

THE LAMP

A CATHOLIC JOURNAL OF LITERATURE, SCIENCE, THE FINE ARTS, ETC.



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Where has the tree gone, that locked
Earth to the sky? What is under my hands,
That I cannot feel?

Larkin

The lines of life are various,
Like roads, and the borders of mountains.
What we are here, a god can complete there,
With harmonies, undying reward, and peace.

Hölderlin

THE PUBLISHER'S DESK

Not long after we completed the Trinity 2023 issue of *THE LAMP*, it became necessary to pull open the windows and slide screens into the sills. The air hung heavy, and the passing of time ceased to matter. (Nic Rowan records the similarly dreamlike pace of Pope Francis's general audiences on page 7.) It is always this way during this season: "All those Sundays after Trinity!" sighs one of Barbara Pym's characters in *Excellent Women*, and, as the weeks trip down that long, scantily marked path to the liturgical year's end, it is hard not to sigh along with her. (On page 20, Sam Kriss treads the primrose path to a much more final end.) Before long, the heat—but more especially the humidity—makes it difficult even to move.

It is at times like these when we are most tempted to daydream. Children gaze up at the clouds and build castles in the air. (Jaspreet Singh Boparai offers staring lessons on page 48.) "I used to wish the Arabian Tales were true," Cardinal Newman wrote of his childhood. "My imagination ran on unknown influences, on magical powers, and talismans." (For more Newman, see Edward Short on page 53.) Adults daydream, too, of course, though their fantasies are often less beautiful (Edmund Waldstein examines Martin Luther's own air castle on page 44). In the worst times, adult daydreams are not dreams at all; they are blank thoughts, the fancies of those "who believe in nothing, not even in atheism, who devote themselves, who sacrifice themselves to nothing." (For the source of this quote, see Michael Hanby on page 32.) In best times, they can do as Vikram Doraiswami writes of P.G. Wodehouse on page 61: "he created endless, magical music that always leaves me thinking that the world is a better place than I thought."

In any case, this little dream is at its conclusion—and I hope it was not an unpleasant one. (If you prefer unpleasant dreams, try page 58 for Lars Erik Schönander on Latin America's troubles.) It did not come from the publisher's desk, nor from the editor's office, but from a kitchen table in Northwest Washington, D.C. Now it is time to go. There is a park behind my house, a church at the top of the street, and the river at the bottom. The sun swallows everything else.

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FEUILLETON



❖ For the third year in a row, *THE LAMP* is sponsoring a Christmas ghost story competition in the spirit of Dickens and M.R. James. When we say “in the spirit of,” we do not have in mind wan pseudo-Edwardian pastiches of James and others; we mean stories that “succeed in causing their readers to feel pleasantly uncomfortable when walking along a solitary road at nightfall, or sitting over a dying fire in the small hours,” stories with contemporary or near-contemporary settings that achieve effects similar to those sought by the genre’s masters.

The winner of this year’s competition will receive one thousand dollars, and his or her story will appear in the Christmas number of the magazine. At least two runners-up will receive three hundred dollars each and have their stories published online during Christmastide. The rules are as follows:

- i. The contest is open to all writers aged eighteen and older. With the exception of *THE LAMP*’s editor, any judges involved will not be aware of the identities of the authors before assessing their work; they will examine entries “blind,” without regard for previous publications, background, etc.
- ii. The prize is for stories no longer than ten thousand words. There is no minimum length.
- iii. Stories, while obviously intended to be frightening, must not contain obscene or indecent material.
- iv. Stories must involve the supernatural, however sensitively portrayed or faintly suggested.
- v. Stories must be written in English.
- vi. Stories must be original, which is to say, they must not have been published previously, either in print or in any public online forum.
- vii. “Simultaneous submissions” are not permitted.
- viii. Only one story per entrant is allowed.
- ix. Entries may be submitted by email to boo@thelampmagazine.com (.doc, .docx, or .rtf only; .PDF attachments will not be read). Biographical information limited to a single sentence should be contained in a separate document.
- x. Entries should be formatted in Times New Roman with single line spacing. Do not include tab stops, indents, headers, footers, page numbers, or illustrations original or otherwise. A title will suffice. Epigraphs are also permitted.
- xi. Submissions must be sent by midnight Eastern Time on October 31, 2023, in order to be eligible.
- xii. Both the winner and at least two runners-up will be notified at a date to be announced later. No other editorial correspondence related to the contest will take place. The decision of the judges is final.

❖ And as they went on their way, they came unto a certain water: and the eunuch said, See, here is water; what doth hinder me to be baptized? And Philip said, First you need to make an appointment with Barb, our parish outreach coordinator. Then, we have a few surveys for you to fill out.

❖ Callista Gingrich, in a recent column, offered this biographical gloss of Sister Jean, the centenarian, basketball-coaching nun:

After teaching briefly in Chicago, Sister Jean taught at Catholic schools in southern California where she would encourage and challenge young people to grow, flourish, and thrive. One of her eighth-grade students was Cardinal Roger Mahony who later became the archbishop of Los Angeles.

We can only hope that the former Ambassador of the United States to the Holy See does not consider Cardinal Mahony’s governance of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles an example of the “lives of purpose and service” which she says Sister Jean inspired in her pupils.

❖ In May, Jeanette Taylor, the alderman of Chicago’s twentieth ward, sent a letter to Blase Cardinal Cupich expressing concerns that the restoration a local landmark, the Shrine of Christ the King, was imperiled as a result of the Archdiocese of Chicago’s implementation of the *motu proprio* *Traditionis custodes*. “I have been deeply concerned by your administration’s decision to suppress the Institute’s ability to operate at the Shrine,” she wrote

in reference to the fact that public Masses have been suspended since last August. “The Institute and the ever-growing congregation of Shrine faithful have been an integral part of the 20th Ward since they first arrived at the prior Cardinal’s invitation in 2003.” Taylor added that although many congregants at the Shrine do not live in the twentieth ward, they are “a vital part of our community,” not the least because their commitment to the church and its physical restoration “demonstrated a remarkable capacity to attract both people and resources into an area with a very small Catholic population.”

Shrine faithful bring welcome dollars to our local coffee shops, restaurants, and small businesses. In addition, the restoration of the Shrine itself has attracted a significant amount of resources to a part of our City which, as you know, is sorely underserved. It has been inspiring for my constituents to see that both individual donors and prestigious organizations like the National Fund for Sacred Places consider their neighborhood worth investing in rather than divesting from. I know they share my concern that the instability introduced into the Institute’s position at the Shrine by your administration’s decision last summer will deter donors in the future and cut the Shrine off from the further millions it needs to be a fully functional and operational building up to City of Chicago code.

Taylor concluded with a request that, for the sake of the neighborhood, the Institute of Christ the King Sovereign Priest be allowed “to operate according to the terms of your original agreement with them.”

❖ From Tobias Smollett’s observations on the shortcomings of the ancient Roman religion:

I cannot help observing, that the antient Romans were still more superstitious than the modern Italians; and that the number of their religious feasts, sacrifices, fasts, and holidays, was even greater than those of the Christian church of Rome. They had their *festi* and *profesti*, their *feriae stativae*, and *conceptivae*, their fixed and moveable feasts; their *esuriales*, or fasting days, and their *precidaneae*, or vigils. The *agonales* were celebrated in January; the *carmenales*, in January and February; the *lupercales* and *matronales*, in March; the *megalesia* in April; the *floralia*, in May; and the *matralia* in June. They had their *saturnalia*, *robigalia*, *venalia*, *vertumnalia*, *fornacalia*, *palilia*, and *laralia*, their *latinae*, their *paganales*, their *sementinae*, their *compitales*, and their *imperativae*; such as the *novemdalia*, instituted by the senate, on

account of a supposed shower of stones. Besides, every private family had a number of *feriae*, kept either by way of rejoicing for some benefit, or mourning for some calamity. Every time it thundered, the day was kept holy. Every ninth day was a holiday, thence called *nundinae quasi novendinae*. There was the *dies denominalis*, which was the fourth of the *kalends*; *nones* and *ides* of every month, over and above the anniversary of every great defeat which the republic had sustained, particularly the *dies alliensis*, or fifteenth of the *kalends* of December, on which the Romans were totally defeated by the Gauls and *Veientes*; as *Lucan* says—*et damnata diu Romanis allia fastis*, and *Allia* in Rome’s Calendar condemn’d. The vast variety of their deities, said to amount to thirty thousand, with their respective rites of adoration, could not fail to introduce such a number of ceremonies, shews, sacrifices, lustrations, and public processions, as must have employed the people almost constantly from one end of the year to the other. This continual dissipation must have been a great enemy to industry; and the people must have been idle and effeminate. I think it would be no difficult matter to prove, that there is very little difference, in point of character, between the antient and modern inhabitants of Rome; and that the great figure which this empire made of old, was not so much owing to the intrinsic virtue of its citizens, as to the barbarism, ignorance, and imbecility of the nations they subdued. Instances of public and private virtue I find as frequent and as striking in the history of other nations, as in the annals of antient Rome; and now that the kingdoms and states of Europe are pretty equally enlightened, and ballanced in the scale of political power, I am of opinion, that if the most fortunate generals of the Roman commonwealth were again placed at the head of the very armies they once commanded, instead of extending their conquests over all Europe and Asia, they would hardly be able to subdue, and retain under their dominion, all the petty republics that subsist in Italy.

❖ The Sisters of Notre Dame cut ties with the college in Ohio that bears their name, explaining that the aging members of the order were no longer able to keep up their duties. Eighty-seven percent of the nuns are seventy or older, and the median age of the order is seventy-eight. (Novices are hard to come by these days.) School administrators, although they expressed sorrow at the decision, noted in a message sent around campus that not much would change. Anyway, the majority of the student body isn’t even Catholic.

BRASS RUBBINGS

STAND GUARD

BY DOMINIC LYNCH

On the near-west side of Chicago, just next to Interstate 90, sits Noble Square, a small, four-sided neighborhood truncated by the highway passing through its eastern flank. Noble Square contains two Catholic parishes: Holy Trinity and Saint Boniface. This is the heart of Polonia, Polish Chicago's historical center of gravity, a neighborhood defined as much as anything by its feuds. Holy Trinity, for instance, was founded in a split from the nearby Saint Stanislaus Kostka in 1872, and was later placed under interdict. (The parish was only restored to communion with the Church after a visit from an apostolic delegate in 1893.) And just down the street is—or, rather, *was*—Saint Boniface, a German parish closed more than thirty years ago.

The trouble, if that is what it was, began with the building itself. Saint Boniface was established in 1865 by German immigrants, but the final church structure—and the heart of Noble Square—was built between 1902 and 1904. The church was designed by Henry J. Schlacks, a well-known Chicago-born ecclesiastical architect of the early twentieth century. It sits on a corner lot and takes a Romanesque, Latin cross form with four bell towers, three rose windows, and a grand arched main entrance. The exterior is composed almost completely of brown brick with few flourishes. Inside, the church contains fifty-foot ceilings with a central transept that terminates in a nave with a wonderful marble backstop behind the altar. Murals and stained glass windows surround the interior perimeter. It is a stately building that makes its presence known through its sheer mass. And because Saint Boniface sits on the corner of Noble and Chestnut streets, it also looks serenely over Eckhart Park, which one of the parish's early pastors helped to establish.

As a work of sacred architecture, Saint Boniface is not even the best building on its street. That prize

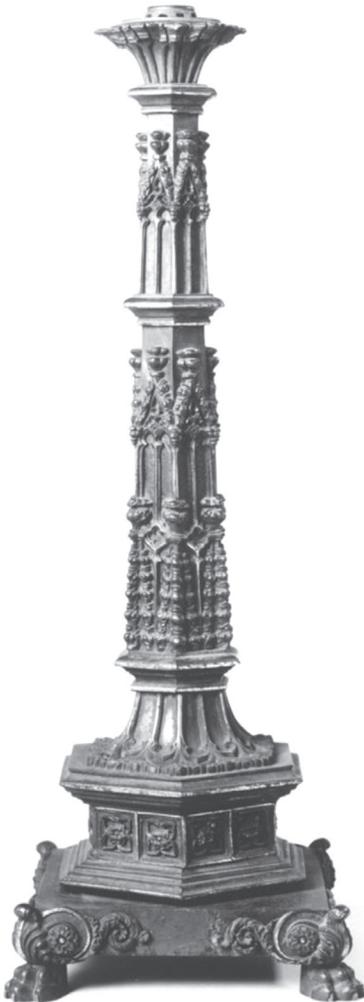
falls to Holy Trinity, which is just fifteen hundred feet north. But for its former parishioners and those who have become attached to it, Saint Boniface is a local treasure. The fact that it was designed during the Romanesque revival sets it apart from Holy Trinity and other nearby churches constructed in the Polish Cathedral style. Romanesque revival has its roots in Germany, and the architecture was in part introduced to the United States by German immigrants as they settled here in the mid-nineteenth century, precisely when Saint Boniface was established. Although “simple” in a superficial sense, Romanesque revival is a well-developed architectural style in its own right. Bulky masonry, wide arches, and piercing towers all contribute to a Romanesque revival building's sense of place and permanence. These attributes naturally work well with geographically significant structures such as churches.

The “new” Saint Boniface was dedicated in 1904, replacing a smaller building near the same site. The parish flourished for eighty years. But in the mid-Eighties, as with so many other churches in Chicago, Saint Boniface faced stagnation and contraction. The school, opened in 1896, closed in 1983, and only seven years later the Archdiocese of Chicago shuttered the parish. (The last Mass was only two days away from what would have been the parish's eighty-sixth anniversary in the new building.) But Saint Boniface never really went away. The parish closed thirty years ago, and was in decline much longer than that. Why, then, has the neighborhood stayed so loyal to its skeleton on the corner of Chestnut and Noble? It's a simple structure in direct competition with other nearby parishes; it's derelict; it's not even really a Catholic church anymore. Still, for three decades neighborhood groups and the city have invested in preserving it, even after the Archdiocese washed its hands.

The answer is bound up in the same story of

decay that all of Chicago underwent in the last century. After the installation of the highways in the 1950s and 1960s (during the era of Mayor Richard J. Daley, the hard-nosed Irish Catholic from the city's South Side), the Noble Square neighborhood became somewhat of an enclave. The highways meant it was suddenly isolated from a significant part of the parishioner base. In a city defined as strongly by its neighborhoods as Chicago is, this was unfortunate. The closing of Saint Boniface only made matters worse. It created a scattering throughout the neighborhood: not only was the parish a literal bedrock because of its physical properties, it had also served as the foundation of the Noble Square community for more than a century. The parish's size and relative longevity allowed multiple generations of families to experience the faith in one place. It allowed them to plant roots, and when the parish closed they held on closely to the physical remains of their spiritual home.

Demographic changes, though not as drastic as elsewhere in the city, further eroded the support Saint Boniface needed in order to survive. The



parishioners who stayed put were, by extension, the most loyal and involved. By the time the parish closed for good, there were enough diehards left to fight for the building's survival. That fight was not easy. Saint Boniface's afterlife has arguably been more eventful than its life as an active church. Almost immediately after its closure, neighborhood groups, preservationists, developers, the city of Chicago, and other denominations fought to restore and repurpose the church building. First, neighbors and other interest groups fought with the Archdiocese. In 1999, ten years after the parish closed, the Archdiocese sought the first of two demolition permits for the property, simultaneously claiming it did not have the funds required for upkeep and that the property also could not be sold. Negotiations between the city, developers, and even a Coptic Church congregation continually hit dead ends, and in 2009 the Archdiocese submitted another demolition permit.

Despite the constant threat of demolition, in 2010 the Saint Boniface property was acquired by the city in a land swap with the Archdiocese and was immediately leased out to a developer with the intention of converting the old church building to a senior living complex. That plan was abandoned a year later due to engineering issues, and more attempts by the developer to restart the project were met with significant financial problems. By 2013, another developer with another senior living plan took over the property, but as before, market conditions were unfavorable. In 2016, another demolition permit was issued but rescinded when a development partnership acquired the property with a plan to build condominiums within the church structure. By late 2017, the development partnership had dissolved, but the church remained in the hands of the developer, who has retained ownership to the present.

Between 2017 and now, the development plan has stalled—again. Saint Boniface is still abandoned and derelict. The most recent attempt is marketed as “Urban Sanctuary. Divine Living.” and is pre-selling condo units, mockups of which can be found on Zillow. According to the frequently updated Saint Boniface community website, the new target completion date is sometime this year. In the meantime, as it has for one hundred and twenty years, Saint Boniface continues to stand guard over its corner.

Dominic Lynch is a writer from Chicago. He publishes the New Chicagoan.



THE JUNGLE

GIVEN OVER TO DREAMING

BY NIC ROWAN

There is a passage midway through *Lord of the World* in which Robert Hugh Benson gleefully describes a pre-apocalyptic Rome as the last backward city in Europe. In that Rome, “cardinals drove again in gilt coaches; the Pope rode on his white mule; the Blessed Sacrament went through the ill-smelling streets with the sound of bells and the light of lanterns.” There the Church has no care for speed, cleanliness, or precision. While the rest of Europe hurtles toward self-destruction, Rome remains as it always was. It is the incarnation of a world given over to dreaming.

The city does often seem to unfold at a dream-like pace, at least for the pilgrim. This is in part because Rome, already densely built up on top of its own ruins, is also rather small; twenty centuries can be covered in the space of an hour. (The walk from the steps of the Ara Pacis, where Augustus established the empire in stone, to the Ara Coeli, where Gibbon conceived of his *Decline and Fall*, is less than twenty minutes.) But it is mainly because when in Rome, as is the case on all pilgrimages, time actually does move differently. What is important in daily life no longer applies, and the things that have taken its place are often confusing, physically taxing, and, for the more reluctant pilgrim, a bit annoying.

This becomes apparent immediately to those who attend one of the pope’s Wednesday general audiences. These audiences have occurred more or less weekly since the mid-1960s, when Paul VI made them a regular fixture of his schedule. Their point is to allow pilgrims from all over the world a chance to catch a glimpse of the pope and receive his blessing. During the winter, they are held indoors in a hall that can seat up to twelve thousand

people. For the rest of the year, they occur in Saint Peter’s Square, and attendance often reaches the tens of thousands.

Because general audiences are so popular among pilgrims—and because seating in the square is limited to a few thousand plastic chairs—the Prefecture of the Papal Household, which runs the weekly event, makes getting in something of a chore. The Vatican’s website does not list any email address to which a pilgrim may send a note requesting tickets. Instead, there is a phone number and a street address. There is no guarantee that the phone will be picked up or that a letter will be answered. Under no circumstances will tickets be emailed or sent through the postal service. If the prefecture grants them—and sometimes it doesn’t—they must be picked up in Saint Peter’s Square the afternoon before the general audience or at 7:00 a.m. on the day it occurs.

Most pilgrims coming from the United States do not attempt to navigate this system. Instead, they contact the Pontifical North American College, which acts as an intercessor for Americans with the prefecture. This means that anyone seeking tickets must undergo a mini-pilgrimage to an office near the Trevi Fountain. Like the Vatican, the college requires that pilgrims pick up their tickets in person the day before the audience. An address is given, but the pilgrim is warned that the way is hard and requires special attention. These are the directions to the ticket office:

From the Trevi Fountain, facing it, look to the left and you will see the store “Giorgios.” Take the street to the left of the store, called Via Delle Muratte. Then, take the first left (after “Gelato Italiano”)

onto Via Delle Vergini (the street sign is difficult to see). Follow Via Delle Vergini until you come to the crossing street Via Dell'Umiltà. Take a left onto Via Dell'Umiltà. On your right you will shortly see a large door with an arch over it, #30 (not 30a or 30b). There is a plaque that says "Casa Santa Maria." That is our office!

Those who make it to Casa Santa Maria soon discover, however, that there is a third, unadvertised option for getting into a general audience. This is the easiest one, and the one that Pope Francis is said to favor: to despair of the bureaucracy and simply walk in without a ticket. The fact that this is even possible comes as a surprise to many pilgrims. Even after a few days in Rome, they are still unused to the fundamentally bitter, disenchanted, and melancholic qualities that underlie the vivacious surface of Italian life.

"But won't they ask us for our tickets?" one American man asked a religious sister working the door on the day before a general audience in late April. "Oh, I don't think so," the nun replied, adding, darkly, "unless you look suspicious." The man looked over at his wife, as if seeking her opinion: "Do we?" The nun glanced at them, scrutinizing their casual shirts and comfortable walking pants. They looked like they were off to hike Old Rag. "I would wear an Oxford shirt, if you have one," she said.

Security in Saint Peter's Square is serious, by Roman standards. There is a line leading to a checkpoint under Bernini's colonnade where guards conduct bag checks and herd people through metal detectors. The line is filled mostly with students and large groups of pilgrims holding rosaries, prayer cards, and other devotional items for the pope to bless. Oftentimes the metal rosary beads set off the detector's sensors, and the impatient guards wave the offender through with a grumble. As the line

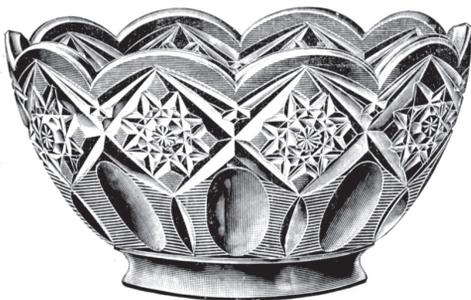
backs up, people unattached to a group circumvent the checkpoint by passing through one of the many unsecured sections of the colonnade. Not that it does them any good. They get seats no better than those who waited.

The audience itself is very much from the mind of Benson. Francis doesn't ride a mule, but he has an almost pretentious disregard for pretense. When he zooms into Saint Peter's Square in his convertible Mercedes G-Wagen—usually about fifteen minutes before the audience is slated to begin—he hardly slows down to wave or smile. The crowds press up against the fences all the same, reaching out for his touch. It is a parade of shoving, picture taking, and crying. Even those who count themselves critics of Francis (and there are always a few in the crowd) are swept up in the general fervor. He is the pope, after all.

It is widely agreed that there are only two ways to get Francis's attention at a general audience. The first is to be a newly married couple. If you wear your wedding clothes, the Swiss Guard will take note and escort you to the front of the square where Francis will give you a special blessing. The second and much more common way is to have a baby on hand. Francis loves children, and when he sees a baby in the crowd he will sometimes request that the Mercedes stop so that he can give the child a kiss. Everyone with a baby hopes that the pope will kiss theirs, and, when Francis passes by, parents hold them aloft such that it appears that a school of babies are swimming above the crowd.

Once Francis ascends to the shaded dais overlooking the square, the crowd's energy subsides. Vatican functionaries take over the proceedings, and read from a lectern in French, Italian, German, English, and whatever other languages are chosen for that day. Their voices echo all the way down the street to the river, where the traffic swallows every sound. Most people do not listen. Instead, they sit on the ground, talk among themselves, or play on their phones. Some watch the big, old televisions set up in the square broadcasting the event. The screens are often pixelated, and sometimes it is difficult to make out exactly what is happening.

Francis speaks, too, usually in Italian, and his voice rarely rises above a whisper. When he gives his blessing, it is as if it is a secret. At length he is helped down from the dais, and the crowds again press up against the fences, awaiting the Mercedes's return. But the audience is over, and the pope is gone. Next week it will be the same. The dream goes on.



HISTORIA ECCLESIASTICA

AENEAS THE POET

BY MINOO DINSHAW

Hidden in a long-suppressed republic lies a particular kingdom of romance. At the Piccolomini Library in Siena, a cultivated, sadly fleeting pope, Pius III, caused the various adventures of his more famous predecessor, namesake, and uncle, Pius II, to be commemorated by the fresco cycle of Pinturicchio. Some of the more unexpected of the elder Pius's experiences predated his ascension to the chair of Saint Peter. The most incongruous of all is Pinturicchio's version of fifteenth-century Scotland. Here a venerably bearded monarch, draped in bolts of gleaming raiment, oversees a jostling, cosmopolitan court. He is receiving a beautiful and very obviously articulate youth, blessed with a confident, mischievously charming demeanor, somewhere between the Archangel Gabriel and the young Saint Nicholas. The prosperous seaport and ostentatious black marble pillar in the background may somewhat overegg 1430s Leith, but the impression given of Enea Silvio Piccolomini early in his unusual career does not seem altogether misleading, even if it grants flatteringly tender years and luscious looks to the prematurely arthritic, toothache-plagued, thirty-year-old envoy. According to Pius II's unique papal memoirs, the *Commentaries*, Pinturicchio's king, James I of Scots, was also, inevitably, less attractive in reality—"small and fat, hot-tempered and greedy for vengeance."

This condensed verdict is quite typical of Pius's prose—ubiquitously connected, simple, personal, candid, perceptive, amusing, implicitly self-aggrandizing, disdainful of violence, all but irresistibly seductive. His own character, so disarmingly set forth, reveals much about the sometimes enigmatic if often alluring Quattrocento. Enea Silvio Piccolomini was born in 1405, into an ancient noble family in the very place in Italy,

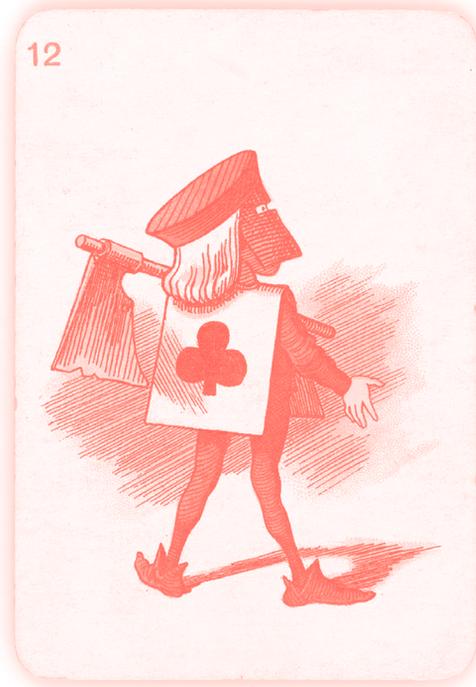
perhaps in Europe, where politics and economics were arranged to the greatest disadvantage of the old feudal aristocracy. During the future pope's entire lifetime the republic of Siena, by 1405 the most faction-ridden and moribund sovereign state on the Italian peninsula, had since the late thirteenth century more or less debarred its nobility from any share in its governance. Enea Silvio's father, Silvio Piccolomini, had been born with just enough cash to afford a nobleman's education, one completely unsuited to the life of agricultural obscurity to which subsequent poverty consigned him; Silvio's wife, Vittoria, née Forteguerra, belonged to the same caste and predicament.

So young Enea Silvio grew up in what had become the last estate left to his family, the hilltop village of Corsignano. However harshly his parents felt their social diminution, their son, realistic and sanguine, had a happy childhood. He loved his native country and cherished memories of his bucolic Corsignanese playmates throughout his long ascent, searching them out, mostly in vain, when he eventually returned to his birthplace as pope. This obviously gifted boy benefited from a miraculous intellectual windfall in 1420, when the university, or more properly *studio*, of Siena took refuge from the plague amid Corsignano's alternating winds and droughts. During his papacy, Pius was to make shrewd use of a highly mobile curia, settling in temporary, provincial, frequently disaffected small seats such as Tivoli, often despite the protests of cautious *condottieri* and soft-living cardinals. "What greater benefits," he argued, "can be offered to any people than those which the Roman Curia brings?" He never forgot the impact of the Sienese *studio*, a far lesser tranche of the great world than was the papal court, upon his own beloved, dusty, gusty, word-deprived birthplace.

Young Piccolomini, though to his family and teachers evidently brilliant, was always more of a jackdaw than an owl. His writings, and even his political principles and rhetoric, suggest interest in history and myth, but he seems to have appreciated the value rather than understood the exact workings of the Greek language. He possessed no facility at all in Greek until the arrival of the *studio*, for his father had been reared at Visconti Milan as a knight with a splash of vernacular poetry, and the parish priest at Corsignano, scarcely proficient even in Latin, did not own a single classical text. Three years after the effervescent passage of the *studio* through the village, the eighteen-year-old Enea Silvio managed to pursue it back to Siena proper. He told himself, or at least his father and the mercantile urban relations with whom he lodged, that he meant to become either a physician or a lawyer, certainly not a priest. As to the impractically noble legacy, or burden, of the penniless house of Piccolomini, Enea Silvio, for all the proudly Virgilian family names he bore, seemed to have left it behind as the encumbrance it then seemed to be. Nor was he ever tempted to win back any dynastic honors through military exertion.

