, and you had to pay attention to them for a time, even though you might never see them again for the whole rest of the book."

The Idiot itself, like the lives of its characters, is constrained by an external structure—Batuman's life. (The novel's Hungary section shares incidents with *The Possessed*.) And yet, by making such doublings the book's theme, Batuman creates something fresh and miraculously lifelike: even when I recognized material from her earlier book, I had no idea where this one was going. This is primarily a matter of style. Like Selin in Hungary, confronted by yet another wearying new detail, Batuman has to pay attention; her prose is as voraciously awake as the mind of a first-year student. Her descriptions of people, emotions, interactions, states of mind are almost painfully precise: "An amazing sight, someone you're infatuated with trying to fish something out of a jeans pocket." Such artlessness is, of course, one of the most difficult achievements in art.

The Idiot veers farthest from autofiction, as from "program fiction" (if that exists), in its lack of shame. Batuman never seems hamstrung by the thought that there might be something unseemly in bringing unflagging verbal attentiveness to the perceptions of the Harvard rich kid she once was. How entitled of her, to find her own life rich in meaning! Some reviewers have generously taken on the embarrassment Batuman forgot to feel, disdaining the book's length, its torrential quality. Even thoughtful and sympathetic readers have framed the book as a likable mess, a "defiantly imperfect" book. There are, of course, no "imperfect" novels, because there are no perfect novels, only more or less interesting ones. During the week I spent in its world, *The Idiot* was as interesting as the sight of someone you're infatuated with fishing something out of a jeans pocket. It slowed time down.

Selin, that hyperverbal creature, has a phrase that describes this too—that unlooked-for vividness, that fullness in the atmosphere, that arrives rarely in one's life, including one's reading life. It comes late in the book, after an unplanned and blissful interlude with Ivan's family. "I kept thinking about the uneven quality of time, the way it was almost always so empty, and then with no warning came a few days that felt so dense and alive and real that it seemed indisputable that that was what life was, that its real nature had finally been revealed. But then time passed and unthinkably grew dead again, and it turned out that the fullness had been an aberration." I disagree here with Selin, and with Batuman. I think it's the periods of emptiness that are the aberration—that boredom is finally the failure, or inability, or refusal, to see the quotidian in its real amplitude. I think this partly because I have been taught by a literary tradition that models such vision. It is a tradition that *The Idiot* inherits, and joins. ■

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The Other Guy

Jerry Ryan

When I was a boy the third person of the Trinity was referred to as the Holy Ghost. I recall not being too keen on doing business with a ghost, however holy he might be. It is now more usual to speak of the "Holy Spirit." Perhaps this makes him less intimidating for little kids, yet for most of us he is still the "other guy"—a sort of phantom shrouded in mystery.

In the psychology of the Western church, the main drama of salvation is played out between the Father and the Son. It is only at Pentecost, when all has been accomplished, that the Paraclete promised by Jesus enters the scene. The Holy Spirit is presented as depending on the Word for its temporal manifestation as well as its eternal procession. This, in turn, leads us to consider the church as primarily the church of the Incarnate Word—rationally structured, ordered, determined in its intelligibility—and only secondarily "pneumatic." The Holy Spirit seems almost like an afterthought. In *Papal Sins*, Garry Wills claims that many of the prerogatives of the Holy Spirit have gradually been transferred to the Virgin Mary—as if an embodied person, one of us, had to replace the Holy Spirit in the role of comforter.

In short, there is a certain malaise in the Catholic Church when it comes to the Holy Spirit. We do not quite know what to say about this nebulous and somewhat isolated presence. It is significant that, at Vatican II, it was the Orthodox observers who pointed out to the council fathers the lack of references to the Holy Spirit in their proposed texts. The texts were revised, but the malaise remains.

The intuitions of the Eastern Churches might be of help to us. "Never think of the Son without thinking of the Holy Spirit," wrote St. Gregory of Nyssa. St. Iraneus speaks of the Son and the Spirit as the "two hands of the Father," and the Father always uses both hands at the same time. The Word and the Spirit work together from the very beginning. If it is the Son who gives the Spirit; it is the Spirit who reveals and makes present the Son. At the origin of all things, it is the Spirit who hovers over the primal waters preparing them to receive the creative Word. It is the Spirit who inspires the prophets of Israel and prepares the revelation of the Logos made flesh. It is by the Spirit's power that the Virgin Mary conceives Emmanuel and God dwells among us. It is the Spirit who manifests Jesus in the waters of the Jordan and leads him into the desert. Throughout his life, Jesus is obedient to the Spirit of his Father. His final act will be the remission of the Spirit to the Father—so that Christ, "abandoned," might enter into the silence and solitude of the tomb and of hell, and thus shatter the bonds of death. The Spirit will seal this triumph and raise him up on the third day. Finally, it is through the Spirit that the grace of the risen Christ is poured forth on his church.

It is also the Spirit who transforms the gifts into the Body and Blood of Christ in the Eucharist. When we receive Christ in the Eucharist, we also receive the Holy Spirit. It is the function of the Holy Spirit to make the presence of Christ a vivifying and permanent reality in the church, transforming a community of sinners into the Body of Christ. The Gospel message is not credible—not for others and not for us—unless the Paraclete has first prepared the mind and the heart to receive it. And when, in the silence of our innermost being, we listen to the voice of prayer springing up in our heart, it is not our own voice we hear but that of the Spirit speaking within us, revealing the Father and the Son.

Artus Wolffort, The Holy Trinity*, early seventeenth century*

In the Eastern tradition, the Son reveals and sends the Spirit as the Spirit reveals and sends the Son, and both proceed from the Father. Without the Spirit, the Word is mute; without the Word, the Spirit is inarticulate. Both are needed to manifest the Father of Lights. The return to such a tradition in the West might enable us to recover a sense of intimacy with the mysterious Third Person, who is too often discussed impersonally, as if he were just a theological abstraction.

This intimacy would not evacuate the mystery. The Spirit remains discreet and veiled. He is not in the earthquake or hurricane but reveals himself in the light breeze. He is flame, unction, perfume, a dove—insinuating himself in the ordinary. His *kenosis*, or self-emptying, parallels that of the Son. He is the Father of the poor (*Veni pater pauperum*) who makes known the presence of Jesus in every person but especially in the powerless, the weak, the helpless. The very nature of his revelation is self-effacement. Yet outside of him there is no truth. ■

Jerry Ryan *joined the Little Brothers of Jesus in 1959. He lived and worked with them for more than two decades in Europe and South America. He and his family now live in Massachusetts.*

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