While he seems to have settled on civil law over medicine without much difficulty, Enea Silvio's heart was soon unambiguously wedded to literature, in particular poetry. A great and subtle thinker, capable of distinguishing himself without becoming by any measure an academic recluse, he developed a Latin style in prose and verse that has been described as owing more to talent than technique. But the strictly formal shortcomings of his writing surely help to explain its charm, its ability to project his idiosyncratic personality, powerful, insinuating, but never—to readers and auditors, as opposed to professional and political adversaries—intimidating. To any but the most pedantic reader the Pius of the *Commentaries* is elegant, lucid, and funny, his wit less dry and kinder than that of his obvious canonical forerunner, Julius Caesar.

As for the law, like many another ambitious, hungry student Piccolomini both hated and excelled in it. He was lucky at least to learn from the admirable and inspiring Mariano Sozzini the Elder, from whose descendants were to derive the "Socinian" doctrines. Sozzini, a generous host and a lavishly charitable citizen, demonstrated "some experience of guile, not in practising but in shunning it." Regarding Enea Silvio's eight years as a student at Siena (which included sporadic visits to the even more lively humanist circles of Florence), one aspect of the city and university's atmosphere and affinity was particularly important for



Piccolomini's subsequent career. This was Siena's identity as a Ghibelline, or pro-imperial, city, and the *studio's* foundation by an imperial, rather than papal bull. The student body contained an unusually large northern European contingent, including Englishmen and particularly Germans, which would lend to Enea Silvio crucial imperial connections. More importantly, since the Piccolomini family were Guelf exiles from Siena, pro-papacy and anti-empire by long-held if by then obsolete conviction, Enea Silvio now possessed a sympathy for, and understanding of, both the Italian and the wider European political traditions that would come to serve him (and his successive masters) exceptionally well.

Such ambiguities were doubtless assisted by the young Piccolomini's vernacular reading. In the *Commentaries*, while describing and criticizing the states which did and did not send emissaries to his crusading Congress of Mantua, the pope allows himself the characteristically leisure of digressing on their history, politics, and literature. But when considering the Florentines, the archrivals of his own city, almost his first concern is Dante, "the greatest of them all," whose "magnificent poem with its noble description," he says, "seems to breathe a wisdom almost divine—although in his life he sometimes erred."

If that decorous caveat suggests orthodox Guelf disapproval, then that complication is characteristic—and is also the same mild criticism that Pius publicly applied to his own political trajectory. In

fact as a worldly statesman, Pius's consistent, life-long instincts were substantially similar to those of Dante, and even later Machiavelli, driven by the same purpose that animated all sensitive, intelligent, patriotic Italians: the protection, by skillful diplomacy rather than brute force, of their glorious, various, fractious, yet still just about independent peninsula from the bullying of overweening barbarians, whether French, German, Spanish, or Turkish.

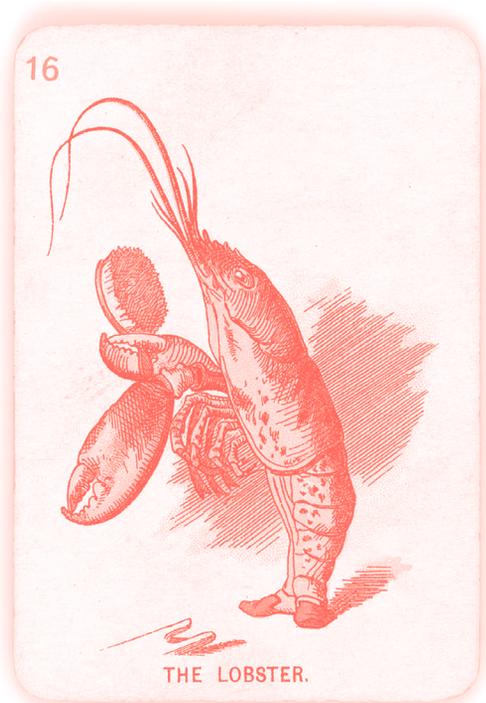
In 1431 Piccolomini made his initial leap upon his *cursus honorum* as portrayed in the first panel of Pinturicchio's fresco sequence—his departure for the Council of Basel as secretary to Domenico Cardinal Capranica. Despite his easy amiability and conciliatory manner, from his scrambling youth to his papal apogee Pius would generally display the same propensity, part cool-headed investment, part passionately chivalric adventure, to take apparent risks and pursue (almost always with ultimate success) distant but glorious rewards. Piccolomini inclined towards his recent education, rather than his family background, in choosing Capranica, a patron out of favor with the papacy and committed to the conciliarist movement that still disputed with the See of Peter for the supreme authority in the Church.

The idea that a general council of the Church could, in extremis, override the will of a pope had an attractive and comprehensible context and lineage, given the disasters wrought upon the Church and Christendom by conflicts between popes and emperors during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the humiliating “Babylonian captivity” of Avignon from 1309 to 1376, and the catastrophe of the Western Schism from 1378 to 1417. It is easy to see why the youthful Piccolomini was drawn to conciliarist theory, if harder to conceive how he endured in practice so many barren years at Basel.

His first employer Capranica, whose revenues as cardinal and bishop of Fermo were withheld by the hostile Venetian Pope Eugenius IV, almost immediately had to dismiss his entire household on the grounds of his own penury, while Enea Silvio with his colleagues scattered all over Basel's fractious assemblage of light-pocketed rebel prelates. A brief stint with the Visconti bishop of Novara followed, introducing Piccolomini to the powerful Milanese sphere where his own father had been uselessly polished, and giving him the chance to shine as an advocate in a squabble over the rectorship of Pavia. Both more significant and sympathetic was Enea Silvio's third patron, Niccolò Cardinal Albergati. In this household were two formative friends, the affectionate Piero di Noceto and the

scholarly Tommaso Parentucelli. One interesting early mission with Albergati was undertaken to the Hermit-Duke of Savoy, Amadeus VIII, a princely recluse in the style of *Love's Labour's Lost* or *As You Like It*, himself already destined to become pope according to his subjects: “fortune-telling women with prophetic spirits, such as the mountains of Savoy abound in.” Throughout the *Commentaries* Pius pays special if sometimes avowedly skeptical attention to visionary predictions about future pontiffs, especially, not unnaturally, himself.

It was as Albergati's messenger that Enea Silvio entered, in 1435, Pinturicchio's second, Scottish panel. Both autobiographer and artist give this episode prominence in some ways out of proportion to its impact on its hero's professional ascent. But Scotland—impoverished, remote, marginal—did command some respect as an exotic destination, and James I of the house of Stewart, though probably the pettiest king in Europe, was still remarkably enough the first of the many potentates with whom Piccolomini was to treat on equal terms. The story, besides leaving Pius II with a slight purchase on Anglophone historical memory, is rousing, piquant, and well-observed. It displays, initially, the novice diplomat's quite endearing mixture of curiosity, timidity, and inexperience. Though the ineptly secret mission upon which he had been dispatched was palpably one to England's disadvantage, Enea Silvio, obviously much more tempted at



this point by the cultural sights of England than the unknown rigours of Scotland, obtained permission to travel to London via Calais from an exalted Basel acquaintance, Henry Cardinal Beaufort, bishop of Winchester, cousin of the boy king Henry VI.

Piccolomini saw and admired the architecture and artifacts of Saint Paul's, Westminster, and Canterbury, but then ran out of luck, being unsurprisingly refused any safe conduct into Scotland. Enea Silvio slipped aboard an unofficial vessel (he had learnt this trick back with Capranica off the Siennese shore), but he was about to learn the difference between the Tyrrhenian and North Seas. Driven by storms almost to Norway, he sealed a characteristically impetuous bargain with the Blessed Virgin. The icy, ten-mile barefoot pilgrimage Enea Silvio made in gratitude after landing in Scotland, from Dunbar to Whitekirk, cost him the reliable use of his legs. Pinturicchio's handsome, heroicized portrayals tactfully conceal that Piccolomini was from this point, both in sober fact and in the often disdainful eyes of contemporaries, "a pauper and a cripple."

Perhaps Enea Silvio accepted his own responsibility for this plight. Though he did not take to the Scots king, his account of the country is by no means jaundiced. It is easy to discern what part of the Scottish population appealed to Piccolomini most:

The men are small of stature and brave, the women white and beautiful and very prone to love. To kiss a woman means less there than to touch her hand in Italy.

Pius unblushingly admits that the next year, after his return, he heard of the birth of a Scottish son, who did not live long. Later in his career Enea Silvio rejoiced at the birth of a second, equally ill-fated, son, to the pretty and cultivated Breton wife of a merchant, encountered at Strasbourg in 1442. One draws the pleasant conclusion that he preferred a Celtic "type" (Pius particularly praised the Bretons in his brief relation of their history marking their attendance at the Congress of Mantua).

His sprightly account of his return journey through northern England depicts Cumbrian men of all ages cowering to hide from possible Scottish raiders, while the women, left unescorted, vainly proposition their startled Siennese guest. Piccolomini left the British Isles after bribing a customs officer, having learnt the hard way to circumvent formal English procedures.

As a travel writer Pius has a vigilant eye for detail that never fails; he wisely accepts that the

wonders of fable are meant to be sought and rumored, not found and captured. Witness his wry account of his search in Scotland for the origins of the barnacle goose, according to myth grown from a tree. The Scots assured him of this report's truth, but regretted that such geese were born only further north in the Orkneys. In fact the Orkneys have geese but very few trees, so it seems probable that the Siennese envoy was being teased; but what is more distinctive is that Pius, recalling the incident in his memoirs, seems more than half in on the joke; as he wryly concludes, "miracles always recede further into the distance."

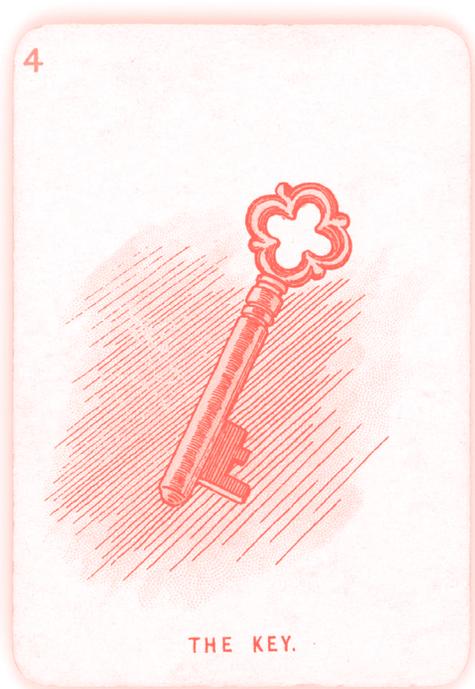
Pinturicchio next takes up the future pope's tale at around the same time as Enea Silvio's Breton love affair, seven years after the voyage to Scotland. Piccolomini, now a polished courtier poet approaching Dante's *mezzo del cammin di nostra vita*, is shown receiving warmer treatment from a far more exalted monarch than James Stewart. The Holy Roman Emperor, Frederick III of Habsburg, crowns him imperial poet laureate, by implication appointing him as far above rival intellectuals as the emperor claimed to stand above lesser monarchs. This fittingly reflects the truth that both the emperor's power and the laureateship's fruits were often notional.

In 1439 Piccolomini had committed a rare false step by agreeing to become the Hermit-Duke of Savoy's secretary, on the latter's election to what would turn out to be the last antipapacy in history. Duke Amadeus, whom Pius claims to have recognized at their first encounter as a suspiciously ostentatious and still all-too-soft-living aristocratic holy man, took the name Felix V but did not live up to its auspicious timbre. Three years later Enea Silvio was desperate to escape the duke, the conciliarists, and Basel. He secured his spectacular getaway to Vienna through his powerful Italo-German friend Kaspar Schlick, imperial chancellor since 1433. Piccolomini had made this amusing and useful acquaintance during the visit of the Emperor Sigismund to Siena in 1432. In gratitude for his promotion into imperial service, Enea Silvio duly composed *The Tale of Two Lovers*, an epistolary roman à clef about a handsome German knight winning a Siennese beauty from her miserly husband. Pius II is still both the only autobiographer and the sole romantic novelist to have obtained the Vicariate of Christ.

After Rome, as the British colonial governor and aesthete Sir Ronald Storrs once put it, there can only be Jerusalem. After winning over the emperor, there remained only, for Piccolomini, the pope, who was unfortunately still Eugenius IV,

a Venetian so irascible he had long warred with his natal republic, and a pontiff whose authority Enea Silvio had spent his entire career to date undermining. Yet the emperor and his poet laureate-cum-factotum recognized both the urgent necessity of reuniting Church, papacy, and empire, and Piccolomini's own unmatched suitability for that perilous and demanding task. So, in 1445, his fortieth year, Enea Silvio headed for Rome, heedless of the (generally accurate) warnings of various Job's counselors that Pope Eugenius "remembered nothing so well as injuries" and "was cruel, and greedy of revenge." All of this is captured by Pinturicchio, whose subject—eternally youthful, angelic hair streaming about him—prostrates himself to kiss the papal buskin. The speech he, and the emperor, sorely needed came to him with its invariable facility:

They have not lied who informed against me. Many are the things that, while I was at Basel, I spoke and wrote and did against you. I deny nothing. And yet it was my intention less to hurt you than to defend God's church. For when I persecuted you I thought I was obeying God. I erred: who would deny it? . . . But when I perceived the errors of [the conciliarists], I confess that I did not at once turn to you. Fearing lest I should slip from error into error, as men trying to avoid Charybdis slip into Scylla, I betook myself to those who were considered neutral, in order that I should not pass from one extreme



to the other without time for deliberation, until no doubt was left me but that the truth resides with you . . . so it came about that, when Caesar desired me to make this journey, I willingly obeyed. . . . Now I stand before you, and because I sinned in ignorance I implore you to forgive me.

Had any of the standard-bearers of later church reform possessed a tongue, a spirit, a mind and art like this, Christianity and Europe might have been spared much hardship. In his defense of intellectual doubt, care, and enquiry as positive virtues, Piccolomini anticipated the theological liberality of William Chillingworth, that bird of paradise among the crows of mid-seventeenth-century England, who once recalled

A moderate Protestant turned a Papist, and the day that he did so (as all things that are done are perfected some day or other) was convicted in conscience, that his yesterday's opinion was an error, and yet thinks he was no schismatic for doing so. . . . The same man afterwards upon better consideration, became a doubting Papist, and of a doubting Papist, a confirmed Protestant. And yet this man thinks himself no more to blame for all these changes; than a traveller, who using all diligence to find the right way to some remote city, where he had never been, (as the party I speak of had never been in Heaven,) did yet mistake it, and after find his error, and amend it.

But unlike the obdurate Puritan captors among whom Chillingworth was to pass his sad last days, Eugenius IV accepted Piccolomini's plea and recognized the value of the man who made it. Within two years, his repentant enemy had helped to negotiate the honorable but total surrender of the conciliarists.

In her recent biography of Donne, Katherine Rundell argues that, *pace* Leslie Stephen and T.S. Eliot, her subject took holy orders willingly rather than as a result of professional disappointment and economic pressure. In the case of Enea Silvio Piccolomini's similarly delayed entry into a fully ecclesiastical career, it is hard not to suspect a lack of ardor more reminiscent of the traditional view on Donne. Unlike Donne, Piccolomini had to choose between major orders and marriage, but in rejecting the latter his motivations were more realistic, fleshly, and, so to speak, Augustinian. His two known sons had been sired during his travels with gleeful inadvertency. Though he made a sincere enough suggestion that his own father should bring up the second boy at Corsignano, the child's mother was still married elsewhere.



Indeed at no point does Piccolomini—who as a highly eligible bachelor would have stood to gain considerably by making a suitable match—seem to have considered marriage at all, unlike his close friend Piero di Noceto, who married, like Donne, for love and against his pecuniary advantage. In literature and even in politics, before and after his election as pope, Pius's imagination was decidedly non-marital. Piccolomini's *Tale of Two Lovers*, like most secular literature of the day, rejoiced in adultery, while Pope Pius once joked to the bishop of Orte that while Florence, "such a beautiful woman," was without a husband (that is, a formal lord) she had instead "a lover," her de facto tyrant Cosimo de' Medici. The life of Piccolomini was itinerant, restless, ascetic in the manner of the traveler if not of the hermit, and never—despite his genuine feeling for the native land and family he very seldom visited—in the least domestic.

So much for marriage, but for celibacy Piccolomini had no more zeal, writing candidly to Piero di Noceto in 1443: "So far I have avoided taking Holy Orders because I fear chastity," a virtue he considered "more becoming to philosophers than poets." Though as pope he would be notably tolerant towards worldly young prelates, overpromoted with corrupt rapidity following dynastic bargains, still in the grip of desires proper to their age (he gently reprimanded but did not punish or cease to favor Callixtus III's nephew Cardinal Rodrigo Borgia, the future Alexander VI), he himself was his own man, of good but penniless lineage, never obliged to play the hypocrite. It seems that for many years

Piccolomini simply preferred to remain "Aeneas the poet" rather than deprive himself (or his Muses, or muses) or to break vows of celibacy he regarded with seriousness not always observed during his era. At the same time his most obvious ambitions, talents, and opportunities were literary, diplomatic, but ultimately clerical.

In the period 1446 to 1447, just past forty, Piccolomini finally acknowledged this and was ordained priest and deacon. A few years earlier he had declared that "as I grow older, secular knowledge neither becomes me nor delights me," but his most indulgent admirers may be forgiven for doubting this statement. Piccolomini had not long before this dismissal completed a satire on life at the imperial court and a Plautine comedy which, like *The Tale of True Lovers*, contained allusions to several acquaintances. His eventual papal name, that blantly Virgilian pun, gracefully self-loving, yet possibly, subtly, genuinely transformed, implied inescapably that Pope Pius could never altogether reject "Aeneas the poet" and perhaps never really wished to do so.

The cantankerous Eugenius IV's successor in 1447 was Nicholas V, once Cardinal Albergati's librarian Tommaso Parentucelli, who took his old employer's Christian name in gratitude. With Piccolomini, though his old friend, he proved a little reserved. Once a priest, Enea Silvio was quickly raised to the see of Trieste, just in time to reassure his mortally ill mother Vittoria about a vision she had once dreamt, that her baby son would grow up to wear a mitre—she had apparently feared all her life it would be the mocking one applied to disgraced criminals. But now he had seriously begun at last, Bishop Piccolomini was not likely to rest content with Trieste's quiet beauties, and the three years he lingered there may have chafed upon him. Much more welcome was his translation in 1450 to Siena, to his own delight but mixed sentiments in the republic, which veered between celebrating him as an eminent countryman and fearing him as a dangerous nobleman. Pinturicchio takes up Enea Silvio's story again not long after this happy elevation, the bishop, at last aged more naturalistically, presenting a demure Portuguese infanta as empress to his former master and almost reliable friend, Frederick III.

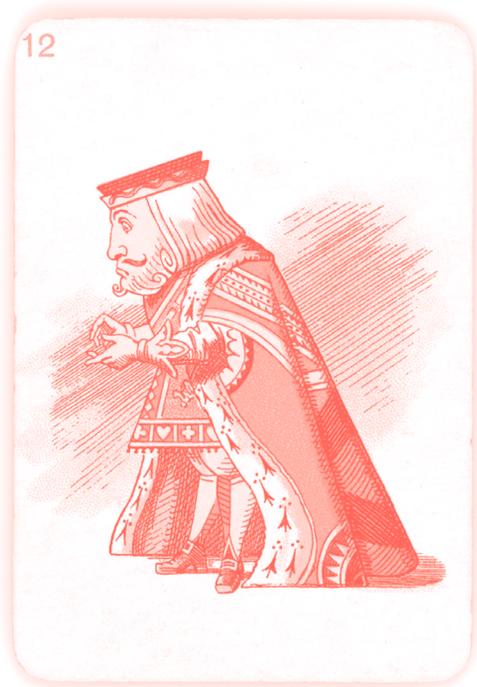
Nicholas V was a great humanist scholar, much greater at least in this regard than his eventual successor Pius. But in Pius's emphatic statement, doubtless as sincerely as strongly held, that Nicholas's otherwise laudable pontificate was marred and shamed by the fall of Constantinople to the Turks in 1453, can perhaps be detected a note of

resentment for Nicholas's refusal to grant him the cardinal's hat that everyone from the emperor down loudly proclaimed Piccolomini deserved. Nicholas's successor, the elderly, stolid, sometimes unintentionally comical, oft-forgotten first Spanish de Borja pope, Callixtus III, was a convinced crusader. That it was Calixtus who admitted Piccolomini, in 1456, to the College of Cardinals (another moment selected for immortality by Pius III and Pinturicchio), and that after his own election Pope Pius proved largely Hispanophile in his princely policy, friendly to the Borgia papal nephews to boot, seems to make more sense than most of this period's involved political horse-trading.

But, in this place and time, such simplicity always misleads. Cardinal de Borja's main rival in the Conclave of 1455 was Bessarion, the greatest living Greek intellectual, the very man most passionately and intrinsically committed to rescuing Constantinople, whose election was thwarted by the French Cardinal Alain of Avignon's resort to Latin xenophobia. Calixtus himself quarreled bitterly—for personal reasons, perhaps, or from pure dynastic envy—with his natal overlords the Spanish House of Aragon, later favored by Pius. At the next conclave of 1458 Bessarion, despairing of his own chances, remarkably and persistently favored a French papacy, only to be overcome by Piccolomini's spectacular appeal to Italian pride and (reasonable) distrust of France.

Bessarion, de Borja, and Piccolomini were all truly devoted to a future Crusade. The French, in fact more lukewarm, exploited with partial success their glorious history and present power as such an enterprise's likeliest sponsor, to pursue what their king truly desired, a tame papacy, an effectively independent Gallican Church, and the crown of Naples for a close kinsman. But when the dance was over, the French were, not for the last time, routed from their Italian pretensions, and Aeneas, poet, "pauper and cripple," was now, at fifty-three, Pius II, responsible for the retrieval of Constantinople. This burdensome triumph was naturally and faithfully recorded by Pinturicchio: a sober rather than climactic scene, its preparatory atmosphere gesturing towards more momentous and essential events ahead.

Enea Silvio Piccolomini, later Pius II, was without dispute an accomplished poet, an intellectually enthusiastic humanist, and a conscientious and competent pope, "pious in fact as well as in name," yet it is in retrospect clear that his particular greatness lies elsewhere. His prose autobiography—boundlessly fascinating, purely individual and historically priceless—constitutes his only timeless



achievement as an author. Though Pinturicchio's fresco cycle and Pius's own extraordinary architectural legacy at Pienza, as his birthplace of Corsignano was somewhat vaingloriously rechristened, associate him with the Renaissance, in his moral principles, his personal character, and his most remarkable and consistent policy, he was an undeniably heroic, if not an ultimately successful, medieval prince and crusader.

Despite age, infirmity, and now a quarrelsome suite of sybaritic, untrustworthy cardinals in his train, Pius, who as his own court poet Campano put it had inherited "travel from his father" and "conquest from his mother," insisted on maintaining a papacy quite as peripatetic as the endlessly mobile career that had eventually won him his tiara. And wherever the unwilling curia paused on its wanderings, Pius devoted his *Commentaries* to intricate, inquisitive, open-minded discussions of history, geography, folklore, and contemporary politics, full of striking descriptions of natural beauty ("the source of the river Sarno, a spring so cold that the darker kinds of wine, when submerged in it, quickly turn white"; the river Merse, "full of eels, small but very white and agreeable to eat"; Monte Cimino, where "people live jammed together like bees in their hives"), poetic grandeur (Civita Castellana, "built, some say, on the site of ancient Veii"), and gossip about bandits (the *condottiere* Jacobo Piccinino, who "shut himself up for several days, living only on wild plums").

Toward Siena herself Pius maintained an affectionate patriotism complicated by politics, and

attempted to support the republic, sometimes despite its own political drift, in Church and state. Pinturicchio's version of the pope's canonization, in 1461, of the fourteenth-century mystic and political agitatrix Saint Catherine of Siena, is somehow the most intimate of all his sequence. In the saint's perfectly preserved corpse the viewer is compelled to see both Pius's earthly mother Vittoria and his mother city, for all he could do doomed to be deprived, ultimately with all the Italian states save the papacy, of her self-government.

It is necessary to recall that Pius's actual contemporary most gifted as a visual artist was not Pinturicchio, his nephew's hireling, whose earliest work postdates his most famous subject, but Piero della Francesca, employed by the pope's ally Federico of Urbino and his enemy Sigismondo Malatesta. But where the genius of Piero—mysterious, rich, allusive—is in keeping with the conventions of the early Renaissance, the plain-spoken, witty, and generous soul of Pius tears the arras back from his own time for the permanent, astonished attention of whoever has cared to look since.

The portraits of states and princes, digressive potted chronicles of nations, detailed natural scenes, and miniature masterpieces of political insight that make Pius's account of his own papacy so delightfully complex to chase are, however, almost all structured around the single underlying theme and purpose of his crusade. Whether or not one agrees with the celebrated verdict of Sir Steven Runciman that the expeditions to Syria and Palestine of the High Middle Ages constituted "the last of the barbarian invasions," it is important to realize that the enterprise urged by Pius II had a completely different character. After the fall of Constantinople the Balkans, central Europe, and even the Italian peninsula were in immediate danger of Turkish invasion and conquest by an aggressively expansionary rival dynasty, people, and faith.

Pius attended keenly to the warnings of the conquered, including the Byzantine prince Thomas Palaeologus and his own local expert among the cardinals, Bessarion, as well as to those states now closest to danger, such as Ragusa and Hungary. Indeed on one occasion he listened too avidly, allowing himself to be defrauded by a confidence trickster with a retinue of "oriental ambassadors," as Pius gamely admits in the *Commentaries*. He realized that the only possible hope lay in concerted Christian unity and action, and he knew all too well how distant an objective that remained. The selfishness of France and the blindness to the threat shown by Venice appalled him. Pius was

determined that he, at least, should do and be seen to have done everything that a pope could do in this dire emergency.

To this end he orchestrated and endured the Congress of Mantua of 1459, where, as he was informed that hostile cardinals complained through their curial spies, "the wine was terrible and so was the food" and "all you could hear was the croaking of frogs." More offensive to the pope's ears were the inadequate excuses, mostly expressed through ambassadors of relatively lowly rank, of the princes of Christendom. Here Pinturicchio shows us the pope overseeing a miscellaneous assemblage of representatives from West and East whose material power is signified by gorgeous raiment and distantly glinting halberds. For all that, there remains in the headmasterly patience of Pius's profile the tactful admission of the congress's all-too-predictable disappointments.

Regarding the crusade, the papal autobiographer and his nephew's chosen painter operate completely in step. When Pius set down in the penultimate book of the *Commentaries* the almost martyrological set piece of his winning round (most of) the cardinals, after every political betrayal and setback, to join him against the odds—foremost among them, with critical symbolism, his French onetime rival for the triple crown, Cardinal Guillaume d'Estouteville—he still maintained some hope of mounting a substantial Crusade. Yet his reader feels that the nearly sixty-year-old pope, as much as the later painter, must have by now become aware of his true historical role, that of a Christian and chivalric hero in sacralized defeat.

Pius occupies the exact center of Pinturicchio's panel, floating aloft, in a barely earthly apotheosis, on his papal chair (its bearers by custom several lords of the Romagna, amongst whom a disgruntled Sigismondo Malatesta had once been numbered). The fleet in the Anconese background bravely asserts that his worldly power is in proportion to his moral victory. In fact Pius largely awaited it in vain, the Venetians ("What care fishes for justice?" as the pope asks bitterly in the *Commentaries*) letting him down as ever, before his death amidst a tiny and diminishing mercenary army in 1464. But this always captivating figure, "Aeneas the poet," who became Pope Pius, "ready to offer his life for his sheep," should be remembered as both the most intimately knowable and altruistically motivated of crusading monarchs.

Minoo Dinshaw is the author of Outlandish Knight: The Byzantine Life of Steven Runciman and a contributing editor at THE LAMP.

APOLOGIA

APOCRYPHA NOW

BY J.C. MILLER

I had never been angry at a book before I read *The Da Vinci Code*. I am no biblical scholar, and it was clear to me that Dan Brown is not either. The book was overtly blasphemous, and, worse, it was popular. It really bothered me how many people liked it. (A thriller based on the Gnostic Gospels isn't exactly my idea of entertainment anyway.) But my outrage soon gave way to reflection, and the novel prompted me to think for the first time about how the real Bible actually came to be. In its way, *The Da Vinci Code* is what led me to the Catholic Church.

I was raised in a Protestant family who moved freely among churches and denominations and non-denominations. We always believed in God,

and we believed in the Bible and read it. We said some prayers now and then. We lived in a particularly religious area: western Michigan is the region's Bible Belt. We were less religious than the region but at least as religious as the average American. We did not go to church every Sunday, but we went to church many Sundays, and there were certainly times where we did go to church every or almost every Sunday. When I became an adult, moved out, and went off to college, I was not going to church frequently. But I still had my own faith, praying most frequently when I found myself in some kind of trouble. I did go to church in college at least a few times. I tried various local Protestant churches in the East Lansing area but remained at none. I read some theology. I also continued to read the Bible, regularly and without commentary. But I didn't know the history of the Bible. I had never heard of Saint Jerome, and I wouldn't have recognized the word "Vulgate." I just knew the Bible was the Word of God.

When I read *The Da Vinci Code*, which was inescapable for several years, I began to think about its treatment of texts outside the canon of Scripture and the possibility of other Bibles. I knew that Catholics had "added" some books to theirs—the mysterious Apocrypha, which I assumed was pretty much just Maccabees. I didn't think any of it was theologically significant and assumed that Catholics' divergent views came from things popes had declared rather than from their understanding of Scripture. Messing with the Bible was clearly a bad idea; the last page of it had a stern warning about adding to or subtracting from the book. I was ignorant without knowing it and had a quintessentially American view: the Bible is the Bible,

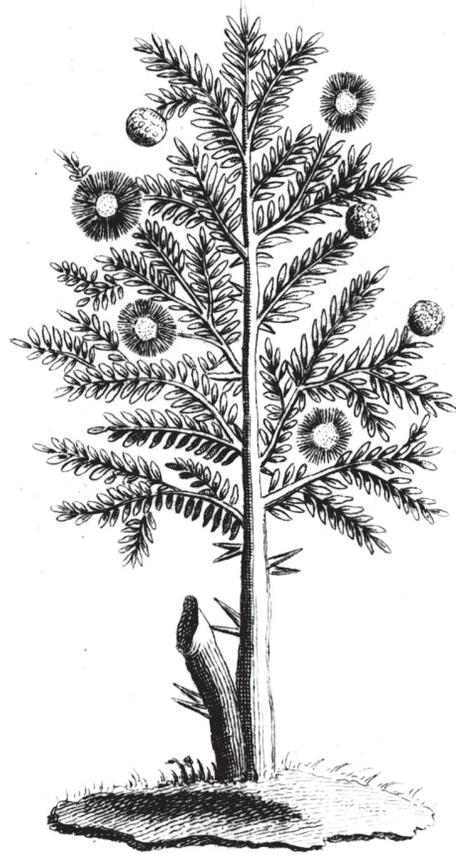


and we all know that, and we all know what's in the Bible. But Dan Brown of all people made me wonder: who gets to decide?

I had faith that the people who decided and compiled the Bible were right and guided by the Holy Spirit. The Gnostics were out, and for good reason. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were inspired by the Holy Spirit. But the Holy Spirit had acted through some men to protect the canon of Scripture so that we could have it two millennia later. Once I started thinking about this, and read about the context, I started to see a problem. If the Bible was inspired by the Holy Spirit, then people who preserved it down through the ages were guided by the Holy Spirit too. This seemed a necessary precondition to biblical Christianity—that the Bible we hold is right and true. But for this to be the case, the Catholic Church must have been inspired and protected by the Holy Spirit to preserve the Bible inerrant and intact for more than a thousand years only to deliver it . . . to Martin Luther? I was simultaneously forced to believe that God had established the Catholic Church to pass on the Bible *and* that everything the Church had passed on was false. I did not yet know the phrase Sacred Tradition, but I somehow arrived independently at the conclusion that if the Holy Spirit had guided these men to preserve, translate, and transmit the Bible to me, maybe the things they said about it were worth paying attention to. If you don't accept that someone—some institution—has been entrusted by God to tell us that the Gospels were true and the Gnostics were false, what makes *The Da Vinci Code* wrong? The only candidate for that someone to speak this truth was the Church.

I shouldn't give Dan Brown too much credit. The Catholics I would get to know during that time in my life certainly had a role. In my childhood, I didn't really know many Catholics or know much about them. My mom's family had been Catholic, but they had abandoned the faith before I was born. My teenage years were spent in Hudsonville, Michigan, a town full of Dutch Reformed Calvinists. There is one Catholic parish, and there were a few Catholics in my high school, but they did not figure very much into my experience.

My first real exposure to the Church came when I interned at a think tank whose staff, a mix of Catholics and Protestants, often discussed theology. The think tank's founder was a priest and my supervisor would later be ordained as well. The latter once told me that I would either become Catholic or nothing. I thought that was silly at the time. But somehow over the course of a few years, I started to think that *maybe* the Church was



right. Not just right about one topic, but maybe just plain right—about everything.

Once I became open to the idea, it was hard to stop seeing things in this light. I started to find clues—like Dan Brown's invincibly ignorant Robert Langdon—particularly when reading the Bible. The most arresting of these was not, as some readers might guess, Our Lord's discourse on the Bread of Life or the giving of the guys to Peter, but the account in Acts of the Council of Jerusalem. The first Christians were divided about the question of the Mosaic law; Jewish Christians insisted that Gentile converts needed to become Jews, that males should undergo circumcision, and that dietary and other customs should be observed. Paul disagreed. But what do we see him do? Instead of founding his own church and attempting to win adherents to his position as the leader of a new breakaway sect, Paul sets off for Jerusalem, where the Church's leaders debate these issues, and he finds himself confronting Peter. But even in the midst of their dispute, Paul does not break off from Peter or his fellows; he reasons with them in a loving and charitable manner. I found what follows even more moving. When the council adopts most of Paul's positions—but not all of them—he accepts the decision and insists that Christians must avoid eating

food sacrificed to idols. He accepts the teaching of the universal Church and Peter as the head of the Church. This was clearly what the Church was supposed to look like: united, under a tangible authority in which debate is possible without schism or recriminations. And this sure looked a lot more like the Catholic Church than the Protestants.

When I decided to become Catholic, mine was at first a purely intellectual decision. I just decided that the Catholic Church was right, but I didn't know how one actually became Catholic. And I wasn't necessarily on board with personally *doing* anything Catholic. I was going to be Catholic in the sense that I was going to cheer for the Catholics and at least give Church teaching the benefit of the doubt. My old coworkers, though, pointed out that I needed to start going to Mass, which seemed quite strange to me. Nor did I begin doing so until I had entered law school. There, my roommate (who was a practicing Catholic) went every Sunday. He reported to me that Mass at Christ the King, the regional charismatic parish where he had gone on his first Sunday, was horrible. He told me that the homily was extra long—like a Protestant service—and the music was upbeat, energetic, and had a guitar—also like a Protestant service. It sounded like a



great option for me. I went the next weekend and found myself signed up for R.C.I.A.

Christ the King was the perfect parish for me to convert in. My R.C.I.A. group was large and full of people like myself—would-be converts wanting to learn about the faith rather than someone checking a box to get a sacrament. Our group leader had a Ph.D. in history and was in the process of being ordained to the diaconate. The pastor was himself a convert with an amazing story—the dark-and-stormy-night kind of conversion story—and was willing to tackle the big issues from the pulpit. The R.C.I.A. process got into real material and answered tough questions. Learning about the saints was a particular treat. For my confirmation I chose Saint Alban, the first recorded British martyr, who only took the place of a priest to save his life but also converted his own executioner by his example.

My roommate went to Mass every Sunday with me (the parish grew on him) and stood with me at the Easter Vigil as my sponsor. He was a great inspiration, though no one is perfect. At the Vigil, he forgot my confirmation name and whispered to me asking my saint at the last minute. Mishearing “Alban,” he answered the priest, “Almond.” I was confirmed in the name of Saint Almond, with the priest giving a skeptical look that matched my concern that this is not a real saint's name. But it turns out Saint Almond is another British martyr, though not the one I had picked. I still don't know who my patron saint is.

Alban or Almond, the conversion clearly took. My six children have been baptized into the Holy Catholic Church, and I now find myself thinking a great deal about how to raise them in the faith. I know that mine is not a particularly exciting conversion story. Sometimes I envy people who have a great road-to-Damascus moment that turns their lives around. For me, it was a gradual recognition of the truth and the understanding of authority to speak that truth, a truth that eventually pushed me to action. If there is any lesson from it, it is that quiet encouragement and engagement both matter. You never know whether the person you're arguing with is slowly moving in the right direction and agreeing with you. It is also, I suppose, a testament to the mystery of providence and God's ability to bring good forth out of evil. If He can redeem us with the horror of the Cross, a teenager can be led to Him by one of the worst novels ever written.

J.C. Miller is an attorney, author, and father living in Michigan.

SHADOW ON THE SUN

BY SAM KRISS



It took Jason a little under five minutes to completely suss me out. Jason was a real estate agent for The Villages, the largest retirement community in the world. It was his job to sell houses in Florida to old people, and he appeared to be very good at his job. He was about my age, somewhere in his early thirties, but he probably made ten times my income. In fact, this was one of the first things Jason told me when I got in his enormous Toyota pickup. He apologized for being late, and said he'd been up until dawn the previous night playing cards. He'd won big. He'd won twice what I make in a year.

There are a few retirement communities in the U.K.: in any English seaside town you might stumble across a plasticky apartment building or a cluster of small, neat cottages that have been set aside for the old. When you've been alive for a while, your skin starts to hang slack. You develop small scratchy patches on your face, and your eyes turn the color of expired cream. Your bones go brittle. Your mind goes dull. Nobody wants to look at you too closely, in case they see where they're headed. The world is loud and confusing, and you've long stopped trying to make sense of it, so you sell your home and come here. Here, by the seaside, there might be a little square of AstroTurf where blue-haired old dears play a gentle game of bowls under the heavy spitting sky. Here, it's bingo night every Thursday, and on Friday, classic films. On Saturday, the nurses will herd you into a minibus to the local spa. You can fade until you vanish altogether, safely out of everyone else's sight.

The Villages is something else.

Jason's Toyota purred down the highway, past rows of identical pastel-colored bungalows and

retail parks. Scholl Foot Care. Urology Associates. Cracker Barrel. Jason told me about The Villages. He explained that The Villages occupies around eighty square miles of central Florida, which makes it substantially larger than the island of Manhattan. It's home to some one hundred forty thousand happy, active retired people, with more constantly arriving: this is the single fastest-growing metro area in the entire United States. It contains nine state-of-the-art hospitals, four gun ranges, two one-thousand-seat concert venues, and eight vast churches. It has more than fifty free golf courses, enough for you to play on a different range every week of the year. Ninety swimming pools, not counting the ones in people's backyards. Twenty of them are Olympic-sized. Something like ten million square feet of commercial space, including a dozen sprawling shopping centers and over one hundred restaurants and bars. Residents also have their pick of around three thousand community social clubs. The Acting Out Theater Club produces its own original musicals. The Red Sox Nation Club has more members in The Villages than it does in Boston. The MAGA Club has hosted members of the Trump family. You can sail or scuba dive or line dance or learn the ukulele or discuss Ayn Rand. The Villages has its own radio station (W.V.L.G.), TV channel (V.N.N.), and newspaper (the *Daily Sun*), and somewhere north of eighty thousand homes. Jason couldn't give me a more precise figure because it's constantly changing. The Villages builds four hundred new houses every month.

I tapped away at my phone, noting all this down. Jason started telling me about the roads. The east-west roads, he said, the major ones, were mostly retail. The north-south roads, like the one we were about to join, were purely about getting people

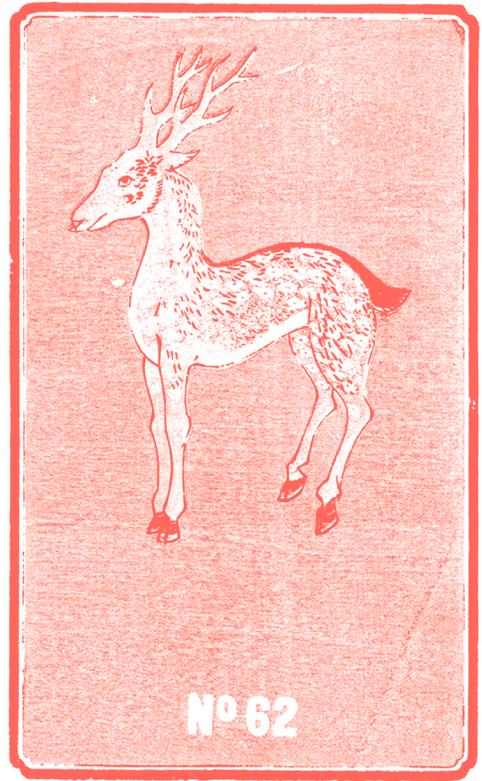
from one place to another. “If you really need to travel,” he said, “you’ll be taking these. It’s like, it’s like . . .” “Like arteries,” I suggested. Jason slapped his steering wheel. “Yes! Exactly! Like arteries. Like the whole place is a human body. That’s good, bro. You’re pretty good with words.” It sounded like a compliment. But he said it like an accusation.

I was in The Villages because I’d been commissioned to write the piece you’re reading now, but I didn’t want Jason to know that. A few days previously, I’d phoned The Villages’ real estate division and asked if they had someone who could show me around. Florida developers are a fairly cagey lot, so I’d decided that telling them the truth—“Hi! I’m interested in excoriating your fiefdom!”—was probably a non-starter. So I lied. I gave them a fake name, and even made an email account to go with it. I was going undercover. I was doing serious journalism. I said that my mother was interested in maybe retiring to Florida, and since I’d be in the area anyway she’d asked if I could head down to The Villages and check it out on her behalf. To make sure I didn’t slip up, I’d concocted an elaborate backstory in my head. In this version of reality, my parents were separated but not divorced. In this version, my mother was a very different person. She’d kept the house, but it was too big for her to be living in all by herself. And anyway, she wanted to get out of London. That great calcified pile of limestone and birdshit, with its miserable skies and its miserable economy: the whole city felt like her failed marriage writ large. She had a sister in Florida, nephews and nieces. They seemed happy there. So why not? Why not line dance and learn the ukulele? Why not enjoy some nice weather? Why not be happy too?

This was the story I’d given Jason on the phone. Now he was explaining how property ownership in The Villages worked. Something about a thirty-year bond. I asked what the bond paid for, and Jason gave me a sudden sly look. “You know what I reckon?” he said. “I reckon you’re a writer. I reckon you’ve come here to write something about this place.” “I’m not,” I said, pathetically. “Doesn’t matter to me,” said Jason. “Whoever you are, anything you write about me is just gonna make more people want to come here. I *want* attention. I *want* people to know what we’re doing. That’s great news. That’s only gonna be good for business. So let’s say you are who you say you are. Sure. Look, I believe you. You’re just looking for a place for your mom.”

He was right about one thing. This is an attempt to prove him wrong about the other.

Jason had a good reason to be suspicious, because I am not the first interested outsider who



took the trip down to Florida to gawp at The Villages. Indie documentarians, in particular; there seems to be a new film about it every year. It’s good cinema. All those endless pastel suburbs. Those wrinkled bodies in the swimming pools, synchronized swimming. Happy people golfing over sad eerie music. Essayists love the place too: this perfect manicured Disneyland, just waiting for some millennial to dig down into its festering Lynchian heart of shadow. The right-wing politics, or the sex. Everyone knows that The Villages has the highest rate of S.T.D.s in the United States (it doesn’t), that residents attach colored loofahs to their golf carts to signal their wife-swapping preferences (unlikely), and that there’s a vast black market in Viagra (this one’s true). I was warned that I’d probably be pounced upon by some lubricious sexagenarian. (No such luck.) People treat it like a curio, a weird Floridian quirk, which it is: this city populated exclusively by the retired. But the real story goes deeper, and The Villages is not just a bubble. Its residents might never have to leave their little utopia, but it is deeply, deeply enmeshed in the workings of the world.

This wet tract of bungalows is the unacknowledged capital of Planet Earth. Whoever you are, and whatever you do, if you work then you are probably working for The Villages. In Jharkhand in India, there are open mines where children, some

as young as five, squat in the toxic dust and dig out nuggets of coal with rusted shovels. They don't know it, but they are working for The Villages. In Brazil, there are sweatshops where women trafficked from Bolivia and Peru sit in silence for twelve hours a day, stitching clothes: they are also working for The Villages. In New York, there are finance guys who snort cocaine and move billions around like chess pieces and they might think they run the world, but the sole purpose of everything they do is a two-for-one frozen margarita night in The Villages. Container ships cross oceans for The Villages. Artillery shells pound the muddy ruins for The Villages. The arms companies might prolong the world's wars to boost their profits, but the arms companies are all secret subsidiaries of The Villages. And so am I. What I learned in The Villages is that there is *nothing outside The Villages*. In some way I can't quite see, I am also a minor node in its great global empire.

I'm exaggerating. But only very slightly.

Retirement is not just big business; in a sense, retirement *is* business, full stop. The U.S. has a total G.D.P. of twenty-three trillion dollars, but the assets of all American pension funds are nearly fifty percent larger: thirty-five trillion, a monstrous pile of money accumulated for the sole purpose of allowing Americans to have a nice time when they retire. These pension funds are the biggest players in the financial markets and the biggest investors in every level of the economy. The richest people in the world—the richest *countries* in the world—are utterly dwarfed by the sheer fiscal mass of millions upon millions of ordinary middle-class Americans' 401(k)s. When we talk about corporate profits, or the capitalist class, or even capital itself, we are talking about pensions.

In the 1980s, when the pension funds first started taking over the economy, this led to some strange outcomes. Often, an industrial firm would be bought up by its own pension fund, who would then decide that the firm was hopelessly unprofitable, sell off all its assets, and fire all the workers. Today, things are calmer. The United States has quietly transitioned into a command economy. Between them, the three biggest asset management firms—Vanguard, BlackRock, and State Street—own almost the entire corporate sector. (They also own an increasingly large chunk of the residential real estate market.) They are strangely unconcerned by the profitability of any individual firm they invest in, since they also own a significant slice of all its competitors. Instead, they're content to gently guide the entire system of global capitalism towards a maximum general return on investment.

In an era of stagnant growth, this requires total control: every industry integrated, every possible node accounted for. (During the COVID pandemic, for instance, BlackRock instructed the major pharmaceutical corporations to collaborate on vaccine research. The asset managers didn't care whether Pfizer or Johnson & Johnson or Merck patented a vaccine first; they owned all three.) These firms manage investments for individual billionaires, sovereign wealth funds, and central banks. But most of all, they manage pensions.

Once, not so long ago, old people who couldn't work were either looked after by their families, or not at all—and that “not at all” was a very frightening prospect. A century ago, fifty-eight percent of American men over sixty-five still participated in the labor market: it was either that, or burden their children, or starve. This was not a very good state of affairs. But what we have now instead is deeply strange: mass consumer pensions have turned our entire adulthood into a preamble to old age. You work for three, four, five decades—all so you can enjoy those few, brief, useless years between retirement and death. Not just that: everyone in the world is now working to increase the value of your pension, even the coal miners in India and the garment-sewers in Brazil and all the other billions without any pensions of their own. The entire global economy is now a machine for producing satisfied retirees. Capitalism, which blundered about the world for four hundred years without any ends other than itself, has now found its purpose.

The job of The Villages is to be that purpose. It is here to soak up as much of this extraordinary bounty as possible: to ensure that a significant slice of an entire planet's worth of economic activity ends up in central Florida. They do this by selling the thing that all these people have been working for all their lives: perfect leisure before you die. Like the pyramids for the Egyptians, or the moai for Rapa Nui, The Villages is the final output of our society; the thing all our collective efforts have come together to produce. Our monument. It is a place of infinite, affordable delight. I have been there. It is the worst place I have ever been.

I met my first Villager before I even arrived. Mike was the only other passenger in my shuttle from Orlando Airport, and he did not look how I'd imagined someone who lived in a retirement community would look. Mike's hair was jet black, and he had substantially more of it than I do, even if he'd sheared most of it into a crew cut, black strands fuzzing down the back of his neck. He wore wraparound Oakley sunglasses and a goatee

pressed deep into the folds of his face. An upturned nose; black eyes. And unlike most people who live in a retirement community, Mike was not actually retired.

Mike worked as an engineer for Caterpillar; he kept saying that he'd worked there for thirty-five years. I didn't ask his age, but I totted up the numbers in my head: assuming he'd gotten the job right after he left the Army, that would make him fifty-seven years old, just above The Villages' minimum. He said that most of the people he met in The Villages assumed that he and his wife were there visiting one of their parents. He'd just flown in from a work trip: his job took him all over the world. Mike worked on mining equipment; he was present everywhere vast machines tear into the bowels of the earth. Once Mike had been sent to a diamond mine in Russia, north of the Arctic Circle. This inhumanly cold desert where your tears freeze to ice crystals in the corners of your eyes. The miners had to wear oxygen masks. They had blasted an enormous circular pit into the ground there, nearly half a mile wide. They worked all through the winter, even when the sun doesn't come up for weeks on end. Searching for diamonds in the dark.

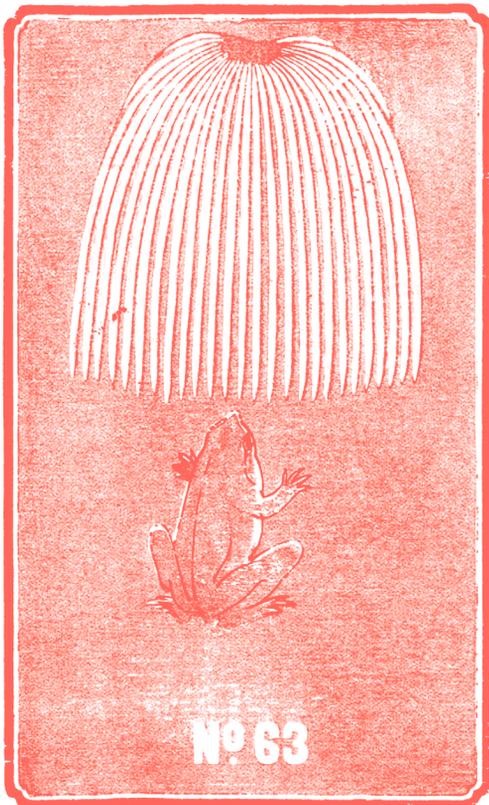
What made Mike decide to move to The Villages was another business trip, this one much closer to

home. He'd been sent out to Jackson, Mississippi, and the client had insisted on providing him with a car and a driver throughout his stay. If he drove around by himself, they said, he'd be carjacked and murdered. Mike knew that America was falling apart. He said that in New York, they'd stopped prosecuting crime altogether. You could just walk into a store and steal anything you wanted, and the cops couldn't do a thing. In Chicago, which is where he was from, things were even worse. The whole show, he said, was being run by a bunch of crooks. Five of the last eight Illinois governors, he said, were in prison. (In fact it's four of the last ten, with two others acquitted.) The only laws they still enforced had to do with gun control. He started talking about a new law on magazine capacity they'd introduced somewhere, which I didn't fully understand, but the upshot was that it meant that anyone who owned a pistol with a magazine—and Mike owned several—had to register it with the state authorities. This, he said, was the beginning of the New World Order.

With the rest of the country in a state of lawlessness and collapse, Mike and his wife had moved to The Villages. "It's clean," he said, "and it's safe. What more do you need?" He liked to hang out at the bars, and he was glad that his wife preferred to stay at home: "There's some hotties around for sure." He didn't mean the residents. He meant their college-aged grandkids, come to visit for the holidays. Admittedly, he had some problems with the place. "They need more restaurants," he said, "but nobody wants to deal with The Villages because they've got their hands in everybody's pockets. They want to take eighteen percent of your profits." But it was worth the lack of restaurants to live somewhere clean and safe with hotties around. He liked Ron DeSantis and thought that Florida was generally well run. But Mike's prognosis for the rest of the country was bleak. "It's gonna turn into martial law one of these days," he said. "My kids are doing okay, but by the time grandkids come around, I don't know how society's gonna be." The Villages was his holdout against a world gone mad. A holdout with golf.

Then he described a chain of gas stations in Texas called Buc-ee's. "They have a beef jerky bar that's forty-five feet long," he said. "It is fantastic. Every time I go there I spend about a hundred fifty dollars on beef jerky."

We were veering through the tangle of freeways around Orlando. Outside, Florida looked entirely empty. Vast rolling plains with nothing in them. Here and there, in the middle of this nothing, there'd be a tiny collection of low houses

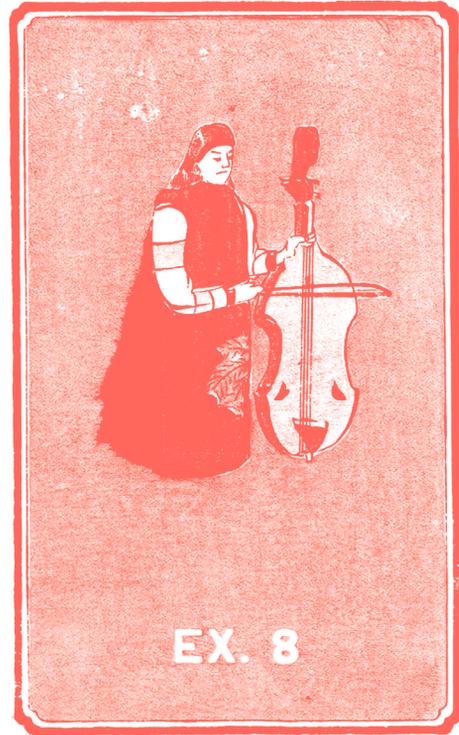


with pitched roofs and swimming pools out back. Like a fragment of suburbia that had come loose in the wilderness. Sometimes the thin layer of turf cracked and you could see what lay underneath, which was sugary yellow sand. Two million years ago, this entire peninsula was underwater, and these sands were the seafloor. Before long, they might be submerged once again.

Our driver was called Gabriel, and he did not live in The Villages. He lived in one of the smaller, shabbier towns that have yet to be gobbled up by the development, where families can still live together. A dormitory for the armies of younger workers who service the retiree utopia: the people who staff the tills and trim the lawns and flip the burgers and perform the bypass operations and wipe up the piss and teach the aquarobics classes and assemble the houses and fix the plumbing and drive the shuttle bus to and from Orlando Airport, two hours each way. He liked it there, but he preferred it in The Villages. That's where he went on a Saturday night. He agreed with Mike that there were some hotties around, but he added that not all of them were people's grandkids. Some of them were prostitutes, and Gabriel had discovered that the prostitutes were not interested in him. They'd come to siphon off someone's pension.

Another car pulled in front of him on the freeway without indicating, and Gabriel swore. "People here are dumb, man," he said. "I went to high school in Florida and these are the dumbest people in the world. I failed all my classes, but I still got the highest score in the state of Florida in the state tests. It was in the newspapers, the governor even came over to give me a medal. You know why I got the highest score? Cuz it was the same tests I was taking in fourth grade. That's how dumb people are here." He stared at the road for a few seconds. Dumb Floridians speeding around in their dumb cars, in this dumb landscape under a bright dumb sky. "I was a horrible kid," he said.

Unlike Mike, Gabriel had noticed that I wasn't from round these parts. He told me that he had absolutely no desire to ever go to England, because of what we were doing to the kids. "They're kidnapping the kids over there," he said, "they're just grabbing them up off the street and cutting them open." I said that I was pretty sure this wasn't happening. Gabriel shook his head with some force. "I've seen videos," he said. "They take the kids, they cut them open for body parts. You can buy a kid's heart in England. It's the Russians, or the Ukrainians, the Russians or someone are cutting up kids for body parts. The Albanians. It's all on video. I've watched dozens of videos of them cutting kids



open. They're still awake when it happens, man. Don't you go on the deep web?" He had one more observation about my country. "I hear you're trying to get rid of the Indians over there," he said, "the same way we're trying to get rid of the blacks." He laughed. Gabriel's father was Chinese from Guyana, and his mother was Jamaican. He was, by American standards at least, black.

For my stay in The Villages, I would be holed up in the Comfort Suites near Spanish Springs. According to the official history, Spanish Springs was the first part of The Villages to be completed, although strictly speaking this isn't true. The Villages was the work of one Harold Schwartz, one of the great mediocre American salesmen. Schwartz grew up, like quite a few of his eventual clients, in the Midwest. His grandparents had come over from Hungary to live in a different kind of poverty. They couldn't afford to feed their family, so Harold's father and his two uncles ended up being abandoned to an orphanage. Harold grew up without grandparents. His father ended up as a tailor, and not a particularly successful one. The entire family had to squeeze into a tiny, humid tenement on the South Side of Chicago. When Harold turned eighteen, his father put him to work as a traveling salesman, hawking suits. He'd wanted to be a violinist. Harold was not a natural: a few years later, in the midst of the Great Depression, his father's business collapsed.

But there are ways of selling without selling. The young Harold Schwartz went into the mail-order business: distanced, touchless. He sold vitamin pills and cuckoo clocks. He wrote all the ad copy himself, and handled all the shipping from his father's tenement. He married a non-Jewish woman who'd grown up in the same building and moved her in with his family. They had one son together, and then fairly promptly divorced. After the war, Harold bought up radio stations just south of the Mexican border, not-quite-legally broadcasting to Texas and California. Their purpose was to advertise his mail-order vitamins and tat. And eventually, he started selling land.

The first incarnation of The Villages was Orange Blossom Gardens, a patch of swampland just north of U.S. Highway 27. Schwartz bought the land at one-hundred fifty dollars an acre, parceled it out into quarter-acre lots, and sold them off sight unseen through his mail-order catalogs: two hundred fifty-seven dollars each. The idea was that you would buy a mobile home, park it on your patch of swamp, and live there for the rest of your life. Over the first decade, he sold barely a few hundred plots. In 1983, Orange Blossom Gardens was a sad shamble of trailers with a few shuffleboard courts and a nine-hole golf course. That year, Schwartz brought in his son, H. Gary Morse, as a business partner. Morse had been raised by his mother in Michigan, and ended up taking his stepfather's name. He was also an immeasurably better salesman than his stepfather. I wonder what kind of subtle Oedipal play was at work when Morse, who had first wiped out his father's name, then decided to bulldoze everything his father had built and start again. He got rid of the trailers and started putting up houses: lots of houses. He wasn't selling a place, but a dream. The wonderful life you always deserved—which meant building Spanish Springs. And then, right in the center, he put up a statue to Harold Schwartz, who had sat on this prime Florida real estate for decades and not known what to do.

From the ground, Spanish Springs looks like the center of a charming old mission-colonial town. The streets are tidy and walkable. The buildings have shutters and colonnades, and in the warm evenings the stucco glows. It looks like a nice place to live. In the middle there's a plaza with a bandstand, and every night of the year a live band covers the oldies and the Villagers gather there to dance. Local legend says that Juan Ponce de León really did discover the fabled Fountain of Youth in Florida, and he found it here: it's the same fountain that gurgles around the statue of Harold Schwartz. A few brass plaques describe its more recent

history. One building was once, back in 1872, the law offices of Allan & Storms: "The law firm's habit of successfully representing small ranchers against powerful local cattle interests led Robert Allan's uncle, the prominent cattleman Robert McCall, to lament that having a lawyer in the family was bad enough, but having an honest lawyer in the family was nothing short of humiliating."

A small town with a rich, quirky history. The Villagers, these fit and socially active old people, thronged its streets. They ducked into shops and bars. They chanced by people they knew, and stopped to say hello. It really did feel like there was a community here. After all their kicking against the pricks, after all the convolutions of the twentieth century—the race riots, the rock and roll rebellion, the hippies fleeing their hometowns to drift aimlessly from coast to coast, the kids packed off to kill and die in foreign jungles, the utopian communes, the vast tangle of freeways, the de-industrialization, the main streets moldering, the big-box stores, the malls, the opiate crisis, the world's great daring plunge into nowhere, the heart torn out of America, piece by rotting piece—after all that, in their sunset years, the Baby Boomers have finally come back home.

It looks slightly different from above. From the satellite view on Google Maps, Spanish Springs is a tiny dense huddle, three blocks by three. And surrounding it, for acres and acres on every side, the parking lots bloat. Beyond that, there are only suburbs and golf courses. Suburbs without sidewalks, flat sterile streets feeding into eight-lane highways. Golf courses lodged into every gap. The blank formless form that destroyed all the tiny old towns so convincingly simulated by Spanish Springs. There was never an Allan & Storms. There never was a Fountain of Youth. Something depthless and cruel, with the face of its long-vanquished enemy flayed off and worn as a mask.

The Villages is the size of a city, but it is not a city. Spanish Springs calls itself a town square, but there is no town. The Villages has no municipal government, no mayor or city council, no town hall, and no police department. It does not even have any meaningful city limits, and it's not always clear where it begins and ends. The place sprawls indifferently over three Florida counties, which are all now effectively run by the Morse family. And while the U.S. Census Bureau recognizes a Census-Designated Place called The Villages, The Villages itself is substantially larger. Essentially, The Villages consists of all the land that has been bought and improved by H. Gary Morse and his descendants. But the Villagers don't really talk about

Morse and his family as people. They talk about something called The Developer, which is the closest thing this place has to a god.

It was The Developer who built this wonderland, and The Developer sets its rules. The Developer decides what gets built and what doesn't, which services and entertainments will be provided, and who gets to rent out the commercial space. The Developer effectively runs the three counties on which The Villages sits: most Villagers will vote the way The Developer wants them to. It helps that The Developer also owns the local newspaper, along with the radio station with its constant sunny ads for new housing stock. The Developer runs The Villages as an agglutination of seventeen different Community Development Districts—a byzantine hybrid form of local government, unique to Florida, pitched somewhere between an ordinary town and the system of feudal manorialism. (The C.D.D. form also allows The Villages to keep its very particular rules: no more than twenty percent of residents can be under the age of fifty-five, and anyone under nineteen is simply not allowed to live there at all. They can visit, but only for a maximum of thirty days per year.) Notionally, each C.D.D. is owned by its residents, who elect representatives to a Board of Supervisors. In practice, The Developer runs the show.

What it comes down to is this: if you see The Villages' branding, then you're in The Villages. That's it.

I met Jim and his wife at a bar on the main square called Amerikanos Grille. Communicating with Jim and his wife was a strange and difficult process. Jim was capable of talking, at length, but he couldn't understand anything anyone else said. The sole exception was his wife of forty-three years, a tiny creature with a face so wrinkled it appeared to be folding in on itself, and a low, indecipherable grumble of a voice that sounded like it was filtered through the sticky residue of roughly half a million cigarettes, which it probably was. But Jim could understand her fine. This meant that every time I said something to Jim, he would briefly seem baffled to the point of anger, until his wife leaned in close and hacked up a repetition of what I'd just said. At this point Jim would nod, satisfied, and then he'd usually talk on an entirely unrelated subject for about five minutes, at which point I'd buy him another drink and the process would repeat itself.

Jim wanted me to know that he and his wife were not like the other Villagers. They were snowbirds: they spent their winters here in Florida, and in the summer they moved around, ceaselessly,

from place to place. They drove their R.V. across Montana. They pottered around the woods of New England. "I'm like a gypsy, but with money," Jim said. He paused. "Do you know what a gypsy is?" I said that I did. Jim looked suddenly terrified. "What did he say?" said Jim to his wife. Jim's wife growled like a Long Island demon into Jim's ear, and I could just make out the words. "He's saying he knows what a gypsy is," she said. "Ah," said Jim. "That's good." He seemed to lose his train of thought for a moment. "But with money," he added. "You've got to have the money."

Jim couldn't bear to stay anywhere for too long: that was how people got old. He had a lot of scorn for the rest of the Villagers. Their basically herbivorous lifestyles, golf until noon and then drinking until night. "All these people here," he said, gesturing at the happy crowds, "they're all getting dressed up for a nursing home." He said the best thing about The Villages was that the properties were in such high demand, if you didn't like your place you could sell it in three months and leave. He'd bought and sold six properties within The Villages, and made money on each deal. I asked Jim, via his wife, if he moved around because he was hungry for new experiences, or simply because he got bored. Jim seemed very gratified by my question. "That's good," he said. "That's a very interesting question. This is probably the wrong answer, but after a few months here I get sick of the food, I'm bored as hell of golfing all day, and all the same faces, I'm sick to death of every son of a bitch in this bar." One of the sons of bitches in the bar made a face. "See that?" Jim said. "I'm not like most folks. I'm different. I just say what I think."

Jim talked about a few other things. He and his wife liked Ron DeSantis. "He doesn't deal with any of that woke crap." Mostly, though, Jim talked about money. "Everyone has a talent," he said, "and mine is my eyes. I can see what makes money. That's all I need to do, I look at something and I can tell you if it'll make money." He asked me if I knew about the Rule of Seventy-Two, which I did not. "See?" Jim said. "They still don't teach the kids anything." The Rule of Seventy-Two is a method for judging any investment. You take the annual rate of return and divide seventy-two by that number, which gives you the number of years it'll take for your money to double. This is all you need to be a successful investor, and Jim had learned it back in the 1950s, long before everyone else—except, apparently, me—had cottoned on. "Is your money working as hard as you are?" is another question he'd learned. It was his mantra, something he repeated every morning when he woke up.

It had taken a while for these lessons to sink in, though. Jim had been in the Navy. He was stationed in Havana before the revolution, where his role was to confiscate the sailors' guns when they took their shore leave. If he didn't take their guns, the sailors would end up drunkenly selling them on the black market, and then the guns would end up in the hands of Castro and his guerrillas. Not that taking their guns had much effect on the Cuban situation, in the long run. After that, Jim worked in an air-conditioner factory in upstate New York, where he seemed to have been working much harder than his money. He didn't start putting what he knew into action until the 1970s, when he quit his job and started flipping properties. His first deal was in another retirement community, tiny by The Villages standards, in Virginia. He bought a house and sold it again in eight days later. Barely touched it. Doubled his money.

Eventually Jim's wife got up to use the bathroom. While she was gone, Jim tried to order another drink. He leaned over the bar and attempted to communicate to the startlingly young and attractive bar girl that he wanted a Jack and Coke. "I'll have a Coke," he said. "A Coke and, and, and . . . a Coke and, not rum, not rum, no, not rum. . . ." He looked down at his empty glass. "Ah, I'm getting into one of my moods again." Jim cared about nothing more than his own personal freedom and independence, but without his mute wife he was basically incapable of interacting with the world. She was the only person he could understand. He was the only person to whom she could be understood. I found that very beautiful.

By ten, everything was closing down. These are still old people; they like to go to bed at a sensible time. On the way back to my hotel, I noticed something. Spanish Springs was supposed to be like the Main Street of a half-remembered small American town, and one thing those towns tend to have is a war memorial—so Spanish Springs had one too. There are more veterans in The Villages than anywhere in the country without an active military base: having a memorial is important. But in most towns, the memorial records the names of all the residents who died fighting overseas, and nobody from The Villages has ever died in any war ever fought. So instead of a list of names, there's just a plaque dedicating the memorial "to all U.S. veterans past and present." This was a memorial to the other soldiers: the ones who had lived to grow old.

The next morning, I had my tour with Jason. Despite having immediately clocked me as a writer, Jason was happy to keep talking. He played country music through the car's stereo. I asked him



questions and he answered. "You can note that down," he said. "I don't mind." He talked a lot about The Villages' spectacular growth. They can put a home up in thirty days. They're all made of mass-produced vinyl and concrete panels. On the Google Maps satellite view, there are large stretches of ground that seem completely empty, but in fact there are entire neighborhoods, already built and sold. Jason said that he was one of four hundred real estate agents employed by The Villages, and most of the time they were competing to sell around four hundred newly built properties. It wasn't always like that. He asked me to guess how many unsold properties there'd been during the real boom years before the 2008 crash. I shrugged. "A thousand," I said. Jason looked at me like I was an idiot. "No," he said. "Six."

Most of the other vehicles on the road were golf carts. Everyone has a golf cart in The Villages; the whole thing has been built to be completely traversible by small humming buggy. Some people pay tens of thousands to trick out their golf carts with tinted windows and air conditioning. But eventually the system will break down. The Villages is too large now: to get from one end to the other by golf cart would take you an hour and a half.

Jason was taking me to a neighborhood that had just been completed, on the southern fringe of The Villages. The place keeps pushing south. They've

bought enough land for the next forty years of development, but they keep on buying more. Churning the loose sandy soil beneath the cattle ranches, grabbing entire towns and then tearing them down, flattening woodlands, sucking up swamps. Fleets of bulldozers. Acres of concrete. Lot by lot, everything gets ironed out into tract homes and pickleball courts. In places like Spanish Springs, which have been around since the mid-Nineties—ancient, here—the residents tend to be pretty old. Some of them have been living in The Villages for decades. People in the new southern districts are younger. They're in their fifties and their sixties, just retired. These places have a fresher, livelier vibe.

It didn't feel fresh or lively. It felt like a desert. The southern districts have almost no services, since The Villages builds housing first, and then retail slowly trickles in later. Jason pointed out a patch of derelict swampland. "That's gonna be a shopping plaza," he said. It was a great idea for my fake mother to buy somewhere in the south, he explained, because of the equity. All the houses in The Villages are on only a few basic models, but the older ones with lots of stores nearby are much more expensive than the new builds. If my fake mother could hold on to her new house until the commercial zones were fully developed, it might double or triple in value.

The other thing was the trees. Trees grow slowly. In the north, the streets are scattered with stately old trees, magnolias and gumbo limbos hanging gothic trails of Spanish moss. In the south, there are saplings, or nothing at all. I hadn't really noticed the absence of trees until Jason pointed it out to me, just that something was dreadfully *missing* in this landscape, that it seemed stark and hollow and hideous. I thought about the gentle overgrowing trees that block the view from my window in my council estate in London, and how horrible it would be to live without them.

Jason said he could show me a house that had just come on the market, but he'd also be doing a virtual tour for another potential buyer. Before we went in he spoke to one of his colleagues on the phone. "You're going up against the Davises, and that's tough. They'll eat you, bro. They'll eat your ass." Sam and Sandra Davis were a husband-and-wife team and The Villages' highest-performing agents. They were serious people. If you were trying to sell the same house as them, they would peel off your skin and tear out your flesh, strand by bleeding strand—metaphorically, of course. Jason wasn't far down the leaderboard himself. He said that in recognition of his achievements, The Villages was

naming one of the streets in a new district after him. I asked if he'd get first dibs on any house on that street. He laughed. "No." And what about the Davises? What rewards did you get for being the very best? "Money," he said. "A lot of money. A lot."

Once the client was on the line, Jason showed us the house. It was, like all the houses in The Villages, a bungalow. Old people don't like stairs. It was made of turd-brown vinyl and was almost impossibly grim. "Beautiful floors, huh?" said Jason. The floors were plastic, roughly textured to look like wood. The walls were cream. The ceilings were low. In the bedroom, the carpet had the greasy feel of polypropylene. A floor plan had been left on the kitchen counter. The biggest room in this house, by far, was the garage. Everything else was clustered haphazardly around its edges. I suddenly felt very, very depressed. While Jason continued his tour, I slipped outside to smoke a cigarette. Every house on this wide clean street was identical to the one I'd just been inside. They were packed together tight. One low crummy vinyl house after another. No birds. No trees. No gardens, just the same rough, vivid green grass in the narrow gaps between vinyl homes. Everything was silent, except for the rumbling, somewhere over the horizon, of construction machinery: four hundred new homes exactly like this one being plastered over the earth.

Jason wandered out of the house again. He was still on the line with his client. "I just love it," she said through his phone speakers. "I want it so bad. Tell me what I need to do to have it." She said that her husband had died two years ago, and for two years she'd been moping around with his memory, but now she thought she was ready to move on. "Maybe this is something you need," said Jason. "You've been through a lot. You've suffered, you've really suffered. You deserve something good in your life." The customer sniffed. "I think this is what I need," she agreed. "It's so *cold* up here, and everything's on lockdown. I'm so lonely. I really don't know if I can take another winter by myself." Jason was practically stroking her hair through his phone. "This is the place," he said. "This is where you can get out there again. That's the great thing with these new developments. Everyone's new here, just like you. You'll make friends like that." He snapped his finger. The sound echoed faintly in the empty grave-silent street.

Jason was in a good mood on the drive back up north. We talked about country music a little; he liked Brad Paisley and Jason Aldean. I also like Brad Paisley and Jason Aldean, but in a pretentious, half-ironic Euro-hipster way. He didn't know Tyler Childers or Colter Wall or the Turnpike

Troubadours, whom I like without any irony at all. A Chris Stapleton song came on. “I love this guy,” Jason said. “To me, this guy has the second-best voice in music, next to Chris Cornell.” I admitted to not really knowing much of Chris Cornell’s stuff, so he played me an Audioslave track, cranking the volume up loud, and screamed along to the lyrics. “And I can tell you why people die alone! I can tell you I’m a shadow on the sun!” Somehow, we ended up talking about conspiracies. He said he believed in some of them. I said that I did too. “I shouldn’t talk about this shit,” he said, “it’s not professional of me. I really shouldn’t talk about this.” He knew that I was a writer. “But the New World Order,” he continued, “it’s definitely gonna happen.” He said that this was what the elites had always been doing, right back to the Roman Empire. I decided to make a bluff. Maybe, I suggested, Christianity was the first resistance movement against the New World Order, against the pagan pedophile network of Rome. “Actually,” he said, “in my spiritual life, I’m more of a Daoist.” He recommended that I read something by Allen Carr. Allen Carr was a British pop-psychology writer, most famously the author of *The Easy Way To Stop Smoking*. His connection to the two-thousand-year-old philosophical tradition of Daoism is unclear.

Almost everyone I spoke to in Florida seemed to believe in the New World Order. They believe that the world is governed by a secret demonic cabal whose main two goals are to have sex with children and to wipe out the human species. And then they play golf about it.

Maybe it’s impossible to live like this in Florida without noticing that something is badly wrong with the world. Florida is no place for a mammal. It belongs to prehistoric nature: the fat jeweled dragonflies, the alligators wallowing in their green ancient murk. Here the cold-blooded creatures still rule. If you come here soft and hairy, insects will suck out your blood. In summer the air is dripping with damp. In autumn the earth destroys itself with hurricanes. Conquistadors called it *la florida*—the Flowery One—but as their other victims in Tenochtitlan knew, the flowering exuberance of nature is a symbol for the violent death of men. Hernando de Soto, one of the first Europeans to set foot here, recalled: “In all the country are neither wolf, fox, bear, lion, nor tiger, but there be certain snakes as big as a man’s thigh or bigger. . . . From town to town, the way is made by stubbing up the underwood; and if it be left but one year undone, the wood groweth so much that the way cannot be seen.” Early in his expedition, his men stripped off their clothes to wade across a lake: “There came

many mosquitoes, upon whose biting there arose a wheal that smarted very much; they struck them with their hands, and with the blow which they gave they killed so many that the blood did run down the arms and bodies of the men.”

In 1907, Henry James described Florida as “a void furnished at the most with velvet air.” Since then, we’ve scrubbed out that velvet air. We have air conditioning now, refrigeration and insecticides: three weapons to beat the Flowery One into submission, and make it a place fit for seniors to golf in. Still, victory is only partial. You still know you should not be living here, not in your air-conditioned vinyl home, not shopping at Publix, not driving your golf cart to the Ayn Rand reading group. Sometimes an alligator will heave himself into your swimming pool. He’ll sit there, hungry and motionless, waiting for his reign to resume.

Or there’s another explanation. In *The Villages*, there *really is* a shadowy institution, murkily slipping between government and corporation, that produces your world like a show while it controls every aspect of your life.

I asked Jason to drop me off at Lake Sumter Landing, which is another of the town squares. This one had been themed to look like a New England fishing village. Fake clapboard houses containing Panera Bread and AT&T. Iron ruts in the cobblestones, the remnants of a trolley line that had never existed. In the town square, loudspeakers played W.V.L.G., *The Villages’* inescapable radio station. The Rolling Stones, and then ads. One for a new show home in the south. “This could be the start of the new life you’ve always dreamed of—come check it out today!” If you live in *The Villages* and you’re still not happy, just buy a different place. Then one for medication. “Make 2023 the year you say goodbye to joint pain and start living your best life!” This was followed by the day’s headlines, courtesy of Fox News. The sky was clouding over and there was nobody on the street; I started to wonder what on earth I was doing here. A few cormorants stood on the soggy shores of the lake, these black silhouettes of birds, gulping, Jurassic. A sign on the boardwalk broke the ersatz Northeastern vibe a little: “PLEASE DO NOT FEED THE GATORS. Feeding alligators is strictly prohibited under Florida Statutes §372.667.”

I decided to feed myself on the gators instead. I had my lunch at R.J. Gator’s Florida Sea Grill & Bar, a warehouse-sized restaurant serving pallet-sized meals. I had the deep-fried gator tail—“Taste like chicken? You decide!”—and the lobster mac and cheese, along with enough sweet tea to fill up an S.U.V. The restaurant was packed. Astoundingly

fat people sprawled over their booths. In one corner, there was karaoke; another astoundingly fat person belting out a lustily atonal rendition of Lynyrd Skynyrd's nine-minute epic "Free Bird." There wasn't a green vegetable in the house.

My meal left me feeling incredibly claggy. I'd eaten the entire thing, long past the point when every bite was causing me a small dull jab of pain as my abdomen refused what my mouth kept giving it. I thought it might be a good idea to walk back up to Spanish Springs, work out some of the grease. My phone said the walk would take an hour, which was fine; I'll happily walk that far in London or New York. But after about ten minutes trudging along the grassy fringes of Morse Boulevard, two things happened in very quick succession. First, those four or five gallons of sweet tea suddenly started putting an insistent demand on my bladder. Second, it started to rain. Big hot globs of rain, thick enough to swim through. Within a minute, the grass I walked on had reverted to swamp, and I was soaked through. I tried to shelter under a tree, which somehow managed to funnel the raindrops into a steady tap-leak dribbling onto the top of my head. I tried to smoke a cigarette, which kept sizzling out. Eventually, resigned to it all, I abandoned my shelter and trooped on. Cars and golf carts sped past on the road. I wondered what the drivers must have thought of me, this stranger trying to walk through a rainstorm in ex-urban



Florida. They must have thought I was some kind of transient, some escaped maniac. What *was* I doing here? Maybe the sheriffs had already been dispatched to run me out of town.

In the end, I was rescued. My rescuer pulled up in his rickety golf cart next to me. "Just couldn't stand to see you walking like that," he said. "Get on in." His name was Robert, and he was a frighteningly skinny eighty-two-year-old man. He had one eye, and he'd had three strokes. As he piloted the golf cart, Robert ate Chips Ahoy out of the packet with trembling fingers. He'd just given blood. Robert insisted on taking me back to his home to warm up. He said he didn't get out much these days except to give blood, because of his house arrest. He mentioned his house arrest a few more times before explaining what he meant. The house arrest was self-imposed: Robert knew that any encounter with COVID might swiftly finish him off, and a lot of people in The Villages had refused to get the vaccine. So for nearly three years, he'd lived in his house, in its sea of other identical houses, in the heat and the rain, alone.

Robert was amazed that more people didn't give blood. It's such a small, simple thing, but it can save someone's life. I've never given blood.

Robert's house was on the exact same plan as the one Jason had shown me earlier, although that was where the resemblance ended. The unsold house had been blank and mercilessly empty, but Robert's was dark, crammed, heavy with the faint fungal air of damp fabrics. Chintzy furniture piled over itself: overstuffed sofas, lacquered side tables, paintings of flowers, tasseled lamps. A constant Irish folk medley played over the ragged electronic screech of an aux cable that hadn't been pushed in all the way. Every surface bore its thick layer of detritus. A general substratum of unopened letters and empty pill boxes, dotted in places by mounds of wadded-up tissue paper. A few empty beer bottles and empty photo frames had come to rest in the crevices of this chaos. Robert fussed around, fetching blankets to drape over my shoulders. I protested that I was fine. I didn't like the idea of someone as infirm as Robert trying to take care of me. But he wanted, very badly, to drape a blanket over my shoulders. He'd never had kids.

"You're an Englishman, then," Robert said. I admitted that I was. Robert had spent some time in England: London, Liverpool, all over. His wife was from Ireland; he'd lived over there for a while. Robert had never wanted to marry; he'd never even had any serious relationships before. Too many of his friends had got an expedited admission to what he called the "alimony club." But he'd met an

Irish girl at a bar in New York City, and that was it; everything suddenly fell into place. His wife's family had been suspicious at first: if he was thirty-four and he wasn't already married, there must be something wrong with him. They warmed to him eventually, once they saw how utterly dedicated he was to this woman who'd changed his life. She died, well short of her fiftieth birthday, in 1998.

Robert had moved to The Villages because of the golf carts. He couldn't drive, not with his one eye and his trembling hands, but the golf carts gave him a measure of freedom. Before The Villages, he'd lived in another retirement community on the east coast of Florida. He liked it there because it was right by the sea. The Atlantic: the same ocean that washes the shores of Ireland, where his wife's bones still nestle under the green and growing sod. He had no desire to remarry. His marriage had lasted for twenty-four years; before and after then he had been alone his entire life.

The rain had died down now, but Robert still insisted on driving me back to Spanish Springs. The town square steamed with petrichor, and Robert surprised me by pointing out a bar he knew and suggesting we head in. His self-imposed house arrest seemed to crumble as soon as he had someone to go out with. But Robert did not have an easy time at the bar. There was a basketball game playing loudly on the big screens, and loud country-rock over the speakers, and a table of loudly obese middle-aged women in skimpy outfits roaring just to our left. Robert sucked dejectedly at his Guinness. "I can't be rushing about like this," he said. He kept hobbling out of his seat to wander around and look for a guy he knew. This guy was a friend of his, and before Robert had gone into house arrest his friend was reliably in this bar at this time, every single day. But today he wasn't there. "He'll be along later," Robert said. But he must have known, as I did, that his friend was almost certainly dead.

Robert might be the best and kindest person I've ever met. I haven't changed his name.

The previous night, Jim and his wife had told me another story. Their home in The Villages, the seventh they'd owned, had previously belonged to three sisters. All three sisters were wheelchair-bound and almost totally blind. None of them had married. When Jim and his wife bought the house, it was in a state of almost total collapse. The sisters had left deep wheelchair gashes in the carpets. They'd tried to keep the place tidy, but there's only so much you can do when you're almost totally blind. It had taken Jim months to make that bungalow livable again, to get rid of the layers upon layers of laminated filth. Two of the sisters

had died, one after the other in quick succession. Some distant family members had found out how they'd been living, and managed to convince the third sister to move into an assisted living facility. I wondered how many other people were living lives like that in The Villages. For every spry old couple dancing to rock music in Spanish Springs, how many were blind and incapable, trapped in their damp homes, thousands of miles away from whatever family they had, in this sunny wonderland they'd chosen to wither away in, unknown?

The message of The Villages is this: that the true purpose of human life is to have fun, to drink and play golf, and you can only really experience the true purpose of human life once you've retired: when you've nothing left to do but exist. You are not *old*, because age is just a number. You do not need to be looked after. What you need is to *start living your best life*. When they were young, the Baby Boomers broke apart the multi-generational community: untempered youth, wild youth leading itself towards its own ends. Now, they're doing it again. They have absconded from their duty as old people, which is to be the link between the future and the past—because the world doesn't have a past anymore, and precious little future either. You are suspended in an infinite present. You still wear blue jeans. You will never die.

There are no cemeteries in The Villages. The ambulances are unmarked; so are the hearses. Nobody talks about the fact that every few weeks, a vaguely familiar face vanishes from the pickleball court. The most depressing thing I read about The Villages came from someone who'd worked in one of its hospices. By the time the Villagers die, many of them are broke. They've spent their pensions on margaritas and golf carts. Hospice care is expensive, so their homes are sold while they're still dying, and someone like Jason will move some other retiree right in, another lonely person eager to start having fun. Most of the people who die in The Villages end up being cremated. This pleasure-machine, built to delight you with cheap drinks and dancing every night, also systematically burns stacks upon stacks of dead bodies. People who will have no graves to visit. People whose names are not written on any stone.

I returned to London very depressed. When I got back, my girlfriend found something new on my head. There it was: the future that had always been waiting for me. A thin, pale, fragile thing. My first gray hair.

THE CRISIS OF CATHOLIC ATHEISM

BY MICHAEL HANBY

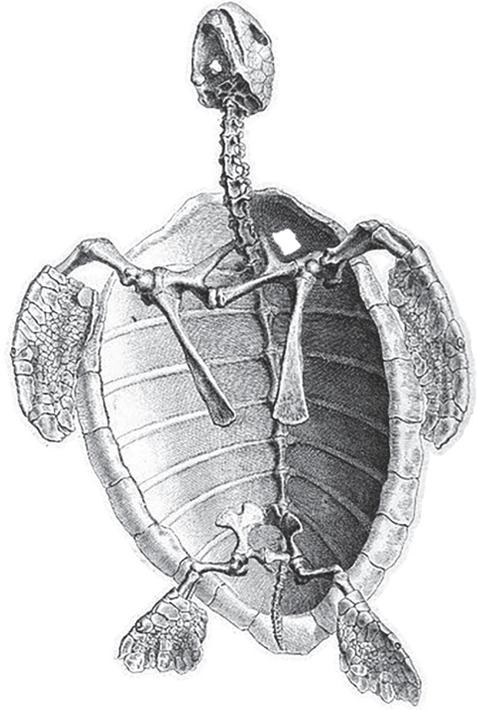


The French poet Charles Péguy defined the modern Christian as one who does not believe what he believes. As the Church seeks once again to discern the “movement of the Spirit” and “the signs of the times,” both professed goals of the Synod on Synodality, it would do well—besides examining its conscience—to set aside the focus groups, the pseudo-scientific questionnaires, and the sloppy sociological and political analyses, and heed the words of Péguy. Or Augusto Del Noce. Or Benedict XVI. In very different terms over the course of a century punctuated by two world wars, these disparate and somewhat disconnected thinkers offered complementary diagnoses of what they regarded as the defining crisis of the age: an unprecedented new atheism different in kind from earlier forms of unbelief within the Christian world. Each understood in varying degrees that this atheism was not external to the Church. Péguy was particularly unsparing in his criticism of “the clerks” for reducing the Christian *mystique* to a mere *politique*, thus helping to bring this crisis about, and for their inability and unwillingness to see it. Taken together, their diagnoses cast light on the “death of God” in the modern world—John Paul II will call it the “eclipse of the sense of God and of man”—with prophetic foresight and profound insight into the shape of a future that is now our present, when the “death of God” is rapidly bringing about the death of all that is genuinely human.

“The real problem at this moment of our history,” wrote Benedict in 2009, “is that God is disappearing from the human horizon, and with the dimming of the light which comes from God, humanity is losing its bearings, with increasingly evident destructive effects.” But already, in 1910, Péguy had lamented modernity as a “mystical disaster,” a complete repudiation of “the whole Christian system.” The modern, post-Christian world is a “world that tries to be clever. The world of the intelligent, of the advanced, of those who know, who don’t have to be shown a thing twice, who have nothing more to learn. . . . *That is to say*: a world of those who believe in nothing, not even in atheism, who devote themselves, who sacrifice themselves to nothing.” Decades later, Del Noce would describe modernity in similar terms. Writing in the aftermath of the great conflagrations of the twentieth century, he saw in postwar modernity a new totalitarianism disguised by affluence, a suffocating immanentism that negated every form of transcendence, an immanentism whose most acute and obvious manifestations were the twin phenomena of scientism and eroticism, all of which had been brought about by the simultaneous triumph and defeat of Marxism. This “post-Christian” atheism world, as with Péguy, hardly merits the name, since hardly anyone bothers to argue for it. Del Noce instead describes a world of pervasive “irreligion,” where God has vanished from the horizon; His exile from our characteristic modes of thought is so complete that He can no longer become a serious question.

Nietzsche foresaw what the death of God would mean because he knew what the life of God had meant in the constitution of the West. We, his last men or perhaps the first posthumans, our eyes well accustomed to the long shadow of God's eclipse, are not so perceptive. Nevertheless, Nietzsche and his madman also knew that the death of God was perfectly compatible with the continuation of Christianity. Likewise, the death of God is no obstacle to invoking God or "the mystery of the Spirit leading the Church into the future" as an extrinsic addendum to an apprehension of the world and a conception of reality that are fundamentally atheistic, where God and our creaturehood are systematically excluded from our working ontology, from our fundamental thought forms, and their corresponding conception of truth. Extrinsicism is usually thought to take a "top down" form, as in the so-called "two-tiered" Thomism of the last century, which is saved from atheism by its metaphysics in spite of its inadvertent support for the autonomy of the secular. But extrinsicism can also take a number of "bottom up" forms from within the immanent frame. It can be sincere, pious, and hopeful, or it can be ideological and cynical, with the Holy Spirit weaponized to bless exercises of power and to make blasphemers of those who oppose them, a strong candidate, perhaps, for the mysterious "sin against the Holy Spirit." But these variations are mostly beside the point. "Catholic atheism" is not principally a question of intention, piety, or sincerity of belief but of the structural exclusion of God from our field of vision by the mostly unspoken assumptions that govern our world. Indeed, piety and sincerity serve largely to conceal this atheism from its adherents, making us the inverse of Rahner's "anonymous Christians": anonymous atheists who do not know ourselves.

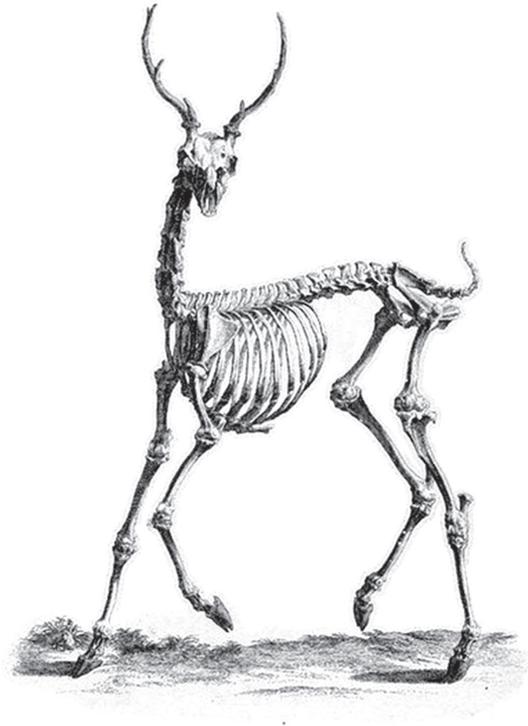
Father Thomas J. Reese, S.J., once a ubiquitous public presence before the media, found other go-to sources for reliable and mediocre Catholic progressivism, recently announced that he did not believe in transubstantiation. The reasons for the ensuing controversy are not entirely clear. Did his words matter primarily because Reese is a prominent American Jesuit, or because he obviously spoke for millions of other American Catholics? In any event, he quickly attempted to assure readers that he *did* in fact believe in the Real Presence, as distinct from transubstantiation, which he could not believe in because he did not believe in the Aristotelian notion of substantial form which is its ontological presupposition. It seems safe to assume he was not exercising an option for Plato or Plotinus.



Now in fairness to Father Reese, it would be pointless to pretend that the last five centuries haven't happened. None of us can believe in a Platonic or Aristotelian conception of form in the way that Plato and Aristotle would have done, intuitively and unreflectively from within an inherently intelligible world obviously shot through with the presence of the eternal. This, presumably, is one reason why Péguy said that one had first to become a pagan in order to become a Christian, and why he lamented the defeat of paganism by modernity. Nevertheless, the metaphysical attitude is the natural one, realists that we are; we must do something to ourselves to disabuse ourselves of it. And there remain compelling arguments for form's ontological and epistemic necessity as well as immediate, firsthand evidence of its reality so obvious as to be almost invisible. Yet despite the ubiquity of substantial, self-transcending wholes, ourselves above all, with interior horizons and a stake in their own being, despite the omnipresence of beauty, the inescapability of meaning, and an incorrigible tendency toward goodness that persists in spite of ourselves, it somehow takes an enormous intellectual effort for us *not* to see the world as a cold, indifferent mechanism and ourselves as some kind of ghost tacked on to (or emerging epiphenomenally from) a mechanical and malleable body. And whatever assent we are able to muster for the reality of creation as traditionally understood can only be a partial and temporary extraction coaxed out if

what George Grant called the “monism of meaninglessness” that forms the entropic background to every form of modern thought, every aspect of modern life and the institutions that enforce it. Which is to say, insofar as we are modern, we can only ever believe half-heartedly. It falls to us to live the reality of Catholicism through the agony of its present impossibility, to discover the transcendent through “intimations of deprivation” (Grant again), the pain over its apparent absence.

But there is none of that agony or eros in Reese’s explanation, only the satisfaction and contentment “of the intelligent, of the advanced, of those who know, who don’t have to be shown a thing twice, who have nothing more to learn.” Lost in the brouhaha over Reese’s comments are the other things one would seem unable to believe after breezily casting off Christianity’s Hellenistic patrimony. It is difficult to see, for example, how one could still think of human nature emptied of form and finality as anything other than the accidental summing up of an evolutionary history of cause and effect, much less offer a rational account of it, or imagine that theology or philosophy could have anything true to say about it. Nor is it clear how “truth” itself could stand for anything more than “the facts” provisionally ascertained by the sciences that analyze such processes. The Incarnation would seem to be a bit of an embarrassment then, what with two natures in one person and all that. And it seems difficult to square this formless understanding of human nature and truth with the reality of the divine *logos*, the traditional doctrine of the divine ideas that contained the archetypes of substantial natures, or a doctrine of creation that has any claim upon the meaning of nature or any real bearing on the ontological structure of the world. It is unclear what place there could be in this two-dimensional view of things for the *vita contemplativa* or the *visio dei*, which likewise seem destined for the historical archives, relics of thought from an earlier time in Christian history that has now been surpassed. Indeed, it is difficult to see how one could give more than a pietistic or fideistic account of the “Real Presence” that Reese does claim to believe in, that is, without treating it as an extrinsic addendum to a conception of nature that has been wholly handed over to the empirical and experimental sciences—where nature is whatever happens or can be made to happen and one thing is therefore as “natural” as any other—sciences whose nature, limits, and implicit metaphysics one hasn’t made the slightest effort to understand. Without a substantive account of human nature or an ontological conception of truth, or even a critical historical and philosophical



engagement with the sciences, the way is clear to embrace whatever intellectual fashion “science” is now promoting and has baptized as *aggiornamento*. The line from Reese’s urbane self-assurance to the sophistry of his confrère Father James Martin is short and straight.

What remains of Christianity in the wake of all this? Here I am reminded of a story told to me by a former colleague at Villanova. In the midst of a discussion of some classical author, my friend asked one of her students to explain the concept of the soul. The student, a bright young woman who I presume was the product of a parochial school education in New Jersey, paused, apparently surprised by such an unlikely question. After reflecting a moment, she answered, “It’s sort of like a mist.” I struggle to think of a better metaphor for contemporary Catholicism as a “spent force,” for a Church with little of substance to say about being or history or the times we live in. It stands for a Church which often seems to have little of substance to say about the meaning of being or history, whose ministers mindlessly intone the same religious formulas like so many brute facts and the same platitudes about tolerance and dialogue and the miracle of sharing to the same bored, exhausted, dwindling congregations week after week, month after month, year after year. The dissonance between this therapeutic



gospel of niceness, the demystified actions on the altar, and the mystical words pronounced there would stretch beyond the breaking point if anyone were paying attention. What could the Incarnation or the Real Presence *be* in this world, a world premised upon the Real Absence of every ontological principle and every form of thought that could differentiate them from magic or alchemy? It's sort of like a mist.

Péguy, Del Noce, and Ratzinger are united in tracing the eclipse to a metaphysical revolution underlying the other, more obvious faces of revolution that characterize the modern age and institutionalize it as a permanent feature of modern life: the political revolutions against the *ancien régime* that began in the eighteenth century and forever subordinated Christianity to the transcendental horizon of political order, the scientific and technological revolution against the limits of possibility, and the sexual revolution against our own nature and the principle of reality itself. Del Noce identifies the apex of this revolution with the “suicidal” triumph of Marxism and its conflation of theory and praxis. This conflation measures the “truth” of our ideas by their effectiveness in changing the world through scientific and political action and ushers in irreligious atheism by bringing the “philosophy of comprehension,” the tradition extending from Plato to Hegel, to an end. Though

Marx is obviously monumental for twentieth-century history, I regard Marxism as a latecomer to a revolution already long underway, locating its origins in the earlier Baconian confluences of knowledge and power, theory and practice, and truth and utility, and the mechanistic understanding of nature that coincides with the birth of modern science. This revolution takes form in technological society, whose interminable pursuit of technological progress provides the collective *raison d'être* of liberal order. And I have argued, furthermore, that the American experiment, which gives political form to this vision of things in a kind of synthesis of the *Second Treatise* and the *New Atlantis*, more perfectly realizes “total revolution” than Marx himself does. The “euthanasia of Platonic Christianity” that Jefferson was so eager to see completed was inscribed into its essence from the outset, with its inherent pragmatism, its worship of possibility, and a Protestantism that was already “irreligious.” In either event, the result, as Del Noce put it, is a conception of reality as a manipulable “system of forces,” mute and meaningless, “not of values.” This system replaces the vertical transcendence of eternity—and with it a transcendent order of being, nature, and truth—with a horizontal transcendence of futurity. “The mystery of the Spirit leading the Church into the future” becomes mysteriously indistinguishable from the spirit of progress.

This immanent horizon determines the limit of our vision and defines what it now means for us to think. Thomas Aquinas wrote that “the name intellect arises from the intellect’s ability to know the most profound elements of a thing; for to understand (*intelligere*) means to read what is inside a thing (*intus legere*). Sense and imagination know only external accidents, but the intellect alone penetrates to the interior and to the essence of a thing.” But where there is no longer an interior essence, intellect, strictly speaking, ceases to be intelligible or even necessary. For there is no longer anything to penetrate or read, indeed no longer any way to pose questions of truth in the traditional “what is” form. This is why there is no such thing as a profound question in American public life. Where reality has no depths, the abyss seems rather shallow. What we now mean by thinking is almost wholly exhausted by questions of the functionalist type: How many? How far? How fast? Where from? Under what influence? To what effect? In whose interest?

Truth within these functionalist forms of reason is then reduced either to an assemblage of social, psychological, historical, and economic conditions—the historicist option—or to its function

in legitimating and maintaining various systems of power; this is sociologism. Or it denotes the provisional limit of our present technical capacities, which necessitates its own overcoming. We can call this technologism. It may be conflated wholly with appearance, renamed authenticity, and measured by our self-understanding. The result is a pastoralism indistinguishable from therapy, which, like public health, can be called upon to justify just about anything. Or, last but not least, truth simply vanishes from the horizon as something we can think meaningfully about *at all*. This is pragmatism. And this is the paradigm shift we seem to be undergoing.

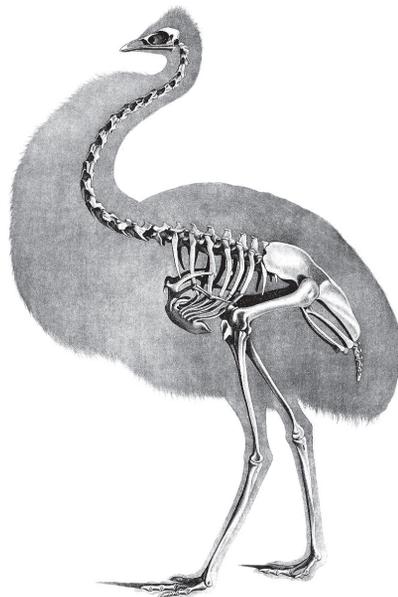
The now axiomatic assumption from within this horizon is that metaphysical truth claims are merely the expressions of ideology. Like Del Noce, Ratzinger regarded this crisis of truth as perhaps the central question facing the Church and Western civilization more generally: “Is there, in the course of historical time, a recognizable identity of man with himself? Is there a human ‘nature’? Is there a truth that *remains* true in every historical time because it *is* true?” The answer for those whose unstated assumptions preclude the possibility of transcendence—for whom metaphysics is simply another ideological project of mastery—is no; indeed, an answer in the affirmative would mark the end rather than the beginning of progress in thought. But they are wrong. Truth, understood in its traditional, metaphysical sense as a property of being as such, supplies the channels through which thought can run and denies us permission to *stop thinking* before we arrive at the infinite. As Del Noce observes:

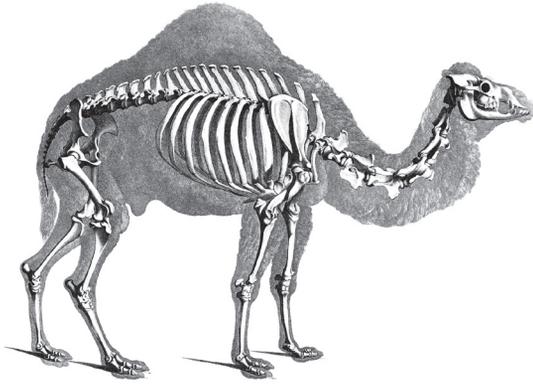
Primacy of contemplation just means the superiority of the immutable over the changeable. It just expresses the essential metaphysical principle of the Catholic tradition, which says that everything that *is* participates necessarily in universal principles, which are the eternal and immutable essences contained in the permanent actuality of the divine intellect. . . . The primacy of contemplation, the primacy of the immutable, the reality of an eternal order are equivalent affirmations, which coincide with taking intellectual intuition as the definition of the model of knowledge. The recognition of this form of knowledge is inseparable from the very possibility of metaphysical thought.

The striking thing about so much contemporary Catholic thought is how little thought is actually in it, especially in comparison to the generations immediately preceding ours, which gave us Blondel and Péguy, Claudel, Bernanos and Guardini,

Balthasar, and Ratzinger. Say what one will about them—the mere mention of some of these figures is provocative in some quarters—but each was a genuinely speculative (and therefore mystical) thinker who attempted in his own way and in his own proper genre to discern the “signs of the times” by means of a deeper penetration of the fundamental Christian mysteries.

Where are the artists, mystics, and thinkers in our suffocating and desiccated landscape? You shall judge a tree by its fruits, and our fruits are prunes. This dearth of thinking, or rather this inability to *see*, is not the exclusive property of the Catholic left. It is increasingly a problem on the Catholic right, especially as it becomes more reactionary, taking refuge in liturgy and traditional theological formulas and confusing philosophy with intellectual archaeology, with the ever more precise re-presentation of Saint Thomas Aquinas or some other ancient authority. But the problem is particularly acute on the Catholic left. Take Massimo Faggioli, the “historical theologian” who seems genuinely not to know the difference between theology and the sociology of religion. He epitomizes Del Noce’s “somewhat farcical-looking character . . . the engaged religious sociologist,” and therefore represents perfectly the degradation of contemporary Catholic thought. One could pick almost at random from the constant deluge of tweets, articles, books, and lectures—whether it’s his embarrassing book on Joe Biden and Catholicism, his reduction of doctrine to “doctrinal policy” in his book on Vatican II, his definition of “synodal church” as “ecclesial processes that are less centered on the clergy and more open to the leadership role of the laity, especially women,” his conclusion that





the divisions currently roiling the church have “less to do with the finer points of dogma and doctrine (as was typically the case for the councils of the first millennium regarding Christology and the Trinity) and more to do with the translation of Vatican II’s teaching in the social and political sphere and on Church governance,” or his exhortation to discern the signs of the times by starting with “the decline of global democracy”—and one would struggle in vain to find a properly philosophical or theological idea. It is one thing to think politically about theology and quite another to think theologically about politics. And it’s politics all the way down. Even his occasional apologia for theological education ends up reading like an argument for the primacy of religious sociology and a sociological justification for the continuing relevance of “theology.” There is no room within this functionalist form of thought and its working ontology for the presence of an Eternity that is immanent within history precisely *as* transcendent; thus there is simply no way for a proper question about God, being, nature, or truth to ever arise. And so it never does.

One can measure the triumph of “anonymous atheism” in the Church by the prominence of these functionalist forms of thought within it, that is, by the triumph of “sociologism,” and the replacement of theology and philosophy by history, psychology, economics, and the social sciences as the Church’s fundamental modes of thinking and seeing. The triumph of sociologism is the triumph of an apprehension of the world and corresponding forms of thought that systematically exclude God, being, nature, and truth from its field of vision, though again there is nothing to prevent a kind of “bottom-up extrinsicism” from later baptizing this godless vision with “the mystery of the Spirit leading the Church into the future” or to prevent Faggioli from saying that “ecclesial processes that are less centered on the clergy and more open to the leadership role of the laity” are really “about

sacramentality and the Church as a sacrament,” burdening that little preposition “about” with more work than it can possibly perform. The more complete the triumph, the longer the shadow of God’s eclipse, the more we are deprived of the light even to see what we are missing. Contemporary champions of a “paradigm shift” within the Church—that is, of changing the subject instead of answering an argument—demonstrate some awareness of this fact. Nevertheless, the pervasiveness of sociologism within the Church and the broader culture explains why our atheism is anonymous and presumably why its animating principles are not acknowledged or argued for but simply *assumed*, apparently without thinking. The jury is still out on the “synodal process,” but the early returns and the campaign by Faggioli, Austen Ivereigh, and others to manipulate the outcome suggest that the arrival of the “synodal church” marks a further stage in this triumph, the Church of pure administration, albeit with administration “democratically” parceled out to committees of lay experts.

Whatever the merits of such reforms, and I am willing to concede there might be some, one can hardly think of a more profound betrayal of the Church’s essence than the Church of pure administration, or a more superficial and undiscerning response to the crisis of Catholicism in the modern world. There is no bureaucratic adjustment, no contrived exercise in artificial “dialogue,” no number of un-habited nuns or lay experts that one can appoint to replace the Catholic vision and the living Christian community that we have done our utmost to destroy, and no amount of historical, political, or sociological analysis that can apprehend what we have lost.

But if Christian Platonism, that is, Catholicism, has ever been true, then it is still true. If “in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God,” if “all things came into being through Him, and without Him not one thing came into being,” then as it was in the beginning is now, and ever shall be. The first principles of reality do not cease to be simply because we are no longer able to apprehend them. If we truly wish to discern the signs of the times, much less believe what we believe, we must begin by attempting to glimpse, through a glass darkly, what we can no longer see and to come to terms with the depths of what we no longer believe.

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DEATH OF A DIALECT

BY SAMUEL SWEENEY



The recent Jewish history of Baghdad is a sad one, and it is nearly at its end. There are only four Jews remaining in the city, and they are all elderly, with no families to replace them. When they die, everything that they have carried on from their ancestors for more than two thousand years will die with them. The decline played out over the course of several generations: in the mid-twentieth century there were about one hundred eighty thousand Jews living in Iraq. About one hundred twenty thousand of them left after the creation of Israel (an event which prompted the Iraqi government to strip Jews of their citizenship and freeze their assets). Over the course of the next several decades, the remaining few thousand trickled out of the country, leaving about eighty by the turn of the century, according to the Jewish historian Mir al-Basri, who himself left the country in the Seventies and settled in London. The American invasion in 2003 only made matters worse. Ever since then, the city's nearly extinct Jewish population has lived in a state of utmost duress.

When I visited Baghdad earlier this year, I had no expectation of meeting any of these remaining Jews. I was, however, interested in their language, a particular dialect of Baghdadi, which is itself a subdialect of Arabic. It will also die with them (at least in the city of Baghdad). And it is not the only dialect in Baghdad that is endangered. The tens of thousands of Christians in the city are also losing their unique dialect. Its fate is tied to the people who speak it, but even their continued presence in the city doesn't guarantee that their dialect will survive, as it melds into the dominant Muslim one. At the same time, emigration is the most pressing

threat to Christianity's continued existence in Baghdad. Some denominations are struggling to maintain their churches in light of a population decline. Those changes are reflections of a larger shift in Baghdad, where it is harder than ever to live as a minority. The study of these dialects might seem to be of minor importance in comparison with the larger issues facing Christians and Jews, but their language is a living symbol of a long and rich history that is in danger of dying out.

Understanding how Baghdad got to this point requires something of a linguistic history lesson. Baghdadi Arabic fits into the larger family of Mesopotamian Arabic, which covers the spoken dialects used roughly across modern Iraq, northeastern Syria, southeastern Turkey, and the Ahvaz region of Iran. Linguists divide this family into two subgroups, based on how they pronounce the word meaning "I said": *qeltu* dialects historically were used mostly in northern Mesopotamia and *gelet* dialects once were found largely in southern Mesopotamia, but now are coming to dominate spoken Arabic across Mesopotamia. The latter now threaten the extinction of the former.

The evidence available suggests that Baghdadis once spoke a *qeltu* dialect. At some point between the Middle Ages and the modern era, however, the dialect underwent a shift from its historical *qeltu* to a *gelet*. Linguists have outlined various theories, but it is likely that after the Mongol invasions (Baghdad was sacked by the Mongols in 1258 and again in 1401), the city was largely emptied of its population, and many of its native inhabitants left. For the Muslim population of Baghdad, the *gelet* dialect of southern Iraq became dominant, likely reflecting an influx of southerners and Bedouins. There is also the possibility that a famine in the

early nineteenth century led to an influx of non-Baghdadis in the city, which would also have reinforced the *gelet* dialect. Linguistic similarities between the modern Jewish dialect of Baghdad and the dialect of Aleppo suggest that at least a sizable portion of Baghdad's Jews went to Aleppo for several centuries before returning to their native city during the Ottoman era. They brought back with them a modified *qeltu* Baghdadi Arabic, but one closer to that originally found in the city than the *gelet* dialect that had taken over since the seventeenth century. Christians also continued to speak a *qeltu* dialect, possibly brought from the city of Mosul.

In the modern era, three major Arabic dialects emerged in the city: Jewish Baghdadi, Christian Baghdadi, and Muslim Baghdadi, the former two *qeltu* dialects reminiscent of medieval Baghdad, while Muslims spoke a *gelet* dialect, reminiscent of southern and Bedouin dialects. The state of affairs held into the mid-twentieth century, but it bears little resemblance to the linguistic picture of Baghdad today. The twentieth century upended Baghdadi society as much as it did the rest of the Middle East. In 1917, the Ottoman government estimated Baghdad's population to be around two hundred thousand, including one hundred thousand Arabs, Turks, and other Muslims; eighty thousand Jews; twelve thousand Christians; and eight thousand Kurds. Other estimates from the same era vary wildly, but the proportions between groups are generally along these lines. The Jews in particular were no token minority, but rather an essential part of the city's life. This diversity was reflected



in the language its residents spoke. The Muslim dialect remained dominant, however, and Christians and Jews normally spoke in the Muslim dialect when dealing with Muslims, and used their own distinct dialect when in their own communities.

In 1964, the Israeli linguist Haim Blanc published a book called *Communal Dialects of Baghdad*, based on field research with the Baghdadi Jewish community that had settled in Israel, as well as recordings of Muslim and Christian Baghdadis speaking Arabic. It defined scholarly understanding of the linguistic picture of the city, and in 1991, Farida Abu-Haidar—herself of Baghdadi Christian parentage—followed up with a more complete study of the Christian dialect, called *Christian Arabic of Baghdad*. She was living in London at the time, and interviewed Baghdadi Christians there. She also obtained recordings of Baghdadi Christians still living in Baghdad. In interviewing those whose families were native to Baghdad, she found a dialect that largely resembled what Haim Blanc had documented in the 1960s, though with increased influence from the surrounding Muslim dialect among the younger generation of Christians. I had these studies in mind when I set off to Baghdad in October 2022 to learn more about the current state of the city's language. I expected to find Christians still speaking this dialect, with a younger generation perhaps adopting a more neutral or Muslim-influenced accent. And I certainly didn't expect to find any Jews. From news reports, I knew there were a few left, but I didn't think it would be realistic to track them down given that they largely keep their identity hidden from outsiders. I was surprised on both counts.

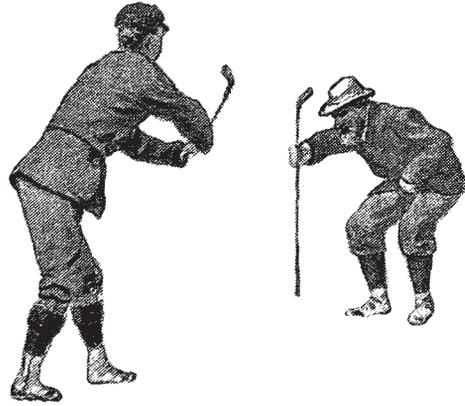
I arrived in Baghdad with a list of Christian contacts (several priests, researchers, and professors of Christian language and history). I was also planning to knock on the doors of as many churches as I could to talk to people, hear them talk, and talk to families who were originally from Baghdad. I was interested in speaking to Christians whose families had come from elsewhere, to see whether they adopted the Christian Baghdadi dialect or a more neutral dialect when they arrived in the city, but it turned out that it's difficult to find any Christians in Baghdad whose families are originally from the city. Over the course of ten days, I spoke to every Christian I could find about his or her family origins and the linguistic features that characterized their home lives. I didn't meet a single Christian who claimed to have Baghdadi origins. Almost everyone said that his family came from Mosul and spoke the dialect of that city, with some others claiming origins in the Aramaic-speaking villages

of the Kurdistan Region or Turkey. I had been warned that this would be the case. I didn't realize that it would be a nearly impossible task to find anyone in the Christian community there whose family history in Baghdad dated to before about 1950. After dozens of conversations in which I was told that I would not find a Christian of Baghdadi origin in Baghdad, I was ready to give up my search. By chance, however, I finally found a person who lived what Haim Blanc and Farida Abu-Haidar documented in their books. That is, someone of purely Baghdadi origin (at least back to the Ottoman era) who could verify that the Christians of Baghdad did indeed speak a *qeltu* dialect resembling both the dialect of Mosul and the dialect of Baghdadi Jews.

Talal Kilano is a retired professor of psychology who grew up in the Baghdad neighborhood of Karrada to parents of Baghdadi extraction. When I met him, I told him he was a difficult person to find, a proper Baghdadi Christian. He expressed surprise, saying that there were many Christians like him of Baghdadi origin, but I protested that walking into a random church in Baghdad, one is almost certain to find a priest of Mosuli origins, who only knows people also originating from Mosul. I had asked people from a wide variety of denominations: Chaldean Catholic, Syriac Catholic, Syriac Orthodox, Armenian Catholic, Roman Catholic, and the Ancient Church of the East.

When I first met Kilano, his accent was hard to distinguish from those around him. When we sat down to our interview, however, he said he would speak in the Baghdadi Christian dialect he grew up using with his family. His descriptions of the language of Baghdad's Christians confirmed much of what was documented in the twentieth century, a narrative of which I had struggled to find evidence in Baghdad today. Even still, Kilano is often mistaken for someone from Mosul. "Even when I get into a taxi," he told me, "if I say a word or two, and the driver is perceptive, he knows right away that I am not from Baghdad, that I'm from Mosul. He doesn't know that I'm from Baghdad originally." Kilano's parents actually spoke Aramaic as their first language, but raised their children in an Arabic speaking household. Baghdad's Christian dialect was a living dialect, still capable of integrating newcomers into it.

Kilano confirmed, however, that his generation is the last to speak the specific Baghdadi Christian dialect, saying that the newer generation have begun to speak the dominant Muslim dialect of Baghdadi Arabic. "This is a sad story



also," he said. Young people often adapt more to the language of their peers than their parents, causing the Christian dialect to be absorbed into the dialect of the surrounding society. Kilano blamed parents as well for not passing this along to their children, causing a loss of Christian identity. In his view, this was a symptom of a larger problem where the younger generation is less tied to their Christian identity, and therefore their Christian values, than previous generations.

When I finished my interview with Kilano, we walked back in the direction of his house and my path onwards in the city. As we passed the Chaldean Catholic cathedral of Baghdad, Mar Yousif (that is, Saint Joseph), it was obvious that an event of some kind was happening. It was a Monday, and the gathering was much too large for a daily Mass. It turned out that to celebrate the two-year anniversary of Pope Francis's visit to Iraq, a number of bishops from France, including the archbishop of Paris, were on a follow-up visit. We entered the church, and watched as about two dozen priests—Iraqi and French alike—concelebrated Mass in French, Arabic, and Syriac. Of the priests on the altar, I had spoken to three during my search for Baghdad's historical Christians; all grew up in Baghdad to parents from Mosul. By the time I found Kilano, I had knocked on the door of about ten churches in Baghdad and had yet to find anyone who explicitly remembered the Christian dialect of Baghdadi Arabic. Most didn't know it had ever existed. A few said that anyone who would remember the Christian presence in Agd al-Nasara and similar neighborhoods in the older part of Baghdad would be elderly, and most of them left Baghdad after the American invasion.

Ultimately, my study of the Baghdadi Christian Arabic dialect led to more questions than answers. (The subject is still wide open for a graduate student in Semitic linguistics looking for an interesting topic, though the security situation in Iraq severely limits academic work.) As for the Jewish dialect, I had planned to study its heritage through books. But, during my search for those who spoke the Christian dialect, an Iraqi priest made a surprising offer: he could introduce me to an Iraqi Jew. I hadn't thought this possible, so I readily agreed.

We met in a discreet location, and she brought a Christian couple with her who knew her identity as one of Iraq's Jews. To outsiders, she usually identifies herself as Christian, a safer answer than Jewish despite the hardships that Iraq's Christian community has gone through in recent years. Even among Christian clergy, she says, she has heard anti-Semitic comments and therefore generally keeps her identity secret. This woman grew up in an already dying community. She was born after most Iraqi Jews left in the early 1950s. Nonetheless, she said that the community still filled one synagogue in her childhood (as opposed to the about thirty-five synagogues that Baghdad had before most of the Jews left). Men prayed downstairs and women upstairs, and prayers were largely in Aramaic. As such, she said, she can understand much of the Syriac prayers used in many of Baghdad's churches. After the last rabbi left in the 1970s, a *hazzan*, or cantor, led prayers for the community. Now, she conducts the prayers, mostly by herself.

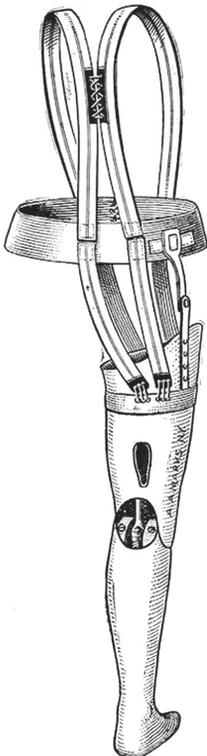
She spent most of the interview describing in minute detail the many holiday traditions that she still carries on. For example, for the Jewish New Year, cucumbers, apples, and honey are standard, as they come directly from the earth. She also throws bread into the water to feed fish, who, like God, do not have eyelids so they are always watching. For Purim, she eats pastries called *odhn al-Haman*, or the ears of Haman. For Passover, unleavened bread and raisin wine. (Later, the woman sent me photos of her preparations for Sukkot and invited me to join. I wasn't able to participate, but was again struck by her commitment to keep on traditions that would likely die with her, at least in Iraq.) I played her a recording of an Iraqi Jew speaking his dialect, and she told the couple who came with her that this was their dialect. It resembled the dialect of Mosul, she said, and pointed out some of the words that were unique to Baghdad's Jews. She said that the four remaining Jews of Baghdad, when together, still speak in this dialect. I didn't have the opportunity to hear this in practice, and I imagine the dialect is diluted from what it once was, but I could be wrong.

Hers is not an easy life. Particularly since 2003, the Jewish community has suffered greatly. She shared details that she asked me not to print, but suffice it to say that being a Jew in Baghdad today presents one of the most difficult sets of circumstances one can imagine. I asked why her parents didn't leave along with everyone else, and she said that at the time life in Iraq was good. "Not like now," she said.

When I finished the interview, I walked back to my hotel. It was only then that the weight of what had just happened began to sink in. I couldn't help but see the oppressor in the faces of everyone I passed. Why does this woman have to keep her identity secret when she's part of a line that extends far beyond both Islam and Christianity? Only one hundred years ago, there were almost as many Jews as Muslims in this city. Jews first arrived in Iraq during the Babylonian exile in 597 B.C. For more than twenty-five hundred years they were an essential part of the country's fabric, and Iraqi Jewry was fundamental in the development of Judaism worldwide. The Babylonian Talmud was compiled in what is now Iraq in the sixth century A.D. In northern Iraq, many Jews (as well as Christians) continued to speak Aramaic, a relic of Iraq's pre-Islamic and pre-Arab past, and some still speak that language in Israel and elsewhere. In Baghdad and elsewhere, they adopted Arabic along with the rest of the population. Long after medieval Baghdadi Arabic ceased to exist, the Jews carried a remnant of that past in their unique dialect. All of that is coming to an abrupt end, and I had the immense honor of meeting one of the last vestiges of that history.



A day or two later, I visited my favorite bookshop in Baghdad, just off Tahrir Square. I explained to the owner that I was looking for books on Jewish history in Baghdad, specifically on language, if such a thing existed. He showed me some books on Iraq's Jewish history, but then he took me out into the street and pointed out some of the houses that once were owned by Jews in the neighborhood. I explained to him that I was working on their language specifically, and he was surprised to hear that they had their own dialect. The man, probably in his sixties, had grown up in a Baghdad where only a handful of Jews remained. His father, no doubt, would have been able to identify the unique Jewish dialect spoken in the streets of Bataween, which sits to the southeast of Tahrir Square and the man's bookshop. Now others inhabit those houses, largely without the permission or knowledge of the original owners, though one Christian resident said that he had neighbors who had agreed with the Jewish owners of their house that they would return it to them if they ever came back. (That agreement will remain a hypothetical, as the reality is simply that Jews will probably never return to Baghdad, at least not in the foreseeable future.) It's unclear whether the Christians themselves will remain. The twentieth century saw the end of the Jewish community in Baghdad, and the twenty-first century threatens to bring about the end of the Christian population.



It may seem that the nuanced linguistic differences between Baghdad's various sects are an issue of obscure academic interest, but the linguistic shift in Baghdad over the twentieth century is emblematic of much larger demographic and social changes. The disappearance of the medieval *qeltu* Baghdadi dialect in favor of a Bedouin and southern-influenced *gelet* was reflective of a massive shift. Bedouins and southerners entered the city from the Mongol invasions onwards, accelerated in the modern era, and formed a critical mass that caused the disappearance of Baghdad's traditional dialect amongst the Muslims of the city. It was likely the social isolation of Christians and Jews that protected them from this trend, though we might see a parallel in the dominance of Mosul's dialect among Baghdad's Christians today.

The linguistic evolution is reflective of a trend within Arab society generally, one that some Arab thinkers have termed the "ruralization" of cities rather than urbanization of rural populations. Writing in 2014, the Syrian writer Yassin al-Haj Saleh pointed to the massive growth of Syria's cities over the course of the twentieth century. He wrote that "most of Syria's cities are in reality new. Decades ago, they were large towns. Even Syria's large and ancient cities—Damascus, Homs, Hama, and Aleppo—were pre-capitalist cities and had a limited energy to integrate [rural incomers]. They were unable to transform peasants into industrial workers."

The Iraqi sociologist Ali al-Wardi applied the same idea to morals and values, seeing that rural Bedouins who moved to the cities of Iraq carried with them value systems that may have made sense in the deserts, but less so in the cities. Following the medieval writer Ibn Khaldoun, al-Wardi distinguished between the values of settled urban dwellers and nomadic Bedouins living in the desert. Each group, he said, developed a value system that suited life in their original environment, but as they moved to a new environment—as nomads settled into Iraq's cities and towns in the modern era—they failed to adapt their value systems to the new environment. To take one example, he wrote, "values in Iraq still carry in their core some of the values of nomadic Bedouins in respecting the victor and scorning the defeated. But these values have been distorted as they left their original environment, and they lost their social function. They still guide behavior, like a psychological complex, without having an objective that is suitable for their new environment."

The trends identified by Yassin al-Haj Saleh and Ali al-Wardi—rural Syrians moving to cities unable to provide them meaningful employment and the

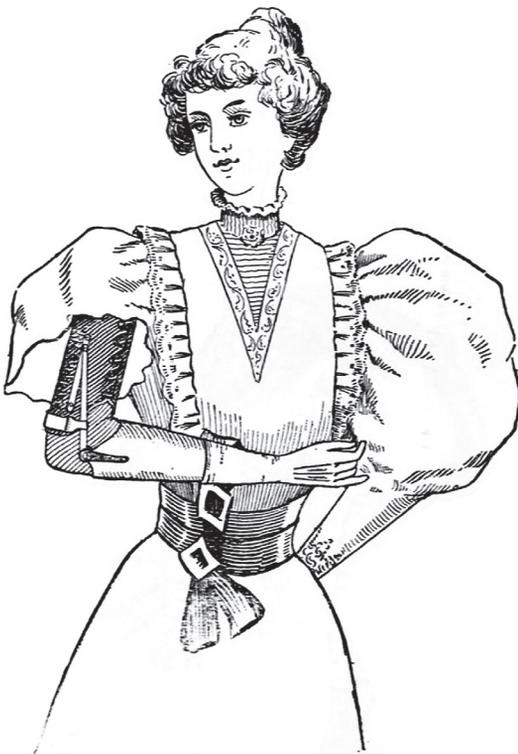
importation of nomadic values into urban Iraqi life—are both reflected by language. Where once a certain urban dialect dominated Baghdad, now a southern and Bedouin dialect has taken its place. The city has become rural, rather than the other way around. While I was interviewing Baghdadis for this piece, several people mentioned that southern dialects have become more common since the U.S. invasion of 2003, prompting a further shift in the language of Iraq's capital city.

Almost everyone to whom I spoke could determine whether someone is Christian on the basis of his or her speech, even those who speak Neo-Aramaic at home. As Talal Kilano pointed out, his Baghdadi Christian dialect is often identified as Mosuli by Baghdadis themselves. The field is wide open for an intrepid linguist who wants to identify what exactly Baghdadi Christian Arabic is today and what distinguishes it from Mosuli Arabic and Muslim and Jewish Baghdadi Arabic, and even from the Baghdadi Christian Arabic before the city filled with Christians from further afield. The Arabic that Baghdadis from Mosuli descent speak today is not exactly Mosuli Arabic. One priest, who grew up in Baghdad to parents from Mosul, said he can tell by his or her accent someone who grew up in Mosul from someone who grew up in Baghdad with Mosuli parents. That matches with my experience in Baghdad; the Arabic I heard Mosuli Christians speaking was neither the Muslim dialect of Baghdad nor the very distinct

dialect of Mosul, though it has much in common with the latter.

The Jewish Baghdadi dialect no longer exists in its native city, and the Christian dialect may be next. Not even all Christians have to leave Baghdad for their unique dialect to all but disappear. A few of the Christians of Baghdadi origin that I found were unaware that their forbears spoke a distinct dialect from their Muslim neighbors. As their numbers dwindle, this phenomenon can only increase, and even Christians who have preserved the Mosuli dialect will begin speaking just like the Muslims around them. This has always been the norm when dealing with Muslims, for both Christians and Jews. They switched to the dominant Muslim dialect of Baghdad in dealing with their Muslim neighbors and used their own only internally. But this is only sustainable if there is a critical mass of speakers that allow one to speak to enough Christians every day to maintain a unique and distinct dialect. Modern media pushes linguistic integration even faster, as children begin watching cartoons and hearing the television in the dominant dialect, similar to how in modern America children in suburban Atlanta now sound about the same as children in Seattle.

While waiting for an appointment in Baghdad, I entered a barber shop to pass some time. The barber, an ethnic Turkmen from Baghdad, said that the neighborhood around his shop on Palestine Street used to be filled with Christians. He had recently spoken with a Christian friend now living in Michigan, who said he wished he had stayed and been killed in Baghdad rather than wait out his years in a strange country. The barber hoped some of the Christians who had left would return, a sentiment I hear often from Baghdadis. When I mentioned this to a Christian couple I was talking to, they dismissed this as an empty platitude. They said that people say they want Christians to stay, but their actions reflect the opposite. Nonetheless, many Christians stay because it is their city, and has been for centuries. The younger generation of Baghdadi Christians may have lost the accent of their grandparents, but perhaps their linguistic integration marks the beginning of integration into a society that has shut out Christians for much of Islamic history in Iraq. For now, the weight of available evidence is against that hope.



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THE CONSOLATION OF MARTIN LUTHER

BY EDMUND WALDSTEIN



he lowest sort of readers, C.S. Lewis argues in *An Experiment in Criticism*, read tabloid news stories and cheap novels as an aid to “egoistic castle-building.”

That is, they read stories that help them to build castles in the air—stories of previously unappreciated women who suddenly become the objects of the overwhelming passion of rich and desirable men, or stories of men sunk in the drudgery of unprofitable wage labor who suddenly become rich beyond the dreams of avarice, or of awkward teenage boys who suddenly find themselves enjoying orgies of sensuality. The charm of such stories is that they support the egoistic fantasies of success and pleasure to which such readers are already prone. This charm is particularly sought by the lowest sort of reader, but I think that it is a charm that most readers (or viewers of narrative film) have felt at one time or another.

I remember once, when I was struggling to finish my dissertation in theology, a confrère lent me a D.V.D. of a film entitled *Limitless*, in which a young man struggles to write his first novel while contending with writer’s block and a general lack of focus and drive. Suddenly, he obtains an extraordinary drug that so heightens his powers of attention, memory, imagination, and thought that he is able to finish the novel in a matter of days. Not only does he finish it; he makes it into a masterpiece. The drug enables him to learn foreign languages with ease, to reconstruct complicated

academic debates from a few fragments of memory, and to predict the future of the stock market. That last ability is somewhat unfortunate, because after the first twenty minutes or so of the film the protagonist turns from interesting things like writing the Great American Novel to the crushingly boring business of making his fortune on Wall Street. But those first twenty minutes are an extraordinary work of vicarious castle-building. What could a struggling dissertation writer not do with such a drug? What languages and authors could he not master? What subtle treatises on theology and philosophy could he not write? What depths of understanding could he not reach?

On reflection, however, possible side effects to such a drug occurred to me. For example, the preternatural strengthening of memory might lead one to be so oppressed by what is sad and shameful in one’s past that it would be unbearable. Based on that reflection, I posted on social media that it would be interesting to make a film about a similar drug that results in people being overwhelmed by sorrow and shame. To my very great surprise, a number of people responded that Catholicism was precisely such a drug. My own experience of Catholicism is so different. The sacrament of confession, in particular, has always been a great help to me to consign what is past to the past. The knowledge that I have been forgiven allows the past to fade. Not that penitents emerging from the confessional forget their sins as completely as Dante emerging from the river Lethe, but no longer

burdening the conscience, the sins can be allowed to fade into the background of the memory.

One ought, of course, not to attribute too much importance to the emotional effects of confession. What is essential is the objective absolution that is effected by the sacrament, independent of the emotional state of the penitent. The contrition (or at least attrition) that is necessary to receive forgiveness of sins is a matter of the will, a spiritual faculty, not of the emotions or passions that are found at the sensitive level of the soul. Nevertheless, under normal circumstances, to know that one has been forgiven is a consolation that is felt at an emotional level as well. As a priest, I am privileged to see this often. I remember one person who confessed to me many years ago. This person had committed a serious sin against the Fifth Commandment. She said that for sixteen years she had been fleeing from herself, not admitting to herself what she had done, working day and night to distract herself from herself. But now she was ready to give up. She said that she could not imagine that God could forgive her. And then she admitted what she had done in floods of tears, in which sorrow was mingled with relief. When I gave her absolution, I could see the sorrow turn to joy. The words of Jeremias occurred to me: "And I will turn their mourning into joy, and will comfort them, and make them joyful after their sorrow."

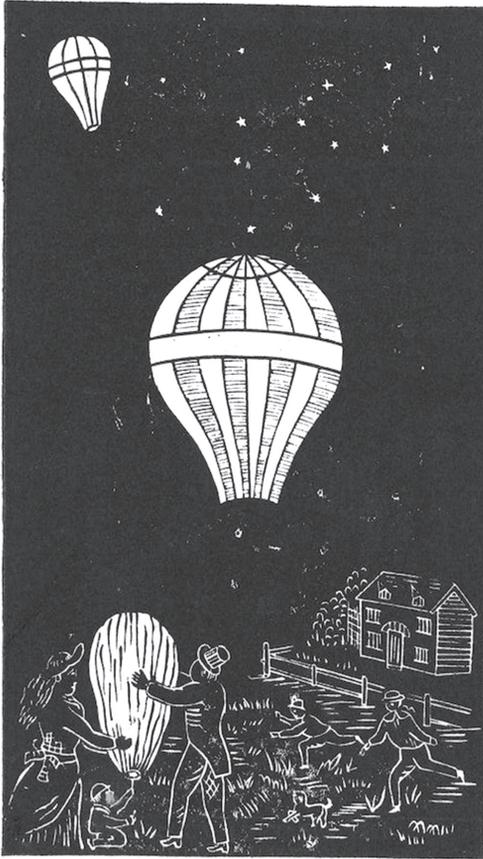
Sometimes, however, the spiritual reality has no emotional effect. Spiritual writers tell us that this can have various causes. At times God withdraws sensible consolations from the soul for purposes of purification. When received in the right spirit, this can be very good for the soul. At other times, there is an obstacle due to some emotional disorder. For example, the embarrassment of admitting one's shame can so dominate the emotions that relief is not felt. Or some hidden emotional wound can impede the feeling of joy. This is usually no great difficulty, but to a soul that puts too much importance on emotional effects, it can lead to doubt in the efficacy of the sacrament. I remember one penitent who kept on confessing the same sin that had been absolved many times, because, lacking the emotional relief that she sought, she could not believe that she had been absolved.

The dangers of such confusion are shown in the life of Martin Luther. In his *Sermon on the Sacrament of Penance* of 1519, Luther gives a beautiful description of the emotional effects of absolution: "people's sins no longer bite or make them uneasy, but rather that a joyful confidence, that God has forgiven them their sins forever, overwhelms them." But Luther shows a fatal misunderstanding of what

he is talking about when he identifies these sensible consolations with the reality of forgiveness: "this is what true forgiveness of sins really means." Luther was a passionate man, with a great capacity for profound feeling. Such a passionate heart is a good thing in itself, but, as Jacques Maritain argued in *Three Reformers*, it led Luther to put too much importance on "that experimental savoring of piety, that assurance in feeling, which God sends to souls to draw them to Himself." Luther does not recognize the essential truth that God gives such quasi-experiential signs of His presence as a mere means. Divine grace itself cannot be an object of the senses, not even of the interior senses. Therefore, in the normal course of the spiritual life, God at times removes such sensible consolations, plunging the soul into the "night of sense" in order to purify the soul from too great an attachment to what is secondary, and lead the soul to cleave to God with pure faith.

Luther was, of course, very much in favor of cleaving to God with pure faith. But he came to a very odd understanding of what faith is. In the same sermon, Luther writes, "It may happen that God does not let a person sense the forgiveness of guilt so that the turbulence and uneasiness of conscience persist after the sacrament as before." Why is this so?, Luther asks. "The deficiency," he claims, "is in faith." How does he know that it is lack of





faith that causes the uneasiness of conscience? “It is impossible that the heart would not be joyful when it believes its sins are forgiven, just as it is impossible that it not be troubled and uneasy when it does not believe its sins are forgiven.” Luther does not even consider that there might be some emotional barrier to feeling the effects of forgiveness, even though faith in Christ, at the spiritual summit of the soul, remains unshaken.

In his patient refutation of Luther, Cardinal Cajetan showed that Luther fails to distinguish between the supernatural faith in the salvation of Christ, and in the efficacy of the sacraments in general, and an acquired trust in the particular application of grace to a person in this moment. As Cajetan shows, the first kind of faith is faith in the strict sense—one can be absolutely certain that Christ atoned for all sins on the cross, and that He applies that atonement to His members through the efficacy of the sacraments. I cannot, however, have the same absolute certitude that the sacrament that I am receiving now is efficacious, since there might be some obstacle that I am interposing (for example, an intention to continue committing the sin that I have confessed). Nevertheless, I can have a reasonable (acquired) faith that, if I am not conscious of any such obstacle, the sacrament I am receiving now is indeed efficacious.

Luther, however, identifies supernaturally infused faith with the trust in the application of Christ’s grace to me here and now. This results in a paradox. While Luther’s concern is to have the soul turning away from trust in itself and its acts (contrition, works of satisfaction, indulgences) and to trust in Christ alone, the actual conclusion that he comes to is that the soul has to rely on its own subjective certitude in Christ’s forgiveness. For all his railing against self-dependence, Luther makes forgiveness depend on a castle the soul builds in the air.

Luther’s own experience of confession was deeply ambivalent. At times he clearly received deep consolation from the Sacrament. Ten years after the *Sermon on the Sacrament of Penance*, Luther wrote an *Exhortation to Confession*, expressing his distress at the fact that his followers had all but abandoned this “splendid, precious, and comforting thing.” Having hollowed out the whole substance of confession; having denied that the sacrament is efficacious through the authority entrusted to the Church, and that the jurisdiction of the Church is necessary to judge whether the penitent has contrition and to assign a suitable penance to make satisfaction for the temporal harm caused by the sin; and having asserted that the same effect as confession could be achieved by simply turning to God in one’s heart, Luther is then surprised that his followers no longer feel the need to embarrass themselves by telling their sins to a minister! Luther here falls prey in an almost comical way to an illusion typical of modern churchmen: that the removal of an obligation will make people more willing to do the action to which the obligation bound them. But the illusion is very revealing of Luther’s own experience of confession.

Luther writes that “we all know from experience” that the rule requiring everyone to go to confession once a year, and to confess all the mortal sins they have committed since their last confession, is a “heavy burden and torture.” The torture for Luther was not principally the shame of admitting his guilt (as it would be for a more pusillanimous soul), but rather the doubt that he felt as to whether he had actually confessed all his sins. Luther’s modern biographers—such as Erik Erikson and Lyndal Roper—have offered plausible psychological explanations for this, such as his disturbed relations with his father, whom he felt he could never satisfy, no matter how much he did to please him. Carried over into his relation to God, this made Luther feel that he had never done enough. The famous story of Luther’s first Mass, where he was filled with panic at the beginning of the Canon

when he had to say the words “To you, most merciful Father,” is understandable in this light.

Luther’s errors on penance are prototypically modern in their replacement of the objective good with the subjective effects of receiving that good. This also explains the early Luther’s polemics against the eudemonism of scholastic ethics. For Luther, to desire God as one’s happiness is to subordinate God to oneself, to make God a means to one’s own subjective satisfaction. Hence, he tells us, the natural desire for happiness is perverse. As he puts it in the *Heidelberg Disputation*: “Man is by nature unable to want God to be God. Indeed, he himself wants to be God, and does not want God to be God.” To the greatest scholastic theologians, by contrast, to love God as one’s happiness is to order oneself to God as the true good in which one participates, it is to love God as a common good to which one is subordinated like a part to a whole. This is a point that interpreters of Luther have not always fully appreciated. (Even Maritain obscures the point because of his own personalist misunderstanding of the common good.) On this point, Luther is the true father of modern philosophy.

Luther was, however, too great a soul to be consistent in his errors. Thus, at times he speaks of the goodness of God as a fountain of goodness

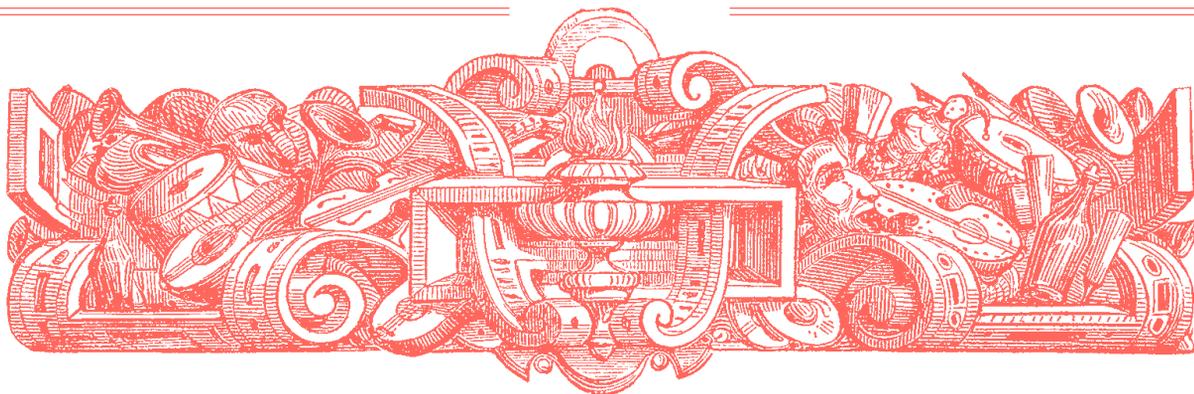
in which we participate, in a way that should have given him the solution to his objections against scholasticism. For example, in the Large Catechism, Luther explains the First Commandment by discussing how God is the source of all temporal and eternal goods in creatures. He concludes by pointing to a pseudo-etymology of the word *Gott* in German, which he connects to the word *gut* (good). German, he says, patriotically expresses the nature of God “more elegantly and appropriately than any other language,” since God is in truth “an eternal fountain which gushes forth abundantly nothing but what is good, and from which flows forth all that is and is called good.”

Luther’s heart was vehemently devoted to that fountain of goodness. And his genius for expressing that devotion, and its emotional effects, in words explains his extraordinary persuasive power. This is shown even in his translation of the Bible, which is by far my favorite translation into a modern language. I find the straightforward, forceful simplicity of Luther’s rendering deeply moving.

Perhaps my love of the Luther translation is partly due to its association with the cantatas and passion music of Johann Sebastian Bach. In the scene of Peter’s tears in Bach’s *Saint Matthew Passion* we have one of the greatest artistic expressions of the joy of forgiveness, which Luther had felt so strongly, and so perilously. The recitative takes the text of Luther’s translation: *Und ging heraus und weinete bitterlich*. (And he went out and wept bitterly). The melisma on the word *weinete* (wept) is not as extended as in the *Saint John Passion*, but it is somehow even more disconsolately sad. But then Bach follows the recitative with an aria which turns bitter sadness into sweet sadness. The text of the aria by Picander (itself based on a sermon of the great Lutheran theologian Heinrich Müller), turns the tears into a prayer for mercy. But it is Bach’s music which makes it into a piercingly moving portrayal of the sweetness of contrition, that sadness which is at the same time somehow joy. Bach here brings to expression what is most powerful in the Lutheran tradition. Listening to that aria, I cannot but be sorrowful for what became of Luther and his followers. Properly ordered, Luther’s passionate experience of the joy of forgiveness could have been the source of so much good. But having been given the wrong interpretation, it led away from the fresh air of the spirit into a dark castle of the soul, from which the world has yet to escape.



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ARTS AND LETTERS



STAND AND STARE

AFTER IMPRESSIONISM: INVENTING MODERN ART

The National Gallery
March 25–August 13, 2023

CEZANNE

Tate Modern
October 5, 2022–March 12, 2023

BY JASPREET
SINGH BOPARAI

In *A Moveable Feast*, Ernest Hemingway speaks about “learning something from the painting of Cézanne that made writing simple true sentences far from enough to make the stories have the dimensions that I was trying to put in them. I was learning very much from him but I was not articulate enough to explain it to anyone. Besides it was a secret.” Hemingway never quite revealed what this secret was. We know that when he was living in Paris writing the stories that

make up his first collection, *In Our Time*, he frequently spent early afternoons in the Musée du Luxembourg staring at the three landscapes by Paul Cézanne that were on display there. It was his substitute for eating lunch. He was by no means starving: his midday hunger was by choice. It helped him concentrate his attention on the pictures.

What did he see in them? These days, nobody seems to understand how to look at Cézanne’s paintings, or anyone else’s, for that matter. At a recent Cézanne exhibition in London at the Tate Modern, it often seemed impossible to see anything. Modern museum-goers have the habit of standing no more than five or six feet away from the canvases that they are pretending to enjoy. Much of this is simply the result of macular degeneration, of course. But most people also seem to think that this sort of close-up scrutiny is how cultured, educated people ought to behave when looking at art.

Obviously you cannot inspect a miniature portrait, or an Old Master drawing or engraving, except up close, otherwise you will be unable to see the details which amount to the main reason to

look at these things in the first place. But paintings are different, at least in the Western tradition. Any oil painting that is larger than a standard laptop computer ought ideally to be examined from ten feet away or more, and most pictures are created to be viewed from at least twenty feet away. Cézanne seems to have created much of his best work to be viewed from a distance of thirty or forty feet, ideally without half a dozen old people’s heads in one’s way.

When you stand far enough away from a Cézanne to see it properly, you begin to see that the blocky masses of color and seeming crudeness of how the paint is handled are not, in fact, important. Cézanne is trying to render light and color as they are experienced by someone who is standing too far away from what he is looking at to register details. Once you realize what he is trying to do, he becomes far more “realistic” than a photo-realist. His effects can be startling, but only if you look at his pictures from a distance that enables you comfortably to ignore the finer points of his technique. You are not supposed to notice the technical elements or care

about them.

Cézanne was an eccentric artist, to be sure. He was weak in many of the conventional technical skills that even his most mediocre contemporaries could take for granted—perhaps this is why his pictures look so good from forty feet away. Only a genius can overcome a lack of basic competence, and even then only through patient, dogged hard work. But once you have learned how to look at—or through—his pictures, and see what he is trying to make you see, then you can begin training yourself to engage more deeply with the entire Western tradition of art.

Cézanne, like every other artist who was active from the 1860s onwards, had to grapple with the ever-growing popularity of still photography. Prior to the advent of the snapshot, well-trained draughtsmen and painters were indispensable where recording and preserving visual information was concerned. But at least he could rely on an audience that was not yet substantially different from previous generations in the way that it looked at pictures. In fact, this was one of Cézanne's greatest professional obstacles as an artist: he was painting in a world where even the most sensitive and refined connoisseurs could not look beyond his obvious basic weaknesses. He struggled painfully to find ways of communicating something that nobody else had expressed before him, and few others could see. But how was anybody to see his genius, or trust his judgment, when he could barely compete with his contemporaries when it came to depicting conventional subjects in an ordinary manner?

Throughout his life, Cézanne was confronted with the reality that only other geniuses could grasp when he was trying to make people see. He himself did not

have the natural talent easily to make his insights visible or comprehensible to normal people. Or to other great painters: Édouard Manet, one of the most pivotal figures in modern art, dismissed Cézanne as “a mason who paints with a trowel.” In fact, Manet refused to participate in the Impressionists' first exhibition in April 1874 because he did not consider Cézanne a peer. To be fair to Manet, much of Cézanne's work from before 1880 is awkward, and some of it is simply awful. Even with hindsight it can be difficult to see much promise in him. He often appears to be inept rather than innovative; certain “experimental” elements in the early work could easily be mistaken for clumsy shortcuts. We only know that there is something worth staring at in Cézanne's pictures thanks to the efforts of fellow geniuses, including Camille Pissarro, who was the father of the Impressionist movement—and perhaps of the “Post-Impressionists” too (he was as shrewd as he was generous).

It makes sense to look at Cézanne first if you are trying to learn how to look at pictures: he had little interest in symbolism, imagery, metaphor, narrative, or any of the elements in a painting that require explanation. He simply wanted his viewers to see what he saw, in the simplest possible sense. This idea seems easy enough to grasp at the most basic verbal level. Even so, Cézanne's original audience was in many senses far too sophisticated and visually literate to sympathize with such a radical aim. We moderns suffer from the opposite problem.

Even talented artists no longer have much opportunity to develop any sensitivity to painting. Photography is partly to blame, although of course our entire mass culture is so deeply

saturated with images that we now need consciously to practice how to stare at things that are not digital images on screens. Purely as “recording technologies,” painting and drawing have been overtaken by photography, just as the oral transmission of poetry had been overtaken by written verse when writing was invented. But no mere mechanical innovation can render an entire tradition obsolete: only a culture can do this, collectively, and with a great deal of coercion from a society's more influential leaders. It takes effort, will, and excellent luck to subvert a tradition once it takes root.

From around the First World War onwards, the increasing sophistication of motion pictures presented interesting problems for visual artists seeking to reflect or illuminate the modern world. The advent first of widespread television, then of computers, and finally of smartphones and tablet computers as virtual necessities in every household in the (self-described) “civilized world” has changed the way in which most of us handle visual information. Yet the process is hardly irreversible. To see Cézanne more or less as Hemingway learned to see him takes a certain amount of patience and effort. But there is no special gift involved in learning how to look. You simply need to train yourself to stand at an appropriate distance and stare.



Cézanne's pictures are easy to read, in the sense that there is no complicated intellectual content. There is never a sense that an ignorant viewer will ever miss anything in looking at one of his landscapes, portraits, or still lifes. Old Master paintings, by contrast, have the power to intimidate and even demoralize us because we always think we know too little to be able to understand them. Essays on the Old Masters in exhibition catalogues are often the opposite of informative: there is so much knowledge taken for granted that they make most readers feel illiterate and uncultured.

Gert Schiff's 1988 anthology *German Essays on Art History: Winckelmann, Burckhardt, Panofsky, and Others* (part of Bloomsbury's Continuum German Library series) is perhaps the best single short introduction to art writing available, featuring perceptive and influential essays by some of the greatest names in German literature, academic history, and art history, from the mid-eighteenth century to just before the Second World War. You can learn a lot from this volume; the most important single lesson it teaches is that great thinkers can teach you nothing about looking at paintings.

Most art writing is similar to literary criticism, in that it generally amounts to an attempt indirectly to discuss some other, more urgent, subject. Often it serves as a form of stealth indoctrination: if you can shape how your readers approach, examine, and think about a given subject, you have the opportunity to mold and influence their thinking on more urgent materials as well. It would be paranoid to assume that this is a conscious process in all but a minority of instances. Also there is nothing necessarily sinister about using

art writing or literary criticism as a vehicle for other thoughts. Yet throughout the twentieth century these things have so often been used as Trojan horses that a little suspicion and skepticism seems warranted.

German Essays on Art History is a reminder that there is no such thing as "neutral" or "objective" art history. This is such an obvious point that it seems impossible for most of us to internalize it, or recognize its full import. If you have an idea of how to look at pictures, art history is useful for establishing names and dates, and pinning down facts, data, and evidence. But it can teach you nothing until you have acquired the confidence that can only come with hundreds of hours spent in galleries and museums staring at images, burning their details in your memory, then letting your memory and imagination play over each other as you gradually develop something like an independent sense of judgement.

Ernst Gombrich first published *The Story of Art* in 1950. This is one of the only useful histories of art for the beginner, other than the works of Kenneth Clark, the other titan of twentieth-century art history. Yet even these men, the greatest public educators British society has ever known, can only take you so far. Their work has inflamed the passions of amateur connoisseurs for decades; their tastes are an education in themselves. But have either of these men ever influenced or inspired the creation of great art?

This might be an unfair question; indeed it might be wholly irrelevant to the question of how one goes about the process of looking at pictures. Also, it could be argued that twentieth-century Britain was too busy losing its empire, destabilizing its own society, and making itself weak,

uncomfortable, and ugly (particularly in its cities) to be hospitable to the creation of great art. A shrinking, decaying, self-loathing society rarely creates anything that can last through the ages, other than cautionary tales based on its own self-destructive tendencies.

But I'll insist on the question anyway, at the risk of possible unfairness: if one were to go through Clark's or Gombrich's work and isolate principles, virtues, and a fundamental philosophy from the chosen body of text, and identify a coherent attitude towards reality, would this prove to be viable as the basis for creating a durable work of art, or literature, in a society where such things were possible?

The question might not be unfair. After all, we simply want to ask whether it seems possible to reflect or illuminate reality permanently based on what Clark or Gombrich tried to teach their vast respective audiences during their many decades as public intellectuals. It might well be. Then again, these men were scholars, not poets or philosophers. Their achievements were necessarily of limited scope and application. Perhaps they could only teach you to look at art in the ways that scholars do. This is nothing to sneer at: how many of us could hope to rise above that modest level?

Scholars are distinguished from the rest of us, at least in



theory, by their mental stamina, intellectual discipline, and demonstrable competence in some field of expertise. This does not necessarily make them more perceptive than the rest of us. What about poets, novelists, or other creative artists? If they can reveal various aspects and elements of the world to us, or teach us something about ourselves, surely they might also be able to shed light on the activities of seers who work in other media.

We might almost think that Hemingway was bluffing in his comments about learning from Cézanne, were it not for the fact that his early short stories are so startlingly original and evocative in a way that nobody else successfully accomplished before him. It might be impossible to look at Cézanne through his eyes, but at least he left us clues to help us see those pictures as he saw them. In a deleted section from the manuscript of his story “Big Two-Hearted River,” he wrote:

He wanted to write like Cézanne painted. Cézanne started with all the tricks. Then he broke the whole thing down and built the real thing. . . . He, Nick, wanted to write about country so it would be there like Cézanne had done it in painting. You had to do it from inside yourself. There wasn't any trick. Nobody had ever written about country like that. He felt almost holy about it. It was deadly serious. You could do it if you would fight it out. If you'd lived right with your eyes. . . . Nick, seeing how Cézanne would do the stretch of river and the swamp, stood up and stepped down into the stream. The water was cold and actual. He waded across the stream, moving in the picture.

Whether or not you find this illuminating perhaps depends on whether you have the capacity to think in non-linear terms.

Fewer of us have this capacity than we realize.

Yet Hemingway does seem to be onto something here. Without quite articulating it directly, he has managed to express a shrewd insight into Cézanne's technique of transforming his perceptions into art. Admittedly, he has done this purely as a means of “thinking aloud,” and working out the sorts of issues that are best discussed in an essay. This is why the quoted passage was cut from “Big Two-Hearted River.” Such content could only violate the simplicity that the young Hemingway imposed on himself as an aesthetic criterion—perhaps a little too strictly.

Hemingway ended up learning the wrong lessons from his own insights: after publishing his masterpiece *A Farewell to Arms*, he failed to develop as an artist. Instead, he ended up compromising his artistic integrity by fixating on a simple style as an end in itself. A style as radically simple as Cézanne's can only be adopted if you are communicating something that cannot be expressed in any other manner. Otherwise you condemn yourself to bluntness, crudeness, and the middlebrow vulgarity of virtually everything Hemingway wrote after 1930. But his unfortunate degeneration as an artist takes nothing away from his early achievements, or the truth of what he perceived—and tried to learn from—in Cézanne.



Hemingway is neither the first nor the greatest major writer to explore his own insights into great art. Many of the most important French writers of the nineteenth century wrote extensively about painting. The most keen-sighted of all was Stendhal, who was not only the inventor of the modern French novel but also a perceptive connoisseur of art, no less than of music. In fact, his tastes appear to have been superhumanly refined. He was in no way prissily fastidious; rather he had an extraordinary knack for identifying mediocrity that the rest of us might not merely tolerate, but even fail to notice altogether.

For all his genius, I cannot really recommend any of Stendhal's writings on art to anyone who is not already steeped in both art history and Stendhal. Stendhal's tendencies towards laziness, dishonesty, self-indulgence, and general lack of discipline (except when creating prose fiction) render many of his review essays on painting all but unreadable, to say nothing of his (sometimes brilliant, sometimes embarrassing, largely plagiarized) history of Italian painting. His best writing on art is found in passing, in his letters, or in ruminative passages in his travel books or charmingly unreliable memoirs. You can even stumble on it here and there in his one disastrous attempt to write a book on art history, where there are some astonishingly sympathetic passages on Renaissance painters. But he never wanted to dwell for too long on other creators' greatness when he fixated so intently on attaining a little greatness himself.

Hemingway, with the straightforward guilelessness of an old-fashioned Midwesterner, ended up revealing more or less everything he learned from Cézanne. Stendhal was much

more self-protective: his discussions of painters and painting were ultimately intended to remind readers that they were in the presence of an adorable genius. From anyone else, such a claim would be hubristic; but nobody has ever successfully proved Stendhal wrong on this point.

Even less reliable than Stendhal is Baudelaire, who was surely the greatest French poet of the nineteenth century, but also stands as the most prominent art critic of the period. Many of his essays remain influential, not least his criticism of official “salons,” and his seminal “manifesto” of 1863, *The Painter of Modern Life*. Baudelaire was a magician with words; his prose remains charming and seductive. But when it comes to art, he tells *his* truth, not *the* truth; his real concern is to develop ideas that will ultimately ripen in his own poetry. Pictures are never more than an incidental or secondary concern.

Baudelaire and Stendhal died before things really became interesting in French art. For both men, the greatest living painter was Eugène Delacroix, who was a captivating writer in his own right (in his letters, and his later journal entries, if not the essays that were published during his lifetime). But Delacroix was a sort of transitional figure at best: his contemporaries all hailed him as an innovator and a visionary, mainly because there was nobody else around who seemed able or willing to assume such a role. Then, shortly after he died, everything changed.



The Franco-Prussian War disrupted French culture to a degree that seemed impossible for most of us to imagine until the last several years of worldwide catastrophe. There are excellent reasons to claim that “modern art” began in France at some point during the 1860s, 1863 being the usual date provided by those who hold this view, because that was the year when Manet exhibited his then-scandalous *Le Déjeuner sur l’herbe*—“Lunch on the Grass”—featuring two fully-clothed dandies picnicking casually with a naked woman while a scantily clad second woman bathes in the background. *Le Déjeuner sur l’herbe* is a picture of some historical importance, to be sure. Yet its impact has grown dull. The precise subject is difficult to make out, and in technical terms the picture is surprisingly awkward: Manet, for all his daring, appears to have lost his nerve and faltered. As a painting, this feels unfinished and under-thought in many sections. Artistically it seems incoherent, as though the image were held together by a collection of ideas that were never fully explored before Manet decided to begin putting his brush to the canvas. The picture is certainly provocative in its attempt to stage an erotic scene from a Renaissance painting in modern dress. Without the pretence of a tale from ancient Greek mythology, or the prestige of a literary precedent in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, the scene seems a little sleazy, and that is precisely the point. But what is the point of the point?

Manet, for all his intelligence, energy, and gifts, lacked both the technical mastery and the visionary quality to capitalize fully on his instincts and insights about reality, and the purpose of art. His work sometimes requires interpreters to explain how he was reacting to now-obscure



contemporary situations, or alluding to paintings by Goya and Velázquez that are no longer well known even among the cultured public. As a result, his most important canvases can seem almost as dated as the supposedly pompous, official “academic” paintings that he so despised.

“Modern art,” as it began to be conceived in the mid-nineteenth century among Parisian painters, was meant to be an escape from texts, learning, and all the detritus of civilised culture, into a world of pure perception and sensation. This sometimes led artists to choose their subjects not from history books but newspaper headlines or contemporary literature. As a result, “accessible” art from the period often turns out to require far more interpretative text and scholarly explanation for today’s viewers than even the most complex compositions produced by the Old Masters before the French Revolution. “Modern artists” tried actively to compete with photography in capturing fleeting moments and impressions. Everyone’s favorite colorful Impressionist paintings are essentially arrangements of pure color that convincingly reproduce certain atmospheric effects in sunlight. There are also urban scenes: Edgar Degas and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec surpass all others in capturing elements of cities. Only Degas and Toulouse-Lautrec ever succeeded in showing both the glamour and the sordid melancholy of Parisian nightlife during the Belle Époque.

Degas, Toulouse-Lautrec, and Cézanne are unquestionably the most important painters of their period, with Degas as the greatest, Toulouse-Lautrec the most naturally virtuosic, and Cézanne the most weirdly original. Not only could they create images that no camera would ever be able to capture; they also produced work that photographs badly, and never quite succeeds in reproduction (something they have in common with many of the Old Masters). Unlike their peers, these men defeated photography completely. Their finest work will never grow stale.

For many of us, not least in America, the finest, most accomplished paintings we can conveniently experience in person were produced between the 1870s and the First World War. Those who do not live in Paris, London, New York, Boston, Chicago, Washington, Philadelphia, or some other city that provides easy access to good examples of the most influential “modern art” will often feel tempted to learn about painting from books. This is a mistake. The photographs in expensively produced exhibition catalogues are useful mainly to jog your memory about a picture you might have seen. Otherwise, such books are best left on coffee tables to impress and intimidate visitors.

If you read academic studies on Cézanne, you might never guess that from 1891 he was a regular Mass-goer, devoted almsgiver, and serious Catholic. The fact shames and embarrasses art historians, who cannot accommodate this reality in their various preferred narratives. To miss this point is to miss everything of importance in Cézanne’s art. Once you start to notice the absences and distortions in art historians’ accounts of their chosen subjects, you begin slowly to

trust your own eyes, instincts, and judgments. The young Hemingway turns out to have been right: no matter where you come from, you can pick up everything you need to know from repeatedly contemplating pictures by Cézanne during your lunch hour. Everything else follows from there, as long as you are prepared to stand back, focus, and blink every now and again.

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UNREAL NEWMAN

THINKING AS THOUGH
GOD EXISTS: NEWMAN
ON EVANGELIZING THE
“NONES”

Ryan N.S. Topping
Angelico Press, pp. 186, \$26.00

BY EDWARD SHORT

If the good books on Saint John Henry Newman are few and far between, the bad ones are of a stupefying profusion. Why so bright and charming a man as Newman should have given rise to so many dull, slack, lifeless books is mystifying. Of course, it is easy to see why he inspires detractors. Dull men always resent their brilliant betters. Yet here I am not referring to Newman’s detractors but to those who cannot write of the man without distorting him. It is regrettable that an author as well-intentioned as Ryan N.S. Topping should fall into such a category, but there it is: *Thinking as Though God Exists: Newman on Evangelizing the “Nones”* is a seriously flawed book.

We might start with the title. What does Topping’s title say about him and his book? Well, it says that he not only writes but thinks with startling slovenliness. In his introduction, he says that Newman is “an excellent guide for contemporary pilgrims who wish to live in the light of both reason and revelation, that is to say, those who wish to think and act *as though God exists*.” What does this mean? That Newman recommends the Christian faith to his readers as a possibility? If one says that one should think and act *as though God exists*, one is necessarily positing the possibility that He might not exist. And Newman never recommends the faith thus. He insists that to have faith is to have certain faith. Topping needs to acquaint himself



with the convert’s own work on the subject. Doubtful faith, for Newman, is no faith at all: it is a contradiction in terms.

Topping’s characterization of Newman is wildly off the mark elsewhere. “Too many of us, both inside and outside the Church,” he writes, “without tradition, without faith, without fealty, now find ourselves rootless and reeling upon a sea without sight of the shore. In his youth, Newman sailed on similar waters, arriving at his true port only after a tempestuous voyage.” Putting aside the author’s unenviable English, one has to ask what he can mean by suggesting that Newman in youth was “rootless and reeling,” or, worse, “without tradition,” “without faith,”

and “without fealty.” In youth, Newman knew his catechism by heart, he delighted in the Bible, he exulted in dogma, and even after he was received into the Church, he was careful to say that “I was not conscious to myself . . . of any change, intellectual or moral, wrought in my mind. I was not conscious of firmer faith in the fundamental truths of Revelation.” And as for fealty, the young Newman’s well-known devotion to Charles I makes mincemeat of that claim.



Another passage from the book tells us even more of the author’s unfamiliarity with Newman and his age. “After a long and arduous search,” he tells us, “Newman forsook his eminent position as a man of letters within English society to join the Church of Rome.” Of course, in leaving the Anglican Church, Newman was not searching for anything; he was simply recognizing more and more clearly that the Erastian Church of England was a worldly fraud—a “wreck,” as he called it. Secondly, as an Anglican, he never saw himself, nor was he seen by others, as “a man of letters.” Yes, he wrote an incomparably supple English, but as a churchman, not a litterateur. First and last, Newman devoted himself to the cure of souls: literary fame meant nothing to

him. Thirdly, to say that Newman, of all people, as an Anglican or Catholic, had anything to do with “English society” is comical. Topping tells his readers that they should read biographies of his subject. No, Topping should read the biographies: he clearly is unfamiliar with the details of the life.

Elsewhere Topping claims: “Even though the religious landscape has altered in ways that Newman could not have anticipated, he was right in this, secularism, fueled by practical atheism, remains the Church’s great threat.” This is false. Newman did anticipate the “religious landscape” that now confronts us by warning his readers not of secularism—a word coined in 1851 by the atheist G.J. Holyoake—but of liberalism. Once again, Topping gives the impression that he does not know his subject’s work thoroughly. Newman’s prophetic understanding of our present antinomianism emerges in a letter he wrote to one of his Irish correspondents:

Much dreadful information might be collected on the atheism of the population of our great towns. I mean on the professed atheism of large classes. I think they call it by the mild name of “secularism.” . . . Mr. Holyoake is, I believe, a professed atheist—but he has been (meritoriously) devoting himself for years, to combat a worse atheism than his own, viz. that which denies not only a God but a moral law. This is a tremendous subject in its width and its depth.

Moreover, in the same letter Newman had occasion to observe that “there are Lecturers, I think, who go about the country advocating the institution of licensed brothels (as abroad) *on the ground* (for this is the point) that immorality of life under our present civil

and social circumstances is to a certain point *necessary* and must be *recognised*.” As far as Newman could see, sanctioning such immorality was being “exalted into a dogma.”

Here was the convert’s recognition of liberalism’s denial of the reality of sin, which has since made calamitous inroads into the Church, as is all too clear from the conduct of Cardinal McElroy and the synodal Germans. The threat of liberalism, not secularism, was Newman’s abiding cry. As he said in his Biglietto Speech, when he was given his red hat, for “thirty, forty, fifty years I have resisted to the best of my powers the spirit of liberalism in religion.” He never said he opposed secularism, which would have been tantamount to his saying that he opposed the natural man’s distaste for religion. Newman was many things, but he was never platitudinous.

For Newman, liberalism was “the doctrine that there is no positive truth in religion, but that one creed is as good as another,” a doctrine “inconsistent with any recognition of any religion as true.” And it followed that since “religion is so personal a peculiarity and so private a possession, we must of necessity ignore it in the intercourse of man with man.” This was the “great threat” against which Newman inveighed for his entire career, convinced as he was that such a dismissive view of religion would have a





ruinous effect on what he called “the goodly framework of society,” which he saw, not having the benefit of any multicultural relativism, as “the creation of Christianity.” Jettison Christianity, and that “goodly framework” would be in tatters.

The problem with imagining that secularism is the Church’s “great threat” is that it presupposes that there was a time, perhaps in some roseate medieval past, in which hostility to or betrayal of the doctrines and teachings of the Church somehow did not obtain, a presupposition about which Newman was withering. “During the Middle Ages,” he reminded a friend fond of exaggerating the faith of medieval Christendom, “Rome is spoken of, not only as the world, but even as Babylon. How strong is St. Thomas of Canterbury upon it! How the saints are used to look upon the Pontifical Court as in fact almost a road to perdition!” Secularism, in other words, is not the Church’s “great threat”: it is part of the world’s permanent furniture, and, as such, a necessary precondition of the Church’s very redemptive mission.

Is there nothing good to say of Topping’s book? The author urges parents to forget about trying to reform the decadent university and focus instead on schools, which is sensible enough. He also writes at length about Newman and the affections, a vital theme, though in this he adds nothing to what Ian

Ker had to say on the subject in his shrewd little book *Newman on Vatican II*, published nearly ten years ago.

As we all know, no work is more conducive to fruitful evangelization than Newman’s, but it has to be passed along accurately: muddling or bowdlerizing it will only leave the unfaithful unconverted. Topping’s is not a book to be read by the fire: it should be thrown in the fire.

Edward Short is the author of Newman and His Contemporaries (Bloomsbury, 2011), Newman and His Family (Bloomsbury, 2013) and Newman and History (Gracewing, 2017) and the editor of a critical edition of Newman’s Difficulties of Anglicans. His latest collection of essays, What the Bells Sang: Essays and Reviews, is available from Gracewing.

A BETTER OUT- DOORS INDOORS

MEET ME AT THE
FOUNTAIN: AN INSIDE
HISTORY OF THE MALL

Alexandra Lange
Bloomsbury, pp. 320, \$19.60

BY EVE TUSHNET

The father of the mall was a socialist. This tidbit always gets dropped in discussions of mall history, and it’s usually deployed for cheap irony: let’s all laugh at Victor Gruen, the left-winger who created the architectural signature of global capitalism—as if

he did it by accident! It’s a joke that is funniest if you believe neither in socialism nor in malls. Alexandra Lange’s *Meet Me by the Fountain: An Inside History of the Mall* treats the mall more seriously, because its author is faithful to the mall of her youth, honoring the small joys and safe liberties she discovered there. She still holds out hope that the great dream of the socialist mall may yet come to pass: a place where private pleasures can be channeled and co-ordinated to serve the public good. Her book is at once passionate about the mall’s civic potential and honest about the reasons it’s so hard to shop your way to brotherhood. There’s a line in Pascal’s *Pensées* that has stuck with me since I first encountered it: “Man’s greatness even in his concupiscence. He has managed to produce such a remarkable system from it and make it the image of true charity.”

The dream of the mall is that you can also get a pretzel.

Lange notes that when she told people she was writing a book on malls, almost everybody replied, “Oh, let me tell you about my mall.” I, too, found that Lange evoked deeply pleasurable memories: trailing through fixture-and-furniture stores behind my parents, adorning my dream house with the coolest lampshades and faucets; hiding behind a convenient shelf at Waldenbooks to read disturbingly sexy vampire tales; watching as a Cinnabon the size of my head was furled and baked, knowing that soon it would be in my belly. Our mall memories are particular and nostalgic, but Lange emphasizes the mall’s ability to re-invent itself for new audiences. Spencer’s becomes Hot Topic, Orange Julius is replaced by horchata-flavored boba. Malls, considered a dying commercial form in the United States, flourish in Latin America, Asia, and the

Middle East. There's a shopping mall minutes from the Kaaba in Mecca. As the imperial architecture of Austria-Hungary embodied the claim that disparate tongues and faiths could forge a united identity as subjects of the K.-und-K., so the global spread of shopping malls suggests that we can overcome our differences in a common love of water features and palm courts.

The original mall designers were trying to solve a problem of suburbanization. The United States government created the suburbs through its funding of highways and housing. But, Lange notes, "in subsidizing the home and the road, the government failed to subsidize a place to gather." The mall didn't just give white people fleeing the cities a place to shop. It also solved one of their emotional or even spiritual problems, as single-family housing and the triumph of the nuclear family over the extended family left housewives isolated in the home. Victor Gruen and those who came after him intended to solve this problem by creating spaces that were not only convenient but beautiful and convivial.

The first malls look great—and just a little weird. Milliron's Department Store, one of Gruen's early projects, has the hot white slanting lines of a Chuck Jones cartoon. You expect Marvin the Martian to start tumbling helmet-over-heels down the parking ramps. The test-tube fitting rooms at the Neiman Marcus in Dallas's NorthPark Center are pure genius. The classic mall's distinctive look, all skylights and glass and balconies, owes at least as much to museums as to the long outdoor promenades that share its name. Inside the classic mall, there's modern art, usually vertical and playful: the Northland Shopping Center outside

Detroit featured a "screwball fountain," "a wall-size ceramic map of the Great Lakes," and a totem pole. The mall has enticing benches, easy landmarks (as Lange's title indicates), and both escalators and elevators to ease the lives of moms tugging toddlers or pushing strollers. The mall, at its inception, brought art to young families. The mall has public bathrooms and long flat floors for elderly exercisers or wheelchair riders. No more cracked sidewalks and dangerous curbs! The mall eases extreme climates—this is one reason the mall is such an important model for public spaces today. The mall has a unified, easily intelligible "look," rather than the colorful chaos of downtown shopping districts. One handbook for malls notes that aviaries are nice, but warns against having monkeys. (Were mall monkeys ever a thing? Is this what they took from us?) In the words of an article published in *Architectural Record* in 1966, malls reject "the chaos of unbridled competition" in favor of "order and delight." Material satisfaction through top-down control: it's almost as if the mall was invented by a socialist.

But the mall was never for everybody. The delightfully orderly mall was always intended as a refuge from the city: not just "A Better Outdoors Indoors," but "a downtown outside downtown"—away from poor and black people. Gruen failed to predict that malls would raise local housing prices, since people want to live near amenities, and so developers would turn the land into lucrative single-family housing instead of the mixed-use neighborhoods Gruen hoped malls could anchor. Malls themselves were not explicitly racially restricted, but they served communities created by whites-only



covenants and mortgage discrimination; both public and private funding structures kept the suburbs, and their malls, dominated by whites.

And, as happens so often in American history, race simply crystallizes a problem which can also be expressed in non-racial terms. The mall is a place where some people feel especially comfortable, because other people are kept out. The mall doesn't have anti-homeless designs, because the mall doesn't have homeless people. You can lie down on the benches because nobody else does. The mall offers some people the safety that allows them their first taste of independence, because others are monitored, surveilled, or kept away by the difficulties of reaching the place on public transportation. Even later projects which sought to bring mall comforts to neglected urban areas remained restrictive and car-centered, places where high retail rents paid for (among other things) all the private security. Lange delves into the legal history of the mall, the various court cases by which protesters won or failed to win the right to agitate at this most calming of civic spaces, this most public of private property. But the mall's totalitarian air comes more from the daily absence of poverty than from the occasional absence of protest.



Look, I love the mall. Don't you? Lange does a great job of exploring the architectural features that make the mall such fun: escalators and balconies let teens pose and flirt as they scope out the scene; ample seating promotes conversation and allows rest. The mall is a space designed for friendship. Outside, the air shimmers and the parking lots soften in the heat, but in here we are cool in every sense of the word. Because malls evoke nostalgia, I want to add to Lange's catalog my own favorite malls in pop culture: the B-movie classic *Chopping Mall*, say, or the video for the B-52s' "Funplex," in which security guards arrest a protester, then hold a dance-off with mall Goths. I like the mall because it's bad fun, because it pleases in a way that energizes and also dazes—that's the "Gruen transfer," which Lange glosses sunnily as "the moment when your presence at the mall tips from being goal-oriented . . . into a pleasure in itself." The Gruen transfer is just a fancy name for the thing the B-52s frontman Fred Schneider caterwauls in "Funplex," as he sucks a smoothie and zooms along on a Segway: "I'm at the mawwwllll on a diet pill!"

Lange argues that the mall idea is worth salvaging. What's so bad about a place designed for comfort, beauty, and friendship, even if that place was also

designed for Aéropostale? Perhaps there are ways to reduce the mall's quantum of evil, its car culture and unequal security. Perhaps just as the first malls were mashups of department store, museum, and World's Fair, a civil architecture of the future will blend mall, public library, and wilderness preserve. Lange highlights projects like the Galleria in Houston, which offers not just retail but offices, housing, hotels, a bowling alley, and even an ice rink: "victory over weather." One mall became a community college; another, a mix of parkland and "transit-oriented mixed-use development." Atlanta's Plaza Fiesta has "280 stores, thirty food businesses . . . dentists, hair salons, barbers, insurance agents, and a bus company with routes from Georgia over the Texas border into Mexico. A whiteboard detailed the process to become a U.S. citizen." Outside the United States, the mall's transformation into infrastructure has gone even further: Chilean tax structures encourage the incorporation of libraries and museums; at a mall in the Philippines, you can drop your kid at daycare or the carousel while you deal with government offices. From a "downtown outside downtown," we've moved to seeking "a mall without the mall."

But all these projects are still the result of well-intentioned, top-down planning, and I suspect all will replicate the central tension of the mall: evoking desire versus maintaining discipline. A mall open to everything becomes a sketchy mall, and then an empty mall. But a mall that treats its customers like threats will become empty too. Most malls have chosen to impose discipline on some for the reassurance of others, using security, surveillance, and anti-urban planning to bar an ever-expanding list of the

disreputable and the unprofitable. The treatment of teenagers at the mall may be the clearest example. Teens are the iconic mall rats. Malls built oddball upper levels and secluded video arcades to attract them. But with teens came trouble, because teens are like people only more so. Since the 2000s, Lange notes, more and more malls have cracked down on the crime of being young, imposing curfews and parental-escort requirements.

It's tempting to think that the mall can become a secular basilica, in which pleasure and not prayer guides the soul to follow the order of the architecture. But none of us will ever be orderly enough to bring our desires into perfect harmony. The worst aspect of the classic mall isn't its enforcement of pristine conformity. It's the fact that everything in the mall is shaped toward the needs of the "ideal customer." A better place—a place more like a real community—will have more give-and-take, more conflict, and more room for people who are neither customers nor ideal.

*Eve Tushnet is the author of two novels and, most recently, **Tenderness: A Gay Christian's Guide to Unlearning Rejection and Experiencing God's Extravagant Love.***



PLOW THE SEA

THINGS ARE NEVER
SO BAD THAT THEY
CAN'T GET WORSE:
INSIDE THE COLLAPSE
OF VENEZUELA

William Neuman

St. Martin's Press, pp. 352, \$26.99

BY LARS ERIK SCHÖNANDER

Most Americans in the United States devote very little time thinking about our neighbors in Latin America. That's a shame: its history reads like an epic, filled with characters and nations attempting to achieve everlasting glory, and, when they dramatically fail, leading to unfortunate consequences for everyone involved. The Venezuelan general Simón Bolívar's turbulent career is the prototypical example. It looked like a bust when he failed to liberate Venezuela in the 1810s, like a triumph a decade later when he did liberate Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia, and then again (in his own view) like a bust in 1830 when he died of tuberculosis in a politically fractured Latin America.

The same year that he died, Bolívar, increasingly disillusioned with his fellow *libertadores'* prospects and planning to go into exile, remarked that "all who have served the Revolution have plowed the sea." Overthrowing the old governments in Latin America was one thing. Building new ones was an entirely different task, and dreams of Hispanic unity quickly devolved into political bickering. In the final days of Bolívar's life, his unified state, Gran Colombia, strained due to diverging visions. And,

shortly after his death, in 1831 it collapsed.

Bolívar's successors did not cover themselves in glory either. Andrés de Santa Cruz, a *libertador* who worked with Bolívar in Peru and Bolivia, bungled Bolivia's politics. Under his authoritarian rule, it was an island of stability, at least compared to the rest of Latin America. But, instead of using that stability to work towards the prosperity of his country, he leveraged it to swallow up Bolivia's weaker neighbor, Peru, in the ill-fated Peru-Bolivian Confederation. The federation lasted three years, and it was a constant source of turmoil: the Peruvians did not want it, and, with the help of the Chilean government, they fought it and defeated Santa Cruz at the Battle of Yungay. No one mourned the confederation's death. And the chaos in the decades following Bolívar's death extended even to other countries that he had not liberated. Argentina was less of a country than a series of civil wars until 1860. The country was divided into two armed camps—one pro-centralization, one pro-federalism—that bickered with one another until 1861. (For nearly nine years, Buenos Aires called itself and its outlying regions an independent republic.) It is from Argentina where we get the first examples of *caudillos*, a rotating cast of authoritarian warlords

who promised a unified Argentina, but could not quite deliver, which only led to more strife.

Bolívar still casts his long shadow on Latin American politics. Hugo Chávez, as he rose to power in Venezuela in the 1990s, dubbed his political program for the country the "Bolivarian Revolution." And the reasons why so many of his countrymen supported him are unsurprising. In the 1980s, the regimes of Jaime Lusinchi and Carlos Andrés Pérez were plagued by economic crises and the scent of corruption. This was largely the result of the Puntofijo Pact, an agreement reached in 1958 that was intended to steer the country away from single-party rule, but soon prompted the creation of a complex system of patronage based on shared oil revenues controlled by the country's two ruling parties. Chávez vowed to liberate the country from the system. The results of his efforts are detailed in William Neuman's *Things Are Never So Bad That They Can't Get Worse: Inside the Collapse of Venezuela*, which illustrates why Venezuelans thought that *Chavismo* would save their country and how their hopes were dashed.

For a time it worked. As oil prices rose in the early 2000s, thanks to China's rapid growth and the emerging market boom, Venezuela prospered. Oil revenues surged even beyond the level of the 1970s boom years. Chávez was able to spend lavishly on social programs despite a simultaneous surge in corruption. Thanks to this spending and his admittedly charismatic personality on television, Chávez went on to win election after election. But he was not one to take any chances with his popularity. Step by step, he removed elements of Venezuela's democratic constitution by eliminating or co-opting the media, packing the courts



and rewriting the constitution. When oil prices started to drop, mismanagement of the oil sector became more obvious. Lower oil production and falling prices meant less money for social programs. And the latter were often very poorly executed and, in some cases, entirely imaginary. So Chávez's popularity started to fall, and he found it harder to win elections without cheating.

The collapse of oil prices in 2014 combined with the succession of Chávez by Nicolás Maduro showed how badly the Bolivarian Revolution has failed. Far from delivering prosperity, it has done the opposite. Seven million people have fled Venezuela in recent years (the country used to be a destination for immigrants). For those who stay, signs of decline are everywhere: rolling power outages, hyperinflation, and gangsterism which runs amok in every part of the country. (To think that much of this could have been avoided if a lone paratrooper, Hugo Chávez, had not been treated so gently for his coup attempt.)

Venezuela is an extreme example of Latin American dreams gone wrong. There are less tragic, if stranger political projects in Latin American history. Paraguay before its liberation was a comparatively quiet place, where the major concerns were native tribes and ruinous taxes. Immediately post-independence, it was ruled by José Gaspar Rodríguez de Francia y Velasco, or "El Supremo," after he won election as supreme dictator in 1814. He was an enlightened despot inspired by the social theories of Rousseau, and he cut off Paraguay from all international trade to develop its internal industries. He also banned the marriage of Spaniards with each other and used the state to

enforce miscegenation. (These days, the majority of Paraguay speaks Guarani, so the policy must have worked.) These were strange dreams, but not ruinous ones. Paraguay in the late nineteenth century was the complete opposite. From 1864 to 1870, the government fought Brazil, Argentina, and Uruguay over land claims. The result? The majority of Paraguay's adult male population died. Paraguay in the mid-twentieth century wasn't much better. In the 1930s, Paraguay fought with Bolivia over the *Gran Chaco*, an arid landscape nicknamed the "green hell," which was believed to contain bountiful natural resources. Paraguay won, but it did not find the oil deposits it sought in the region. (That only happened decades later.) And for much of the second half of the twentieth century, the country was ruled by Alfredo Stroessner, a dictator known for such remarkable cruelties as his listening on the phone to his lackeys torturing political dissidents with a chainsaw.

Farther south, in Argentina, there were more indignities. Juan Perón's successor, his third wife Isabel, came to power in 1974, at the start of the Dirty War, a right-wing United States-backed extermination campaign against anyone suspected of having communist sympathies. Isabel was the puppet of José López Rega, the Argentine minister of social welfare. Rega was a right-wing Peronist who helped bring Perón back to Argentina. He was also an occultist nicknamed "El Brujo," who during his time in office used right-wing death squads to kill perceived enemies, mostly leftists. When Isabel Perón was overthrown in 1976 and a military junta was instated, the Dirty War only continued. Anywhere from nine to thirty thousand

people were killed over the better part of a decade. The war only ended after the Falklands War in 1982 proved that the junta was incapable of running Argentina.

Even Uruguay, comparatively the Switzerland of Latin America, has had its troubles. A coup in 1973 canceled elections and enacted a dictatorship. Nevertheless, compared to the troubles in Argentina, Chile, and Paraguay, far fewer people died. Still, nearly ten percent of the country did leave the country (never a good sign). Admittedly, today's profile of Uruguay represents a possibility of a Latin America where leaders don't pursue glorious projects that blow up in their faces. The leadership of José Mujica is refreshing in comparison to leaders promising renewed glory like Maduro in Venezuela or Andrés Manuel López Obrador in Mexico.

Perhaps it's because I am of Latin American descent, but I always remain hopeful about the place. In many cases, over the course of several centuries, these countries slowly and painfully transformed themselves from oligarchic republics and even empires into democracies, and then after backsliding managed to become representative democracies. The end of the P.R.I. and the rise of multiparty democracy in Mexico and the end of the Brazilian military junta are just some examples of this. The problem is when given the choice of quiet growth or the hope of making history, most Latin American leaders instinctively run for the second option, with disastrous results. It is better to work quietly towards the good than to proclaim loudly the coming of a utopia that never arrives.

Lars Erik Schönander is a policy technologist at the Foundation for American Innovation, a tech policy think tank.

FROM THE AWFUL DISCLOSURES OF MARIA MONK

BY JAMES MATTHEW WILSON

A novice never sees behind the gates.
It's only those who take the veil can go
Through doors and chambers closed off from the world.
The paintings in the room of the Three States
Reveal beasts gnawing on the damned below;
The saving flames where infant souls lie curled;
And, high above those glories where stars spin,
The priests and nuns alone enjoy God's light.
For, when nuns lie or steal, the deed turns white,
And priests, we're told, cannot commit a sin.

The nuns would say prayers, there, and wait in fear
For summons to the dark confessional.
Then, would they kneel before the seated priest
And loose their vices naked in his ear.
When silence fell, he'd hiss a subtle call
And take their buried flesh as his own feast.
My first night in the convent, Père Dufresne
Used me thus, keeping me until the dawn;
Two others did the same, as he looked on
To draw his pleasure from my speechless pain.

And there were other places, hidden deep
Beneath the chapel's ivory and gold.
Once, sent down to the cellar for some coals,
I tripped upon the trapdoor, where priests creep
In and out of the convent. I was told
Nuns who refused their wills were locked in holes
On either wall, arms bound and soft mouths stopped.
And in a darker place, I found the well,
Caked white with lime, where infant bodies swell—
Those born and baptized, strangled, and then dropped.

Sometimes, old country priests would come to preach,
Their faces flushed and mouths befouled with drink.
Others would show themselves in candlelight,
When evening prayers were done, and reach
Within our garments, while another'd slink
Into our beds and wait for us at night.
As one lay long upon me, I'd recall
The nuns who vanished, till I felt that bloom
Of some secreted life stirred in my womb
And thought how on its limbs white lime would fall.

*James Matthew
Wilson's most
recent book of
poems is The
Strangeness
of the Good.*

APPRECIATIONS

P.G. WODEHOUSE

BY VIKRAM DORAISWAMI

India presents a peculiar phenomenon in the world of Wodehouse. It is possibly the largest continuing market for his books, with singularly devoted fans, even though the country—and its outsized place in the empire—is conspicuous by its absence in his work. India is still a country where one might find Wodehouse fans in the oddest of places (not just in prisons, as the Master gloomily assumed his fan base festered, in a delightful short piece in *Plum Pie*). These include the not-so-gently-decaying Raj-era halls, libraries, and tea-planters clubs, where one might expect to find well-thumbed copies of his books. The Master is also to be found in swish bookshops of Lutyens' Delhi, the malls of Bangalore, and the Raj-era streets of Calcutta. Collected sets and new prints are still sold in India's teeming airports at bookstalls whose product range otherwise barely justifies the appellation of "bookseller" and at railway stations and at the vast jumble of secondhand booksellers that dot most old areas of our cities.

Just who is reading these books? And why?

Let me start with the first question. Wodehouse's works appeal to Indians of the most diverse social backgrounds. There are the predictable lot: upper-class anglophone Indians. But there are also less well-known examples across India's diplomatic, home civil service, and armed forces—where we still actually do a good line in generously

whiskered, harrumphing old colonels with swagger sticks and tweedy coats. Wodehousiana permeates corporate India, as well as academia, and, of course, the media. It is reasonable to assume that most educated Indians of a certain vintage have at read at least one P.G. Wodehouse story. Even younger English-speaking Indians have at least heard the name. If we go by the rough rule of thumb that some ten percent of our population speaks fluent English—yielding a modest one hundred thirty million souls (if you can count elites as people with souls)—we deduce that the Master is better known to a larger number in India (which, frankly, isn't difficult given the fact that there are twenty times more Indians than Britons) than even in his home country.

Indeed, as Malcolm Muggeridge said: the last Englishmen left in the world are Indian. Even if we set aside Muggeridge's somewhat incorrect conclusion, the fact remains that Wodehouse is widely read in India. Why is this so? After all, none of the Master's stories are set in India. Indeed, the Colonies intrude but rarely into the pristine world of London and the 'Shires. Even beyond, in America, too, it is New York that figures as *mise-en-scène*, apart, of course, from Hollywood. We can assume that having recognized that there was more downside risk than upside advantage in mining the complexities of politics for humor, Wodehouse extended that practical decision to the empire as well.

In a land where politics is our staple entertainment, and in an era where it is increasingly hard to know whether politics is risible, regrettable, or reprehensible, it is the focused, almost deliberate near-vacuum of politics that makes the world of Wodehouse a perfect Eden. The

gooseberry-eyed butlers, eccentric uncles, and sparkling young ladies make his world a veritable paradise, and the near-complete absence of overtly political themes is also very attractive. Of course, there are some stories that touch upon politics—socialism figures in Psmith's shorthand Communist Manifesto ("You work for the equal distribution of property, and start by collaring all you can and sitting on it"). There is also only a single reference to civil disobedience in India, and, of course, one of my favorite scenes in *Big Money*, where the Earl of Hoddesdon gets his top hat stoned by a young lad, and is then pursued by an agitated parent who in part voices a proletariat urge to disembowel the earl for being, among other things, a bourgeois. And yet these are but trace elements in a body of work spanning some ninety-nine books.

Then there's Wodehouse's subtlety. India is a nation that is loud on politics and flamboyant, shall we say, in its use of political theater. The exquisite subtlety of the Master is a pitch-perfect contrast. Every book is redolent with the most brilliant sentence construction, and every word is perfectly suited to the point of its placement. While it would be a stretch to say that Indians read Wodehouse solely because of his literary craftsmanship, it is not incorrect to link this virtue



to the long Indian literary tradition that prizes the simultaneous use of subtlety, precision, and creativity in wordsmithy. This tradition dates back to classical Sanskrit literature, in particular, the legendary Kalidasa—indeed, given chronology, we might describe Shakespeare as the English Kalidasa—but this tradition continues into the age of courtly Urdu and Persian, reaching its apogee with the genius of Delhi's own Mirza Ghalib. The brilliance of a line that turns around and carries a sting in the tail, as it were, is particularly valued in the Indian literary tradition. See, for instance, this line from Wodehouse's "Lord Emsworth Acts for the Best": "Years before, when a boy, and romantic as most boys are, his lordship had sometimes regretted that the Emsworths, though an ancient clan, did not possess a Family Curse. How little he had suspected that he was shortly to become the father of it." And contrast it with Ghalib's famous line: "Oh Lord, it is not the sins I committed that I regret, but those which I had no opportunity to commit."

Wodehouse also excels at the art of gentle insurrection. Without over-analyzing social conflict (especially in this era of culture wars), it is not hard to see genuine empathy of the author for precisely the young, self-made, driven, and aspirational representatives of a new era. With its long history of feudalism, Indian culture is similarly full of insurrection through humor, especially that in which our own upper-class twits come a cropper. Take, for example, the institution of a brilliant court humorist: the repertoire of a court comic is replicated not only in the court of Emperor Akbar but also in Bengal and in South India. Thus the wit of Birbal, Gopal the Jester, and Tenali Raman are a staple

of popular culture in India. And so it is reasonable to see why the English-speaking middle class in India identify with the aspiring members of Mr. Mulliner's large family tree—and not just because we have vast families too—or with energetic second sons and hard-working, self-made women, who reflect the spirit of a new entrepreneurial class. This is also a



theme that is reflected in India's own modern story. One of my favorite insurrectionary quotes, which applies very much to my own story, is this one from *The World of Mr. Mulliner*: "As Egbert from boyhood up had shown no signs of possessing any intelligence whatsoever, a place had been found for him in the Civil Service." Or this denunciation of that prize snob, the Duke of Dunstable: "You are without exception the worst tick and boulder that ever got fatty degeneration of the heart through gorging food and wine wrenched from the lips of a starving proletariat. You make me sick. You poison the air.' 'Good-bye Uncle Alaric,' said Ricky, drawing himself away rather ostentatiously. 'I think we had better terminate this interview, or I may become brusque.'"

Finally, there's his sentimentality: Indians are gluttons for

it. Anyone who has seen a Bollywood film knows that the narrative is primarily built around boy meets girl—boy loses girl—boy gets girl again. It's almost as if tanned versions of Bingo Little or Pongo Twistleton are permanent fixtures on Indian screens. It is almost a heresy to say so, but if we were to take a sliding scale between sentiment and humor, in early Wodehouse works, the dial was more set toward the side of sentiment. But this evolved: the dial more or less settled in the direction of gentle humor. While Indian films largely remain set closer to the sentimental side, the general principle of Bollywood storylines is resolutely Wodehousian, in terms of theme, but also in the treatment of love without all the messy business of sex—which for decades Bollywood coyly avoided. Indeed, in general, Bollywood long reflected the advice offered to Sally (in *Adventures of Sally*), that "chumps always make the best husbands. . . . all the unhappy marriages come from the husband having brains. What good are brains to a man?" What indeed, one is tempted to say. In short, as Nicholas Barber notes, Wodehouse made it his purpose to make people happy, and to spread, as he called it, "sweetness and light."

We in India also share with the British an admiration for the hardest act that Wodehouse performed. That, I believe, is making humor look effortless and spontaneous. We have empirical evidence to show us just how hard Wodehouse worked: a staggering number of books, hundreds of short stories, and such an astonishing output rate in his early years of relative hardship that he was able to keep body and soul together on the strength of his pen without his day job as a banker. But even more than quantity, it was the superhuman effort to



produce quality: we know from the Master's own account of the kind of effort he made to keep his plot taut and action brisk. This included typing reams of plot and narrative ideas and hanging up each sheet of paper like laundry on a clothesline. These were then literally lifted or dropped page by page, or twisted, to identify bits that need reworking upward, downward, or to add a twist to the tale. Compared to most ordinary writers, most of whom would not rework anything, except perhaps a letter pleading for an overdraft, Wodehouse worked incredibly hard to produce his instantly recognizable style. To do all of this, and to do it well consistently for decades, and to be completely devoid of a larger-than-life persona is also very appealing, especially to the middle class in India, which has similarly had to graft hard to succeed.

Having made the case for Wodehouse's special place in India, where do I go from here? There is certainly a case for a larger effort by Wodehouse societies the world over to introduce to a new generation of readers the genius of Wodehouse. There is little point denying that this is necessary for younger generations, if for no other reason than for their own good, as the world they inherit is

quite as grim as the one that Wodehouse acknowledged, although rarely (almost parenthetically). Is there a feasible way of doing so? Perhaps one option is the way forward presented by the authorized new Wodehouse works that place in new context our familiar old friends and bring them into a new dimension of storytelling. The homage by Ben Schott, for instance, is superbly done. Are podcasts an option? The Master was famously unconvinced, as he found his readings of his own work to be less than perfect. Is film or television an option? Well made though most of the previous film efforts were, the nuance of Wodehouse was lost in most of the serials and television productions (although, speaking personally, I found the Hugh Laurie/Stephen Fry *Jeeves and Wooster* series the best of the lot).

Indeed, it is hard to visualize Jeeves now and not think of Stephen Fry—and I say this even though I am convinced that Jeeves was actually Indian. Yes, really. Sift the evidence: in *Right Ho, Jeeves*, we hear from Bertie that Jeeves doesn't have to open doors. ("He's like one of those birds in India who bung their astral bodies about—the chaps, I mean, who having gone into thin air in Bombay, reassemble the parts and appear two minutes later in Calcutta.") Hence, my final conclusion: we Indians love Wodehouse because, of course, his smartest and most celebrated character was a carefully disguised Indian, after whom even dry cleaning services have been named in London.

In the end, to analyze the work of Wodehouse and his genius is like deconstructing a really fine soufflé. It is just as pointless. Truly fine comic talent is famously hard to analyze: we find something funny in large part because of who we are, and not

solely because of the subject. Wodehouse was a genius not only because of the quantity and sustained quality of his output; not just because of his enormous erudition, handled so lightly that he could tuck in everything from Shakespeare, Cicero, and Marcus Aurelius to popular lyrics: no, it was also because he could improvise new comic elements but from within a tightly framed set of narrative chords. If Jazz and Indian classical music share the same almost oxymoronic freedom to innovate freely, but within a rigid parameter of chords and scales, P.G. Wodehouse pulled off exactly that feat: in a tight framework of silly asses, doddering peers, absent-minded clergy and comic villains, butlers, bright young things, and, of course, armadas of aunts, he created endless, magical music that always leaves me thinking that the world is a better place than I had thought. He is, was, and will always be The Master.

Vikram Doraiswami is High Commissioner of India to the United Kingdom. This essay was originally given as an address to the P.G. Wodehouse Society in London.



NUNC DIMITTIS

THE BINS

BY MATTIE VENNERSTROM

Three friends and I have a standing date once a month during toddler naptime where we go to the Goodwill outlet and sort through the overflow from the local stores. The outlet runs the event like a race: the merchandise is rolled out every hour in large blue containers—The Bins, as we call them—and we buy by the pound. We line up on a red line, and when the whistle blows, we are free to cross it and begin picking. After an hour, the whole thing resets. My first time, I walked in during a rest period. Everyone was standing behind the tape, and men with vests were bringing out new containers and sliding the bins back into place. Two were on crowd control, making sure everyone stayed off the floor. When the whistle blew, I waded in hesitantly, avoiding elbows. But by the end of the hour, I had to be beaten back to the tape with everyone else. We watched with a twinge of sadness as the oldest bins were wheeled away, their entire contents destined for the landfill. It occurred to me that there is very little difference between this and going through the dumpsters.

We are not the only ones hooked on The Bins. When I first saw the sign for the Goodwill Outlet World, I thought it was a bit excessive, but I now know it is accurate. There is a whole world at The Bins. There are the usual eccentrics who all seem to know each other. There are the homeless of Denver, who are there probably more out of necessity than amusement. There are also multi-generational immigrant families who are camped out along the perimeter, smiling and sorting their wares, happily chatting. Then there are the suburban moms like me. There are even some well-to-do ladies in gloves, literally too afraid to get their hands dirty. Still, they come to the trash heap. Together, we look like the dime store version of that old Coke commercial. It's the love of trash that unites us.

I have wondered why I enjoy this experience so much. Dumpster diving is a world away from

thrifting, which is more like regular shopping. In the stores the items feel new. They have been curated, sorted, and presented as useful. The Bins have none of this pretense. They bring me into uncommonly close contact with the finitude of created things. The objects there are about to be thrown away—and it is a small miracle that they have been given new life right at the end. At The Bins, by some twist of fate, it no longer matters whether you are a perfect one hundred percent wool Christian Dior blazer or half a pair of socks with the heels worn out. Both end up at The Bins. And only a person who takes a special interest in these things, which have no real value of their own and can do absolutely nothing to save themselves from imminent destruction, will lift them up just before they are whisked away and buried.

Maybe the eccentric people of The Bins find a community there because they have a sense that they share some affinity with the items in the blue caskets. Like the leftovers in the bins, they feel discarded, used, mixed up, of dubious origin, or questionable value. Maybe it's good to recognize that from time to time some very valuable items end up in the garbage. I suppose this is the case with me, too. I love the trash because I share something with it. Someday I will also be rolled away in a container and laid in the ground. But I know that it doesn't end there: I have faith in someone above Who also loves to sift through the mess down below and Who promises to lift me up on the last day.

Mattie Vennerstrom is a Ph.D. candidate and teaching fellow at the Catholic University of America currently writing her dissertation and raising her family from Denver.



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